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# Conceptualizing Existential Anxiety in High-Achieving Populations: Dimensions and Adaptive Responses

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A B S T R A C T

**Objective:** This study aimed to explore how high-achieving individuals experience and conceptualize existential anxiety and to identify the adaptive responses they employ to cope with these concerns.

**Methods and Materials:** A qualitative design grounded in interpretive phenomenological analysis was employed to deeply examine the lived experiences of existential anxiety among high performers. Twenty-five participants from Hungary, recognized for sustained excellence in fields such as academia, business, arts, sports, and science, were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting 60–90 minutes, conducted face-to-face or online according to participant preference. Interview questions focused on participants' perceptions of meaning, identity, mortality, and strategies for coping with existential unease. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, after which transcripts were analyzed inductively using NVivo 14. An iterative coding process—open, axial, and thematic analysis—was used to develop higher-order categories and ensure rigor through double coding and member checking.

**Findings:** Analysis revealed three overarching themes: (1) sources and manifestations of existential anxiety, including pressure to maintain achievement, identity fragility, isolation in excellence, mortality awareness, and value–performance dissonance; (2) cognitive–emotional processing, characterized by internal dialogue, meaning searching, existential curiosity, and development of self-awareness; and (3) adaptive coping and growth responses, such as purpose reorientation, relational anchoring, mindfulness, creative expression, boundary setting, professional renewal, and existential acceptance. Participants often described an initial phase of perfectionistic rumination and isolation followed by deliberate meaning reconstruction and connection-seeking, transforming anxiety into growth.

**Conclusion:** Existential anxiety in high-achieving individuals emerges at the intersection of success-driven identity and existential awareness but can

become a powerful driver for personal transformation when supported by reflection, relationships, spirituality, and curiosity. These findings deepen theoretical understanding and inform culturally sensitive, meaning-centered interventions for high performers.

***Keywords:*** *existential anxiety; high-achieving individuals; coping strategies; interpretive phenomenological analysis; meaning-making; resilience*

## 1. Introduction

Existential anxiety—defined as the deep unease arising from awareness of mortality, freedom, and the responsibility to create meaning—has reemerged as a central theme in contemporary psychology. Once primarily a philosophical concern, it is now widely recognized as shaping emotional well-being, motivation, and resilience in a rapidly changing and uncertain world (Ma, 2023). Increasing social and economic complexity, together with global crises, has intensified this form of anxiety and made it especially relevant to those whose lives are strongly oriented toward achievement and external recognition (Pavlidis, 2025; Smirnov & Makarova, 2025). High-achieving individuals often pursue mastery, prestige, and impact, but these same aspirations can create vulnerability to crises of meaning and identity when personal success fails to deliver existential security.

Existential anxiety is not always pathological; it may act as an adaptive signal prompting self-examination and authentic living (Amani, 2024). Yet, when unresolved, it can lead to alienation, chronic worry, and depression (Pourdehghan et al., 2024). Studies show that those in highly competitive fields are especially at risk because their sense of self is strongly linked to performance and recognition (Balolong et al., 2025; Monti & Dinero, 2025). As performance becomes an identity anchor, any threat to competence or social validation can destabilize self-worth (Bakanova, 2024). In this way, professional excellence can paradoxically coexist with profound vulnerability.

Recent global disruptions have further exposed these vulnerabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many high achievers to confront unpredictability and mortality, undermining carefully planned career paths and raising questions about meaning and purpose (Lee et al., 2022; Mokhov & Babushkina, 2022). For some, the experience catalyzed rethinking of legacy and values, while others reported deepening despair when life trajectories suddenly shifted (Gordon et al., 2023). Armed conflict and forced migration have similarly revealed how fragile professional identities can be in the face of existential threat (Петренко et al., 2024). In ecological and global contexts, growing concern about environmental and societal instability has triggered both anxiety and renewed striving for purposeful contribution (Betrò, 2024; Mah et al., 2024).

Cultural frameworks shape how such existential challenges are processed. In religious and humanistic traditions, meaning-making practices, transcendence, and ethical self-reflection can buffer existential fear (Firdaus & Murtadho, 2025; Hasanah, 2025). Spiritual coping, such as seeking connection to a higher purpose, has shown protective effects for professionals facing uncertainty and moral distress (Williamson et al., 2024). Group-based and relational resources also play an important role: collective resilience and shared narratives help individuals transform crisis into growth (Kanwal et al., 2024; Özmete et al., 2025). However, in highly individualistic and performance-driven environments, high achievers often lack these buffers and may experience increased isolation and vulnerability (Balolong et al., 2025; Monti & Dinero, 2025).

Emerging research suggests that curiosity and openness to existential questions can convert anxiety into constructive exploration. Approaching life's uncertainties with curiosity fosters psychological flexibility and reduces avoidance (Gawda & Korniluk, 2024). Yet, many high achievers, accustomed to control and predictability, find such openness difficult to cultivate (Robinson et al., 2025; Smirnov & Makarova, 2025). This gap between the need for existential exploration and the drive for control may intensify anxiety and hinder adaptive coping.

Social and relational processes are another critical dimension. Studies among patients with life-threatening illnesses, survivors of collective trauma, and students in transitional phases show that connection and shared vulnerability support meaning-making (Kanwal et al., 2024; Özmete et al., 2025). In contrast, the competitive ethos and high standards within elite academic, corporate, or creative circles often discourage vulnerability and limit access to supportive networks (Balolong et al., 2025; Monti & Dinero, 2025). This relational gap can magnify the experience of existential threat, leaving individuals alone to negotiate questions of worth and purpose.

Environmental and generational concerns further complicate the picture. As global narratives about climate change and future uncertainty spread, legacy and long-term impact have become salient aspects of existential reflection



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(Betrò, 2024; Mah et al., 2024). For individuals who measure success through external achievements, the sense of global instability may create despair about the durability or significance of their efforts. Others, however, respond by reorienting their careers toward contribution and sustainability, suggesting that existential anxiety can catalyze meaningful redirection when adaptive resources are present (Mah et al., 2024).

Cross-cultural evidence warns against treating existential anxiety as a universal and static experience. In collectivist contexts, spiritual and relational responses tend to dominate, while in Western and individualistic environments, emphasis falls on personal meaning-making and psychological strategies (DurakÇAy & Ovali, 2025; Firdaus & Murtadho, 2025; Hasanah, 2025). Eastern European and transitional societies add another layer, where socio-political change and narratives of insecurity influence existential stability (DurakÇAy & Ovali, 2025; Петренко et al., 2024). These dynamics call for culturally sensitive approaches when examining high-achieving populations in countries such as Hungary, where aspirations of global competitiveness intersect with local social and historical realities.

Despite the conceptual advances in existential psychology, there is limited understanding of how existential anxiety is experienced and managed by high-achieving individuals outside clinical or crisis populations. Much of the existing work focuses on patient groups, refugees, or general adults (Kanwal et al., 2024; Ma, 2023; Петренко et al., 2024), leaving the world of excellence-driven individuals underexplored (Balolong et al., 2025; Monti & Dinero, 2025). Furthermore, the interaction between performance identity, relational isolation, spirituality, and curiosity as coping resources remains poorly understood (Robinson et al., 2025; Williamson et al., 2024). Addressing this gap can advance theory and inform targeted psychological support for those facing high internal and external expectations.

The objective of this study is to explore how high-achieving individuals in Hungary conceptualize and experience existential anxiety and to identify the adaptive responses they employ to cope with these existential concerns.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### *2.1. Study Design and Participants*

This research employed a qualitative design using an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the conceptual dimensions of existential anxiety and adaptive responses among high-achieving individuals. The interpretive phenomenological framework was selected to gain a deep understanding of participants' lived experiences and subjective meaning-making processes, which are often nuanced and context-dependent in populations with high performance standards.

Participants were recruited from Hungary through purposive sampling to ensure maximum relevance and richness of data. Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) be identified as high-achieving in their respective fields (e.g., academia, business, sports, arts, or science), (b) have a minimum of five years of demonstrated excellence or recognized accomplishments, and (c) express a willingness to share personal experiences regarding existential concerns and coping strategies. Individuals with a self-reported history of severe psychiatric disorders were excluded to focus on existential rather than acute clinical anxiety. Recruitment was facilitated through professional networks, academic circles, and high-performance organizations. The final sample consisted of 25 participants (14 women and 11 men), aged between 27 and 52 years, representing diverse professional sectors. The sample size was guided by the principle of theoretical saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new significant themes emerged.

### *2.2. Measures*

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in Hungarian or English based on participants' preference. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted face-to-face or via secure online platforms when in-person meetings were not feasible. The interview guide was developed based on existing existential and performance psychology literature and included open-ended questions exploring personal experiences of anxiety, perceptions of meaning and purpose, and coping or adaptive responses. Examples of guiding questions included: "How do you experience existential concerns in the context of your achievements?" and "What strategies or mindsets help you adapt to or cope with such anxieties?" Flexibility in questioning allowed participants to elaborate on unique experiences while



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ensuring that core topics were consistently addressed. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### *2.3. Data Analysis*

Data analysis followed an inductive and iterative process consistent with interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Transcripts were imported into NVivo software version 14 to facilitate systematic coding and theme development. Initially, open coding was performed line by line to identify significant statements and meaning units related to existential anxiety and adaptive responses. Codes were then grouped into conceptual categories through axial coding, enabling the recognition of patterns and interrelationships. Higher-order themes were subsequently developed to capture the core dimensions of existential anxiety and the range of adaptive mechanisms described by participants. Constant comparison techniques were applied throughout the process, with emerging themes regularly cross-checked against raw data to preserve authenticity and depth. To ensure credibility, two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts and discussed discrepancies until consensus was reached. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with several participants to validate accuracy and resonance with their lived experiences.

## 3. Findings and Results

The study included 25 high-achieving individuals from Hungary, comprising 14 women (56%) and 11 men (44%), with ages ranging from 27 to 52 years (M = 38.6). Participants represented diverse professional fields, including academia (n = 7; 28%), business and entrepreneurship (n = 6; 24%), creative industries such as art and music (n = 5; 20%), competitive sports (n = 4; 16%), and scientific or technological innovation (n = 3; 12%). Most participants held advanced academic degrees: 9 (36%) reported holding a master's degree, 10 (40%) a doctoral degree, and 6 (24%) had completed professional certifications or equivalent high-level training. Regarding career stage, 11 participants (44%) had more than 15 years of professional experience, 7 (28%) between 10 and 15 years, and the remaining 7 (28%) between 5 and 9 years. The majority were married or in long-term partnerships (n = 15; 60%), while 10 (40%) were single. This distribution provided a varied yet balanced sample, offering rich perspectives on existential anxiety and adaptive coping strategies across gender, discipline, and career trajectory.

**Table 1**

*Main Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts of Existential Anxiety and Adaptive Responses in High-Achieving Individuals*

| Main Theme | Subtheme | Concepts (Open Codes) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Sources and Manifestations of Existential Anxiety | Pressure of Achievement | Fear of failure; Fear of stagnation; Fear of losing recognition; Anticipation of decline; Inability to maintain peak standards |
| | Identity Fragility | Role confusion; Self-worth tied to success; Constant self-comparison; Feeling replaceable |
| | Isolation in Excellence | Social detachment; Difficulty relating to peers; Feeling misunderstood; Limited safe spaces |
| | Mortality Awareness | Heightened sense of time passing; Reflection on legacy; Anxiety about future irrelevance |
| | Value-Performance Dissonance | Conflict between personal values and external success metrics; Regret over sacrificed personal life; Emotional emptiness despite achievements |
| 2. Cognitive-Emotional Processing of Anxiety | Meaning Searching | Questioning life purpose; Reassessing priorities; Desire for authentic impact; Seeking self-definition |
| | Internal Dialogue | Self-criticism; Overthinking past choices; Anticipating hypothetical losses |
| | Emotional Vulnerability | Fear of weakness; Guilt about privilege; Ambivalence toward success |
| | Temporal Framing | Focus on present moment; Reinterpreting past setbacks; Anxiety about future goals |
| | Self-Awareness Development | Increased reflection; Recognition of perfectionism; Acceptance of imperfection |
| | Existential Curiosity | Reading philosophy and psychology; Exploring spiritual frameworks; Engaging with existential literature |
| 3. Adaptive Coping and Growth Responses | Purpose Reorientation | Redefining success; Focusing on contribution over recognition; Reconnecting with personal passions |
| | Relational Anchoring | Deepening intimate bonds; Sharing vulnerabilities; Building trusted support networks |
| | Mindful Practices | Meditation; Breathwork; Mind-body awareness; Gratitude journaling |
| | Creative Expression | Artistic outlets; Writing personal narratives; Using creativity to externalize fears |



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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Balance and Boundary Setting | Prioritizing rest; Protecting personal time; Rejecting constant competition; Learning to say no |
| | Professional Renewal | Pursuing new challenges; Mentoring others; Reskilling or career shifting |
| | Existential Acceptance | Embracing life's uncertainty; Accepting mortality; Valuing transient achievements |

**Main Theme 1: Sources and Manifestations of Existential Anxiety**

**Pressure of Achievement.** Participants frequently described the relentless expectation to maintain exceptional performance and the anxiety tied to potential decline. Many spoke of an internalized fear of "losing the edge." One interviewee reflected, *"It's as if every success becomes a new baseline; if I'm not outdoing my last achievement, I feel like I'm failing."* Others expressed dread about stagnation and the feeling that any pause could be fatal to their professional identity. These concerns were often linked to the fear of losing recognition and relevance in their high-performing communities.

**Identity Fragility.** A recurring theme was the vulnerability of self-identity when heavily tied to achievement. Several participants reported role confusion and self-worth dependent on their success. One participant explained, *"When I'm not producing results, I don't know who I am — my identity feels hollow without accomplishments."* Others described constant self-comparison with equally accomplished peers, fueling feelings of inadequacy and fear of being replaceable.

**Isolation in Excellence.** Many high achievers experienced social detachment as their career paths diverged from their peers. They reported feeling misunderstood and lacking spaces for vulnerability. As one participant said, *"My friends think I have everything together, but I can't talk about my anxiety; they wouldn't understand."* Another noted the loneliness of being "admired but not truly known," highlighting how success can create emotional distance.

**Mortality Awareness.** Heightened awareness of time and mortality was a striking driver of existential unease. Participants contemplated legacy and the impermanence of success. One respondent shared, *"Sometimes I wonder if all my late nights and sacrifices will matter when I'm gone — or if I'm just chasing temporary applause."* Others described anxiety triggered by birthdays or milestone achievements that reminded them of life's finiteness.

**Value–Performance Dissonance.** Several participants expressed tension between their personal values and the external metrics that defined their worth. Feelings of emptiness despite accolades were common. A participant admitted, *"On paper, I've achieved more than I dreamed, but I've sacrificed relationships and parts of myself — sometimes it feels meaningless."* This dissonance often triggered regret and a search for realignment.

**Main Theme 2: Cognitive–Emotional Processing of Anxiety**

**Meaning Searching.** Confronting existential anxiety often prompted participants to question life purpose and re-evaluate priorities. Many sought a deeper sense of impact beyond professional success. One participant reflected, *"I'm starting to ask what my achievements really mean if they're not improving anyone's life — including my own."* This search became a turning point for personal realignment.

**Internal Dialogue.** Participants described intense mental dialogues, often oscillating between self-criticism and hypothetical fear. One noted, *"At night, my mind replays every mistake and asks 'what if I fail next?' — it's exhausting."* Others said this inner voice pushed them to keep striving but also amplified stress and dissatisfaction.

**Emotional Vulnerability.** Many interviewees struggled with the paradox of being seen as strong while privately grappling with fragility. Some felt guilty for feeling anxious despite privilege and success. *"People think I have no reason to feel insecure, but that doesn't make the anxiety go away,"* one participant stated. Another added, *"It's hard to admit weakness when everyone sees you as unstoppable."*

**Temporal Framing.** Participants engaged with time in complex ways. Some tried to ground themselves in the present to counteract future-oriented fear, while others reframed past struggles to create hope. A participant shared, *"I've learned to say: the past taught me, the future will unfold, but right now I can breathe."* Yet anxiety about upcoming milestones often resurfaced.

**Self-Awareness Development.** Several participants described a journey toward recognizing perfectionistic tendencies and unrealistic self-demands. One reflected, *"I finally realized my bar was impossibly high; I'm learning to accept imperfection."* Others reported that deeper self-reflection led to greater compassion toward themselves.

**Existential Curiosity.** A number of participants turned to philosophy, spirituality, or existential literature to understand their inner conflicts. *"Reading Kierkegaard and Frankl helped me see anxiety as part of being human, not*



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*just weakness,"* one participant remarked. Others sought frameworks that normalized uncertainty and mortality.

**Main Theme 3: Adaptive Coping and Growth Responses**

**Purpose Reorientation.** Many participants coped by redefining success in more personally meaningful terms. Instead of chasing external recognition, they sought authentic impact and personal fulfillment. One participant explained, *"I'm focusing less on titles and more on whether my work aligns with who I am."* This shift reduced performance-driven anxiety.

**Relational Anchoring.** Deepening personal connections emerged as a key adaptive strategy. Participants emphasized sharing vulnerabilities with trusted friends or mentors. One noted, *"For years, I kept my fears hidden; opening up to someone who understood changed everything."* Others highlighted how supportive relationships reminded them of value beyond achievements.

**Mindful Practices.** Techniques such as meditation, breathwork, and gratitude journaling were widely used to manage anxiety. *"I start each morning breathing deeply and listing what I'm thankful for — it slows down my racing thoughts,"* one interviewee shared. Mind-body practices created psychological distance from overwhelming performance narratives.

**Creative Expression.** Participants described turning to creative outlets — writing, painting, music — to process existential fear. A participant said, *"When I write poetry about my anxiety, it stops controlling me; I make it something beautiful."* Such activities offered catharsis and meaning-making beyond professional achievement.

**Balance and Boundary Setting.** Many learned to deliberately slow down and protect personal time. One participant remarked, *"I had to say no to endless projects and reclaim weekends for myself."* Others discussed setting boundaries around work demands and resisting the constant drive for competition.

**Professional Renewal.** Some individuals coped by reinventing their careers or mentoring others. *"I started mentoring younger colleagues — it gave my achievements new purpose and made me less anxious about my legacy,"* one participant said. Others pursued new learning paths or adjusted roles to stay aligned with evolving values.

**Existential Acceptance.** Ultimately, many described a mature acceptance of life's impermanence and unpredictability. One participant expressed, *"I'm learning to live with uncertainty; success or failure doesn't define my whole existence."* Others found peace in acknowledging mortality and the transient nature of recognition.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to understand how high-achieving individuals conceptualize and experience existential anxiety and to uncover the adaptive strategies they employ in navigating such concerns. The findings showed that participants' existential anxiety arises from a constellation of interconnected factors, including intense achievement pressure, identity fragility, isolation within competitive contexts, heightened awareness of mortality, and dissonance between personal values and external success metrics. At the same time, participants demonstrated complex internal processing, oscillating between self-critical rumination and meaning-oriented reflection, and eventually mobilizing a range of adaptive responses such as redefining purpose, strengthening relationships, cultivating mindfulness, and embracing existential acceptance. These results not only expand current understanding of existential concerns beyond clinical and vulnerable populations but also integrate how performance-driven environments shape the phenomenology of existential anxiety.

One of the most salient findings was the pressure of achievement as a catalyst for existential unease. Participants described an internalized drive to maintain extraordinary performance and fear of decline or failure, a dynamic that aligns with previous research indicating that success can paradoxically heighten vulnerability to existential threat (Balolong et al., 2025; Monti & Dinero, 2025). The sense of identity fragility revealed in this study supports the notion that self-worth in high achievers often becomes tightly bound to output and recognition, making setbacks or plateauing deeply destabilizing (Bakanova, 2024). The present findings also resonate with Ma's (Ma, 2023) theoretical review, which conceptualizes existential anxiety as emerging when individuals sense a rupture between self-definition and life's broader meaning. By illustrating how high performers experience this rupture when success feels empty or detached from personal values, our data confirm and extend these theoretical claims to a population rarely studied in this way.

The profound sense of isolation described by participants echoes prior work on relational deprivation among elite performers (Balolong et al., 2025). When achievements create distance rather than connection, individuals lack the communal support that can buffer existential fears. This



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dynamic parallels findings among medical and caregiving professionals, where social comparison and perceived invulnerability inhibit authentic help-seeking (Williamson et al., 2024). Moreover, the current study revealed that cultural narratives play a subtle role: participants from Hungary articulated tension between globalized aspirations and local social legacies, reflecting how macro-level sociocultural factors contribute to ontological insecurity (DurakÇAy & Ovali, 2025). This observation confirms calls to contextualize existential phenomena beyond Western individualistic paradigms and to recognize how transitional societies produce unique vulnerabilities.

The study also found mortality awareness and value–performance dissonance to be central to existential anxiety. Participants described intensified reflections on legacy and time, consistent with Mah's (Mah et al., 2024) research showing that legacy concerns are increasingly salient in global instability. For some, global crises and environmental uncertainty prompted despair about the significance of achievements; others used these threats to reorient toward impact and sustainability, supporting Betrò's (Betrò, 2024) notion of "eco-hope" as a constructive response to existential threat. These findings highlight that existential anxiety, though destabilizing, can function as a motivational force when integrated into purposeful action.

In terms of internal processing, participants' accounts of self-critical internal dialogue and perfectionistic rumination mirror patterns identified in clinical and nonclinical populations (Pourdehghan et al., 2024; Smirnov & Makarova, 2025). However, the current study also showed that many eventually shifted from rumination toward reflective meaning-searching. This transition parallels Gawda's (Gawda & Korniluk, 2024) findings that curiosity and existential exploration can protect against a sense of emptiness. Yet, our participants reported that curiosity was not their natural tendency but something cultivated through crisis. This suggests that interventions aimed at high achievers could deliberately foster existential curiosity as a buffer against performance-related anxiety.

Spiritual and meaning-centered coping emerged as another protective domain, though in varied and personally adapted forms. Some participants found comfort in spirituality or ethical self-reflection, echoing Hasanah's (Hasanah, 2025) and Firdaus's (Firdaus & Murtadho, 2025) work on religion and humanistic frameworks reducing existential threat. This aligns with Williamson's (Williamson et al., 2024) findings that professionals can use spiritual motivations to maintain resilience under moral and existential strain. However, unlike clinical or strongly religious groups, the participants' spiritual engagement was often eclectic and exploratory rather than tied to institutional belief systems. This adaptive integration may reflect the post-traditional meaning-making environment of contemporary high-achieving adults.

The relational strategies participants adopted—deepening bonds, sharing vulnerability, and seeking authentic networks—resonate with the protective role of community documented among trauma survivors and patients (Kanwal et al., 2024; Özmete et al., 2025). Yet, participants also admitted that achievement culture initially discouraged such openness. The shift toward relational anchoring was often described as deliberate and effortful, suggesting that interventions promoting peer connection and safe dialogue could be particularly impactful in elite environments where isolation is normative.

Another notable aspect of the findings is the integration of creative expression and mindful practice as coping. Participants described using art, journaling, meditation, and gratitude to process anxiety—strategies aligned with emerging humanistic and resilience-based approaches (Firdaus & Murtadho, 2025; Monti & Dinero, 2025). These practices appear to help transform the abstract threat of existential anxiety into tangible narratives and embodied calm. The movement from control-driven perfectionism to acceptance of impermanence parallels insights from Mokhov (Mokhov & Babushkina, 2022) and Amani (Amani, 2024) about the developmental role of confronting uncertainty and mortality directly rather than avoiding them.

Importantly, the findings suggest that existential anxiety among high achievers is not merely a liability but can be a developmental threshold. Participants who moved toward acceptance and purpose reorientation reported increased psychological flexibility and deeper life satisfaction, aligning with Mah's (Mah et al., 2024) and Betrò's (Betrò, 2024) view of existential threat as a potential catalyst for adaptive transformation. This underscores the value of reframing existential anxiety in psychological practice—not only as a risk factor but also as an opportunity for growth if navigated with proper support.

## 5. Limitations & Suggestions

While this study provides rich insight into the lived experience of existential anxiety among high-achieving individuals, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to participants from Hungary, a



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sociohistorical context combining Westernizing aspirations with transitional cultural identity. Although this offered unique perspectives, it may limit transferability to high achievers in cultures with different value systems or economic conditions. Second, the data relied on self-reported narratives, which can be shaped by participants' current emotional states or social desirability, particularly when discussing vulnerability and failure. Third, despite theoretical saturation at 25 participants, further interviews might have uncovered additional nuances, especially across diverse professional domains beyond those represented. Finally, the interpretive phenomenological approach emphasizes depth over breadth; while this enhances understanding of lived experience, it precludes statistical generalization.

Future studies could examine existential anxiety in high-achieving populations across diverse cultural contexts to determine how sociocultural variables mediate the relationship between performance identity and existential threat. Comparative qualitative work between collectivist and individualist societies could clarify whether relational and spiritual coping resources operate differently across cultures. Longitudinal designs may also reveal how existential anxiety evolves across career stages—particularly during transitions such as early success, plateau, or retirement. Additionally, exploring intersections with personality traits such as perfectionism, openness, and resilience could deepen understanding of individual differences in vulnerability and adaptation. Incorporating narrative and arts-based methodologies might further illuminate the inner symbolic worlds of high achievers and their creative coping mechanisms.

Practitioners working with high-achieving individuals can benefit from recognizing existential anxiety as a distinct and nonpathological dimension of experience. Therapeutic approaches might integrate meaning-centered reflection, curiosity training, and narrative reconstruction to help clients reinterpret performance pressure and identity fragility. Facilitating safe relational spaces, such as peer groups or mentoring structures, could counteract the isolation commonly reported. Encouraging mindfulness and creative practices may also help individuals externalize and transform anxiety. Importantly, supporting a shift from rigid success metrics to personally meaningful definitions of impact and legacy could empower high achievers to approach uncertainty with acceptance and resilience.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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