What both sides of America's polarized divide share: Deep anxieties about the meaning of life and existence itself

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Whatever your beliefs, existential anxiety is likely the fear at the root of why certain issues trigger you.

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Opening my social media feed, I'm often confronted with a jarring contrast: intense, diametrically opposed perspectives from different friends. The comments can be laced with insult, character attack and invective.

I'm certainly not the only one noticing this kind of vitriolic polarization. Recent polling suggests a majority of Americans believe that the country cannot overcome its current divisions.

As a professor of human development and family studies, I've researched and written about traumatic and adverse childhood experiences and existential anxiety for over 20 years. Scrolling through my feed, I was struck by the recognition that both sides had something in common: a profound sense of existential fear.

While political polarization has many potential causes, existential anxiety is one that has received less attention.

What is existential anxiety?

Philosophers have written about the concept of existential anxiety for centuries. My own empirical research is based on the writings of the mid-20th century philosopher Paul Tillich, who outlines three facets of this fundamental human fear:

- Fate and death – fears of nonexistence and uncertainty about one's ultimate destiny.
- Emptiness and meaninglessness – fears about life's deeper purpose or ultimate concern.
- Guilt and condemnation – fears of moral failure or threats to one's ethical self.

Existential anxiety is humanity's inherent confrontation with mortality, moral responsibility and search for meaning.

My colleagues and I have found that these fears are very common – between 75% and 86% of participants in our research endorsing at least one concern. Higher levels of existential anxiety are associated with indicators of poor mental health, such as symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation. Existential anxiety levels are also elevated among those who have experienced a life-threatening event. For instance, after surviving a natural disaster, up to 94% of research participants reported at least one dimension of this fear.

Importantly, our research suggests that existential anxiety is associated with aggression. In one study of teens, we found that more extreme existential anxiety as measured with the existential anxiety questionnaire was associated with two kinds of aggression: proactive and reactive. Proactive aggression is goal driven, deliberate and unprovoked, while reactive aggression comes in response to a real or perceived provocation or threat.

Even the most extreme opposite positions likely share a common root: a threat that triggers existential anxiety.

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Underlying theme in existential anxiety

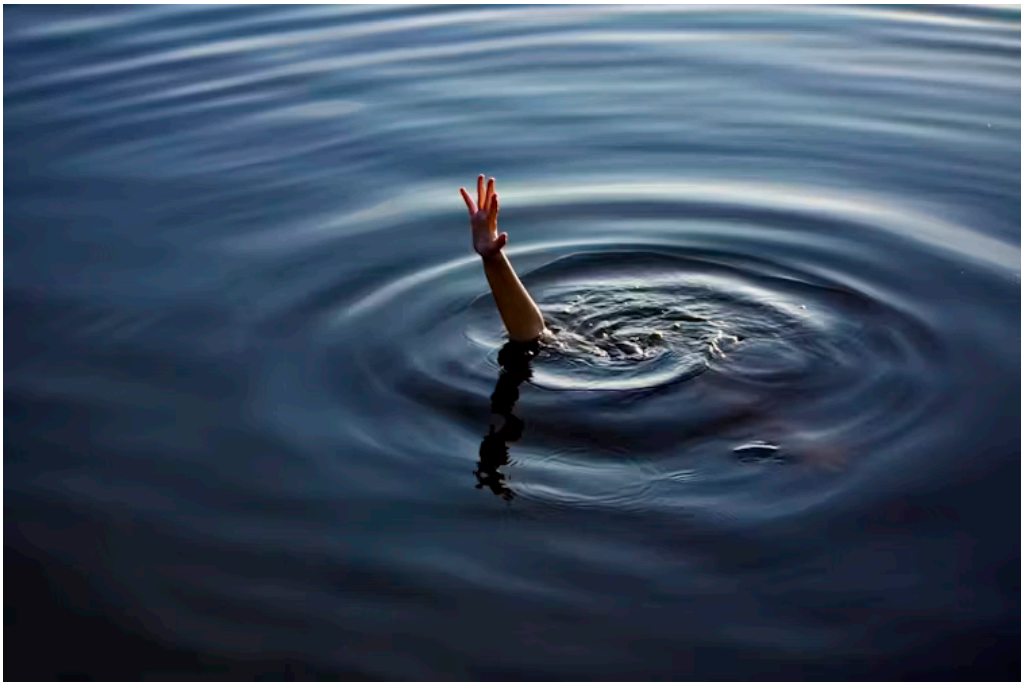
Existential fears have their roots in things that pretty much everyone worries about, at least from time to time. But what specifically triggers this anxiety can be different depending on your worldview.

For instance, as I scroll social media, I see friends expressing anxiety about fundamental safety issues, the fate of the nation, cultural erosion and the loss of traditional values. These concerns are mirrored by other friends' posts expressing concern that the environment is being destroyed, democracy is failing and equality is lost.

Though the content of these expressions can be ideologically opposed, each reflects deeper concerns about societal fate, death or the end of a meaningful way of life. Unspoken but underlying is the fear that the "other side" represents a real and impending threat to one's very existence.

Though the triggering circumstances can differ based on personal beliefs, both sides' perspectives reflect existential concerns about meaning, moral direction and survival.

But existential anxiety isn't just the likely root of some of this distress. Research suggests that underlying fear can increase aggression. Left unchecked, fears may spiral into potential violence.



While existential fears are a part of life, there are ways to pull yourself out of their spiral.

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Where do we go?

The good news is that while core existential fears may never fully abate, you can identify them, alleviate them and possibly even channel them toward adaptive action.

The techniques of cognitive behavior therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy provide a path toward finding common ground and preventing existential fears from escalating into violence.

Core to these techniques is recognizing and facing the fear. They both help participants overcome common tendencies such as seeing only one side of the evidence or catastrophizing that things are much worse than they really are. Acceptance and commitment therapy, for example, teaches participants how to cultivate psychological flexibility, learn to tolerate uncomfortable thoughts or emotions, and practice acting in alignment with one's core values. Together, these skills foster positive action as opposed to destructive reaction.

As disturbing as my social media feed can be, I've also seen real-world instances of people figuring out how to connect across a divide. For instance, one poster appreciated another's comment for helping her realize the existential value his perspective represented to him. Following that exchange, the second poster acknowledged he'd been seeing only one side. In other words, they each recognized the other person's existential fear – accepting it as such helped them de-escalate the confrontation and move forward more constructively.

The critical point is that people on all sides of every issue yearn for safety, purpose and belonging. Recognizing that the core existential concerns we all share underlie polarized fears might be an important step toward bridging divides and reducing the risk of fear-driven aggression.

Carl F. Weems receives or has received funding from the state of Iowa, Youth Shelter Services of Iowa, Environmental Protection Agency, US National Science Foundation, and US National Institutes of Health. He is a fellow of the American Psychological Association, Association for Psychological Science, a member of the Iowa Academy of Education, and American Association for the Advancement of Science.