



Depression vs. neuroticism, the relationships with past and present life satisfaction and presence of meaning in life

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ABSTRACT

Background: Previous studies have indicated that depression and neuroticism negatively impact people's quality of life. The relative impact of these constructs on specific components of well-being is an area that immensely benefits from further exploration.

Aims: This study compares the relationships that depression and neuroticism have with past and present life satisfaction and the presence of meaning in life as essential components of well-being.

Method: Two hundred and twenty Iranian adults (58.2% female, $M_{age} = 25.2$; $SD = 5.19$) participated in the study and completed questionnaires measuring depression, neuroticism, meaning in life, past life satisfaction, and present life satisfaction.

Results: The results indicated that depression had strong negative correlations with present life satisfaction ($r = -0.568$, $p < 0.01$), past life satisfaction ($r = -0.358$, $p < 0.01$), and meaning in life ($r = -0.476$, $p < 0.01$). Neuroticism also showed significant negative correlations with present life satisfaction ($r = -0.431$, $p < 0.01$), past life satisfaction ($r = -0.222$, $p < 0.01$), and meaning in life ($r = -0.372$, $p < 0.01$). Both depression and neuroticism had their strongest negative associations with present life satisfaction, meaning in life, and past life satisfaction, respectively. The results also showed that the correlations of depression with past and present satisfaction and meaning in life were stronger than those of neuroticism.

Conclusion: Depression and neuroticism significantly undermine well-being, with depression showing stronger adverse impacts than neuroticism. Addressing these psychological constructs can be crucial for enhancing individuals' life satisfaction and meaning in life.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Different psychological constructs and variables can influence people's well-being and how they experience life. Among such variables, depression and neuroticism have been shown to be harmful to the quality of life (Ceri & Cicek, 2020; Costa & McCrae, 1995). Life satisfaction and life meaningfulness are two components of wellbeing and the quality of life (Van Rijn et al., 2022; Voicu, 2024). It can be expected that life satisfaction and the meaningfulness of life as subjective variables directly related to well-being decrease when a person is dealing with depression and neuroticism. However, whether depression or neuroticism is a stronger origin of such undesirable changes and whether these two lead to more life dissatisfaction or meaninglessness of life have not received enough attention. This study aims to address this gap by systematically comparing the relationships that depression and neuroticism have with past and present life satisfaction and life meaningfulness. We proceed by briefly explaining the three wellbeing variables, followed by the literature on how they are correlated with depression and neuroticism.

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction refers to one's cognitive judgment of their overall life (Diener, 1994). This subjective assessment has been significantly related to depressive symptoms, anxiety, suicidality, and alcohol and substance dependence (Fergusson et al., 2015). Additionally, exercise, sun protection usage, eating fruit, restraining fat intake, not smoking, and work-life balance have shown significant inverse correlations with life satisfaction (Grant et al., 2009; Haar et al., 2014). Higher rates of suicidality are also negatively associated with life satisfaction (Bray & Gunnell, 2006). Life dissatisfaction has been shown to increase poor general health, long-lasting illness, pain, scarce social support, distress, limited activity, depression and anxiety symptoms, lack of sleep, pain, smoking, drinking, and obesity (Strine et al., 2007). Previous findings also indicate that life satisfaction predicts longevity, psychiatric morbidity, social support, and health-related positive behaviors (Koivumaa-Honkanen et al., 2000).

Meaning in Life

The classic work of Viktor Frankl (1984), "Man's Search for Meaning," highlighted the importance of "sense of meaning in life" as a critical contributing factor to mental health. Frankl observed how the presence of meaning in life led to higher success among people in Nazi concentration camps, helping them cope with severe difficulties. Since then, various associations between meaning in life and different mental health features have been examined. Meaningfulness of life has been found to increase well-being and positive mental health while reducing anxiety levels and psychological distress (Arslan et al., 2020; Cohen & Cairns, 2011; Tsibidaki, 2021; Yek et al., 2017). Meaning in life has been correlated with self-reported health among smoking cessation patients (Steger et al., 2009). It also acts as a protective factor against suicidal behaviors (Lew et al., 2020). Lin (2020) found that meaning in life negatively correlates with depression, anxiety, stress, and negative emotions but is positively associated with life satisfaction and COVID-19-related behavioral engagement. Other studies during the pandemic showed inverse relationships between meaning in life and mental distress, state anxiety, and lower COVID-19 stress (Schnell & Krampe, 2020; Trzebiński et al., 2020).

Depression, Meaning in Life and Life Satisfaction

While previous studies have established significant negative relationships between depression and both life satisfaction and meaning in life (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Steger et al., 2009), limited research has explored the comparative impact of depression on different components of well-being, such as past and present life satisfaction. Depression is accompanied with numerous pernicious effects such as negative self-rumination (Behdarvandirad & Karami, 2022) and suicidality (Behdarvandirad & Mirpour, 2024). Literature suggests that depressed people perceive life as less meaningful. Hedayati and Khazaei (2014) observed this significant correlation among university students in Iran. Similarly, Arsalan (2020) found this relationship among Turkish undergraduate students after COVID-19 restrictions in Turkey. Korkmaz and Güloğlu (2020) illustrated that the presence of meaning in life is a significant predictor

of depression. The inverse relationship between meaning in life and depression is well-established (Chen et al., 2021; Psarra & Kleftras, 2013; Huo et al., 2019; Steger et al., 2009).

Previous research also shows the correlation between life satisfaction and positive health outcomes like longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011), and the harmful effects of life dissatisfaction, such as long-term morbidity, suicidal tendencies, work disability, and mortality (Koivumaa-Honkanen et al., 2001; 2004). It is improbable for a person to be both depressed and satisfied with life (Headey et al., 1991). Studies have consistently shown a meaningful difference in life satisfaction between people with and without depressive symptoms (Gigantesco et al., 2019). Rissanen et al. (2011) found that long-term life dissatisfaction predicts mild depressive disorder. Significant associations between depression and subjective life satisfaction have been observed in numerous studies (Bartels et al., 2013; Haworth et al., 2017; Beutel et al., 2010; Koivumaa-Honkanen et al., 2004; Nes et al., 2013), highlighting the negative correlation between depression and life satisfaction as a key factor in well-being (Bartels, 2015). The association between depression and well-being, a variable closely related to life satisfaction, is also well-established (Ceri & Cicek, 2020; Liu et al., 2009; Smith & Yang, 2017). This body of evidence underscores the critical need to further explore the differential impacts of depression on specific components of well-being, an area that this study aims to address.

Neuroticism, Meaning in Life and Life Satisfaction

Neuroticism, one of the Big Five Personality Traits (John et al., 2008), is associated with negative affect and emotional instability. This trait increases feelings of guilt, nervousness, depression, and fear (Costa & McCrae, 1995; Mroczek & Almeida, 2004; Swagler & Jome, 2005). Several studies have observed a significant inverse relationship between neuroticism and meaning in life (Isik & Uzbe, 2015; Halama, 2005; Moomal, 1999). Numerous studies have also focused on the correlation between neuroticism and life satisfaction. Gale et al. (2013) found a meaningful association between neuroticism and life satisfaction.

Lun and Yeung (2019) observed the predictive power of neuroticism for life satisfaction. This relationship has been consistently noticed in various contexts, such as among Iranian undergraduate students (Joshanloo & Afshari, 2011), undergraduate students in China (Zheng et al., 2003), and Polish students (Sobol-Kwapinska, 2016). Meta-analyses also support the negative correlation between neuroticism and life satisfaction (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Hahn et al., 2013; Steel et al., 2008; Suldo et al., 2015; Weiss et al., 2008).

This Study

Previous studies suggest that people with depression or neurotic are less satisfied with their lives and find life less meaningful. However, the comparative impact of depression versus neuroticism on life dissatisfaction and meaninglessness has received little attention. This study aims to address this gap and determine whether life dissatisfaction and meaninglessness are more strongly related to depression or neuroticism. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the strongest correlation between these psychological constructs and the three components of well-being examined in this study (present life satisfaction, past life satisfaction, and meaning in life).

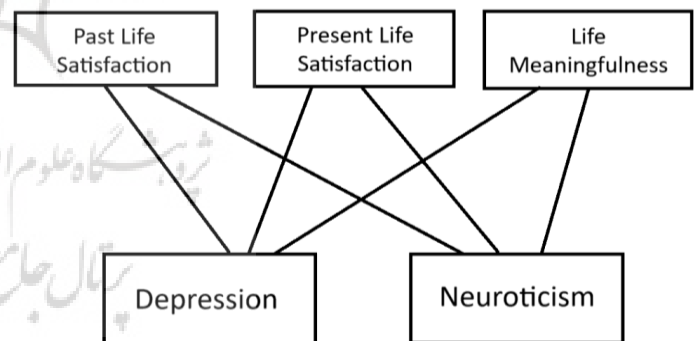


Figure 1. Examined Variables and Correlations

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants and Procedure: Two hundred and twenty Iranian adults between 18 and 40 years of age participated (58.2% female, $M_{age}=25.2$; $SD=5.19$). The participants had their depression and neuroticism levels measured. They also completed a short questionnaire measuring the presence of meaning in life, as well as present and past life satisfaction.

Materials

Depression. The Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck et al., 1996) was used to measure depression. This questionnaire consists of 21 items, each assessing a specific depressive symptom by providing multiple sentences as options. These options describe different levels of severity for the targeted symptom, allowing participants to choose the one that best describes their condition. The Farsi version of this questionnaire, translated and validated by Ghassemzadeh et al. (2005), demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.87$).

Neuroticism. Neuroticism was measured using 8 items from the Big Five Inventory (BFI-44; John, Donahue & Kentle, 1991). Each item states a sentence about the participant's personality (e.g., "I am a person who gets nervous easily.") and provides five response options (e.g., disagree strongly, disagree a little, etc.). Participants select the option that best reflects the degree to which the sentence is true for them. The Farsi version of this inventory, validated by Nosrat Abadi and Joshanloo (2006), also showed good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{neuroticism}}=0.8$).

Meaning in life and life satisfaction. Participants were presented with three questions using 10-point Likert

scales to measure their satisfaction with present life, satisfaction with past life, and presence of meaning in life. The questions were:

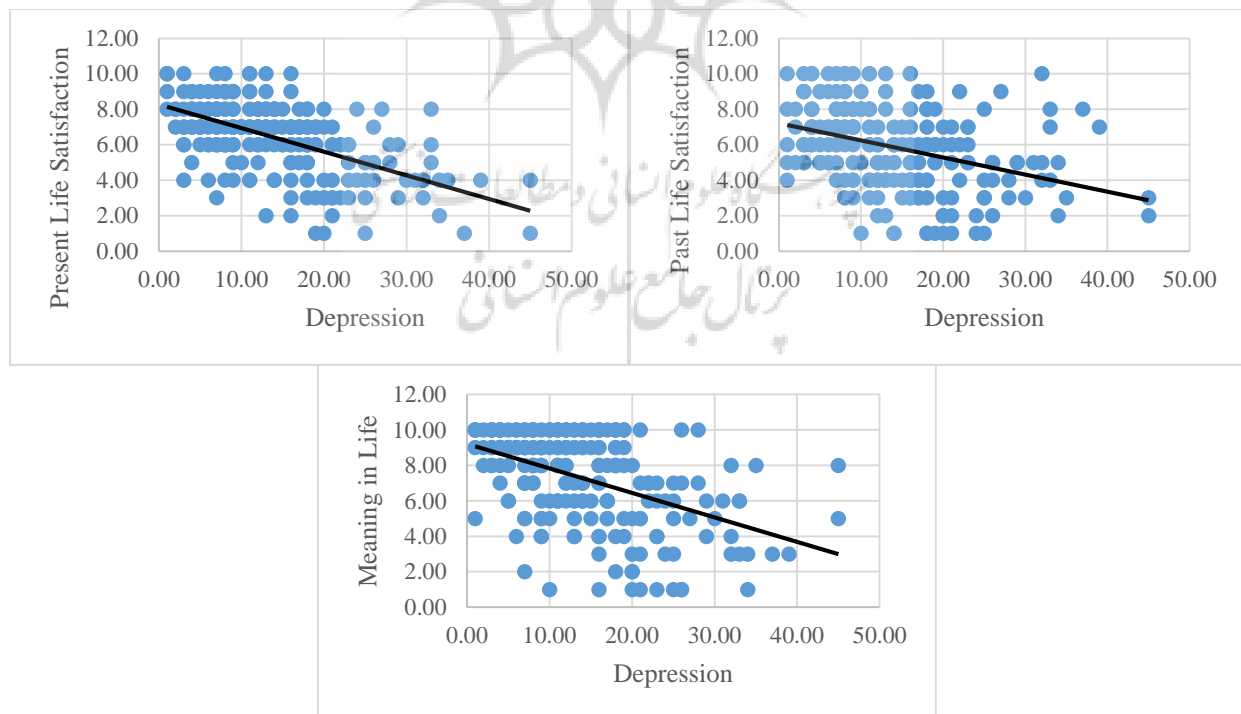
On the scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your present life and the current state?

On the scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your past life?

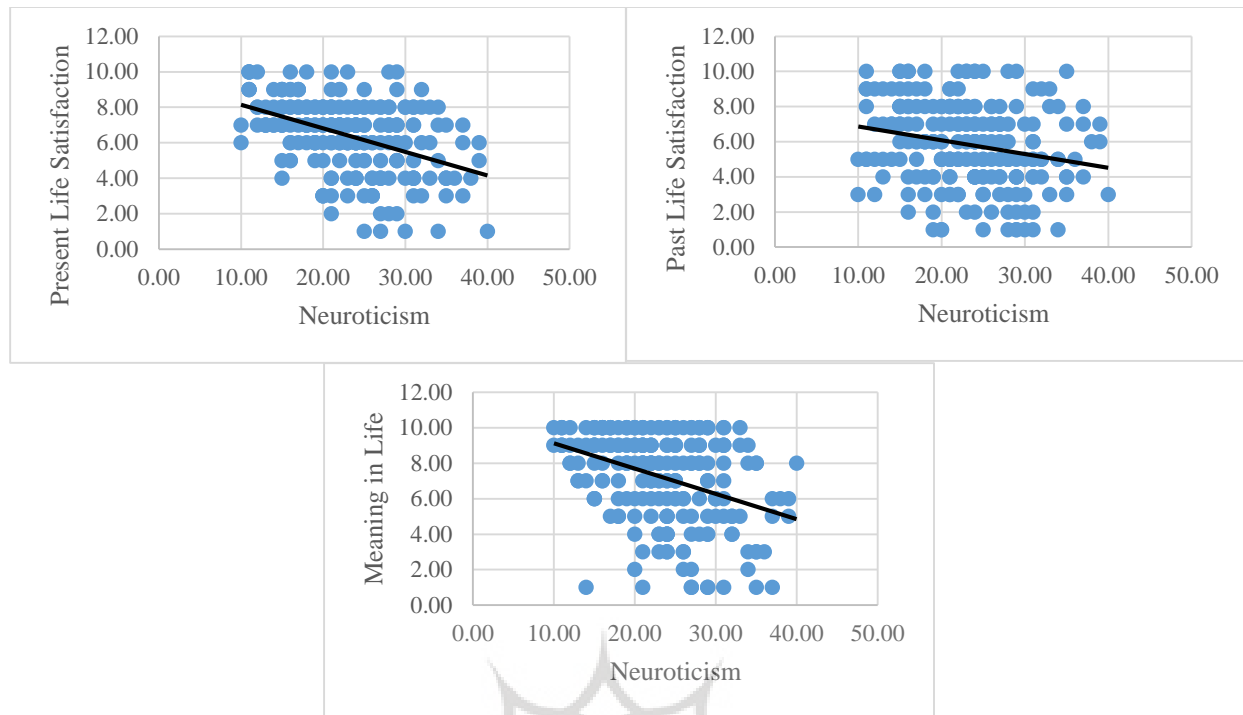
On the scale of 1 to 10, how meaningful is life from your point of view?

Results

To discover any potential relationships, Pearson's Correlation Coefficients were calculated. The negative relationships of depression ($r_{\text{present life satisfaction}}=0.568$, $p_{\text{present life satisfaction}}<0.01$; $r_{\text{past life satisfaction}}=0.358$, $p_{\text{past life satisfaction}}<0.01$; $r_{\text{meaning in life}}=0.476$, $p_{\text{meaning in life}}<0.01$) and neuroticism ($r_{\text{present life satisfaction}}=0.431$, $p_{\text{present life satisfaction}}<0.01$; $r_{\text{past life satisfaction}}=0.222$, $p_{\text{past life satisfaction}}<0.01$; $r_{\text{meaning in life}}=0.372$, $p_{\text{meaning in life}}<0.01$) with the wellbeing variables were observed as significant. The p-values and the coefficients of the mentioned correlations are illustrated in Table1. Figures 2 to 7 illustrate the scatter plots of the variables.



Figures 2, 3, and 4. The scatter plots of depression with Present Life Satisfaction ($R^2=0.323$), Past Life Satisfaction ($R^2=0.128$) and Meaning in Life ($R^2=0.226$)



Figures 5, 6, and 7. The scatter plots of neuroticism with Present Life Satisfaction ($R^2=0.049$), Past Life Satisfaction ($R^2=0.128$) and Meaning in Life ($R^2=0.139$)

Table 1. Correlation Analyses for Depression and Neuroticism with Well-Being Components

	Present Life Satisfaction		Past Life Satisfaction		Meaning in Life	
Depression	<0.01	-0.568	<0.01	-0.358	<0.01	-0.476
Neuroticism	<0.01	-0.431	<0.01	-0.222	<0.01	-0.372

Conclusion

A substantial number of previous studies have identified the negative effects of depression and neuroticism on physical and mental health. Life satisfaction and the presence of meaning in life are significantly impacted by these psychological traits. Consistent with the literature, our study found that both depression and neuroticism decrease life satisfaction and the meaningfulness of life (Chen et al., 2021; Isik & Uzbe, 2015; Steel et al., 2008; Gigantesco et al., 2019). The primary objective of this study was to compare the strength of the negative relationships of depression versus neuroticism with the meaningfulness of life and past and present life satisfaction. Our findings suggest that these impacts are stronger in the case of depression compared to neuroticism. Additionally, this study aimed to identify which component of well-being (present life satisfaction, past life satisfaction, or meaning in life) had the strongest correlation with each psychological construct. Our results align with previous research,

showing that depression and neuroticism are significantly and negatively correlated with present and past life satisfaction and the presence of meaning in life. Compared to neuroticism, depression had stronger correlations with life satisfaction (past and present) and life meaningfulness. It is indicative that the negative impacts of depression on subjective well-being are more pronounced.

Furthermore, our study examined the order of the strength of the correlations between depression or neuroticism and subjective well-being variables. Depression had the strongest association with present life satisfaction ($r = -0.568$), followed by meaning in life ($r = -0.476$), and past life satisfaction ($r = -0.358$). A similar trend was observed for the relationships that neuroticism had ($r_{\text{Satisfaction with present life}} = -0.431$, $r_{\text{Meaning in life}} = -0.372$, $r_{\text{Satisfaction with past life}} = -0.222$). These results suggest that while all associations were significant, both depression and neuroticism have stronger negative correlations with meaning in life than with past life satisfaction. Additionally,

dissatisfaction with present life is even more prominent than the lack of meaning in life among individuals dealing with depression and neuroticism. This research contributes to addressing challenges that various groups face regarding depression, including individuals struggling with mental health issues, those experiencing neuroticism, and marginalized communities (Peña et al., 2023). The findings show that depression strongly correlates with reduced life satisfaction and meaning in life, which resonates with the experiences of these populations. By incorporating intersectional perspectives, future studies can further explore how depression affects diverse populations, ensuring that mental health interventions are more inclusive and responsive. The findings of the present research highlight the need for importance of mental health interventions and policies related to depression. Integration of therapies targeting depressive symptoms, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy or mindfulness-based interventions, could significantly improve the quality of life. Moreover, public health policy may focus more on early screening and prevention programs. One limitation of this study existed in the reliance on self-report measurement tools, as this is prone to biases such as social desirability or recall errors. Further research can extend the findings of the present study by using longitudinal designs and possibly including objective measures or behavioral assessments. Further examination can also shed light on why depression is a stronger influence on well-being than neuroticism is, and what mechanisms account for such differences. Longitudinal studies may wish to further consider how interventions targeted at depression influence the trajectory of life satisfaction and meaning in life. Examining populations from diverse cultural and demographic backgrounds helps achieve a holistic understanding of the relationships studied here.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines: Participation in this research was entirely voluntary. All data was gathered anonymously, and only their age and gender were asked.

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Authors' contribution: The first author was the senior author. All authors contributed during the data collection, data analysis, and transcription of the paper.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest for this study.

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