

# Psychological Distress in the Quarter-life Crisis: The Role of Psychological Inflexibility

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## ABSTRAK

*Transisi perkembangan dari masa remaja menuju dewasa melibatkan banyak tuntutan perkembangan, sehingga banyak individu mengalami fenomena Quarter-life crisis. Individu yang sedang mengalami krisis ini dapat mengalami peningkatan distress psikologis. Distres psikologis dapat mengganggu kehidupan sehingga perlu ditangani dengan serius. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui hubungan psychological inflexibility dan distress psikologis pada individu yang mengalami quarter-life crisis. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan desain korelasional. Partisipan terdiri dari 107 individu berusia 20-29 tahun yang sedang mengalami quarter-life crisis, yang dipilih menggunakan purposive sampling. Pengukuran penelitian dilakukan menggunakan The Hopkins Symptoms Check List-25 ( $\alpha = 0.894$ ) dan Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II ( $\alpha = 0.822$ ). Analisis data dilakukan dengan teknik statistik uji regresi sederhana. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa psychological inflexibility yang tinggi dapat memprediksi distress psikologis yang lebih tinggi pula ( $R^2 = 0.249$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Psychological inflexibility berkontribusi sebesar 24.9% terhadap distress psikologis. Dapat disimpulkan bahwa individu dalam QLC yang memiliki pola reaksi psikologis yang kaku dapat mengalami gejala kecemasan dan depresi yang lebih berat. Temuan penelitian bermanfaat bagi praktisi untuk menargetkan intervensi yang berfokus pada penurunan psychological inflexibility sehingga distress psikologis dapat berkurang.*

## ABSTRACT

The developmental transition from adolescence to adulthood involves many developmental demands, so many individuals experience the Quarter-life crisis phenomenon. Individuals experiencing this crisis may experience increased psychological distress. Psychological distress can disrupt life, so it needs to be treated seriously. This research aims to determine the relationship between psychological inflexibility and psychological distress in individuals experiencing a quarter-life crisis. This research uses a quantitative approach with a correlational design. Participants consisted of 107 individuals aged 20-29 who were experiencing a quarter-life crisis and were selected using purposive sampling. Research measurements were conducted using The Hopkins Symptoms Checklist-25 ( $\alpha = 0.894$ ) and Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II ( $\alpha = 0.822$ ). Data analysis was carried out using simple regression test statistical techniques. The results of the analysis show that high psychological inflexibility can predict higher psychological distress ( $R^2 = 0.249$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Psychological inflexibility contributed 24.9% to psychological distress. It can be concluded that individuals in QLC who have rigid psychological reaction patterns can experience more severe symptoms of anxiety and depression. Research findings are helpful for practitioners to target interventions that focus on reducing psychological inflexibility so that psychological distress can be reduced.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Developmental transitions are periods that every individual will experience, one of which is the developmental transition from adolescence to adulthood. This transition is always accompanied by developmental demands and many changes in life, where many big decisions need to be taken in various areas of life, such as career, education and social life (Balqis et al., 2023; Setiawan & Milati, 2022).

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Individuals are also faced with many responsibilities as adults as well as great demands from the environment, such as completing college, earning money, getting a good job, and getting married (Agarwal et al., 2020; Arini, 2021). Some individuals who are in developmental transition can experience a crisis called Quarter-life Crisis (QLC). QLC refers to the crisis that occurs during emerging adulthood and takes place between the ages of 20-29 years. In Indonesia, the QLC phenomenon has also been found to be experienced by the majority of emerging adults (Herawati & Hidayat, 2020; Rahimah et al., 2022; Riyanto & Arini, 2021). Crisis in QLC can take the form of feelings of panic and overwhelm due to uncertainty and instability, anxiety about the future, questioning one's identity (self-identity, goals and values), and doubting one's readiness to face life (Agarwal et al., 2020; Oktaviani & Soetjningsih, 2023).

QLC can occur due to the great pressure experienced by individuals during the transition to adulthood, especially when individuals cannot fulfill the responsibilities and demands of those around them (Christiawan et al., 2022; Zein et al., 2023). Examples include difficulty getting a job, difficulty finding a life partner, and difficulty building the career of your dreams. In addition, individuals can feel locked out of adult commitments (such as being unable to find a job and a partner), or vice versa, namely feeling trapped or locked in a life role (such as work) that they have chosen but feel unsuited to that role (Herdian & Wijaya, 2022; Veda & Rahayu, 2023). Individuals who experience these things can feel overwhelmed, helpless, don't know anything, doubtful, and afraid, thus causing QLC to occur (Arini, 2021; Hendri & Usman, 2023). The main impact of QLC is an increase in negative emotions, one of which is psychological distress. Psychological distress is a condition in which individuals experience emotional suffering that is not specific to certain mental disorders, which is characterized by symptoms of depression (such as worthlessness; feeling no hope for the future) and symptoms of anxiety (such as often feeling afraid; feeling extreme panic ) (Hendarto & Ambarwati, 2020; Puspitaningrum & Pudjiati, 2021; Riza et al., 2023). Psychological distress that has disrupted daily life can be a marker of the severity of symptoms of mental disorders, so psychological distress can be dangerous if not treated immediately (Hutapea & Mashoedi, 2020; Viertiö et al., 2021).

Psychological distress can be influenced by psychological inflexibility or rigid psychological reaction patterns (Masuda et al., 2022). Psychological inflexibility is characterized by behavior that is too controlled by thoughts, feelings, or other internal experiences, and avoids unwanted psychological experiences, so that individuals sacrifice actions that are actually more effective and in accordance with the values they hold (A'anisah & Bintari, 2023; Citrahartani & Dewi, 2023). Psychological inflexibility was found to have a positive correlation with psychological distress as well as being a predictor of psychological distress (Gunawan & Oriza, 2023). In other words, the more rigid a person's psychological reaction pattern is, the higher the symptoms of depression and anxiety will be (Kusristanti & Arum, 2022; Widayutami & Ratnasari, 2021). It is further explained that individuals who experience QLC and have rigid psychological reaction patterns can consider their thoughts as facts and are too controlled by their thoughts, thus avoiding situations that can trigger negative thoughts (Lani & Kristinawati, 2023; Muliani et al., 2021). When individuals are so afraid of facing unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or situations that they avoid various triggers, the individual's behavior will become very limited, detrimental, or even dangerous (such as consuming narcotics, avoiding social interactions, and excessive procrastination) (Ashari et al., 2022; Zwagery & Yuniarrahmah, 2021). The more time and energy a person spends avoiding or getting rid of unwanted thoughts or feelings, the greater the likelihood that he or she will experience long-term psychological distress and experience a mental disorder (Robinson, 2019; Wibisono & Hakim, 2022).

On the other hand, individuals in QLC have various developmental tasks, namely taking many big decisions and new responsibilities in various areas of life, such as completing college, determining where to work and finding a life partner (Anggraeni & Hijrianti, 2023; Syachri et al., 2022). If they have inflexible psychological reaction patterns and experience high psychological distress, they will find it increasingly difficult to carry out these developmental tasks (Fatchurrahmi & Urbayatun, 2022; Syifa'ussurur et al., 2021). Rigid psychological reactions can prevent them from emerging from a crisis, where it requires compromise and resolution to enter into a series of commitments that are meaningful and in line with their life goals (Asrar & Taufani, 2022; Huwaina & Khoironi, 2021). Therefore, it is important to identify ways to help individuals in QLC to reduce the psychological distress experienced and complete the QLC period. This research is in line with the results of previous research which also revealed that cognitive flexibility and spirituality can be joint predictors of distress tolerance in early adult samples (Pesau, 2023). Other research results also reveal that psychological flexibility has a significant influence on cabin fever levels during the Covid-19 pandemic (Salimah & Prathama, 2022). It's just that in previous research, there have been no studies that specifically discuss the role of psychological inflexibility in psychological distress during the quarter-life crisis. So this research focuses on this study with the aim of finding out the relationship between psychological inflexibility and psychological distress in individuals experiencing a quarter-life crisis.

## 2. METHOD

This research will use a quantitative approach, with a correlational research design. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling, namely selecting samples based on certain criteria. The number of participants in this study was 107 participants, with the criteria being 20 - 29 years old, experiencing QLC, and experiencing psychological distress. Participants were not included in the study if they did not meet the age criteria, had a score below the psychological distress cut-off of the HSCL-25, and did not meet the QLC criteria according to the Crisis Definition and Question (CDQ). There is a description of the demographic data of the research participants can be seen in more detail at [Table 1](#).

**Table 1.** Participant Demographic Data

	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Man	23	21.5
	Woman	84	78.5
Age	20-24	87	81.2
	25-29	20	18.8
Last education	Junior High School	1	0.9
	High School/Equivalent	33	30.8
	Diploma	5	4.7
	S1	63	58.9
Work	S2	5	4.7
	Working Full Time	44	41.1
	Working Part Time	9	8.4
	Freelance Work	7	6.5
	Internships	3	2.8
	Housewife	3	2.8
	Businessman	7	6.5
	Not Yet Working	34	31.8
Status	Marry	98	91.6
	Not Married Yet	9	8.4

Data collection was carried out by distributing questionnaires online via Google Form. There are two research instruments used, namely psychological distress measured using the Hopkins symptoms check list-25 uses the HSCL-25 measuring instrument consisting of 25 self-report items that measure psychological distress. These items are divided into two dimensions, namely anxiety and depression, where the anxiety dimension consists of 10 items (items number 1 to 10) and the depression dimension consists of 15 items (items number 11 to 25). An example of an item measuring symptoms of depression is "feeling sad", while an example of an item measuring symptoms of anxiety is "feeling tense or stiff". The scale used is a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all bothersome) to 4 (very bothersome), where higher scores indicate greater psychological distress. A score greater than or equal to 1.75 indicates that the individual is experiencing symptoms of psychological distress and is likely experiencing mental health problems. The internal consistency of this measuring instrument is classified as good ( $\alpha = 0.85 - 0.89$ ). Based on this research data, the reliability value of the HSCL-25 is  $\alpha = 0.894$ , which means the reliability of this measuring instrument is good. Next is psychological inflexibility measured using the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II. This measuring instrument consists of 7 unidimensional self-report items that measure psychological inflexibility. The scale used is a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never true) to 7 (always true), where a higher score reflects a higher level of psychological inflexibility. An example of an item on this measuring instrument is "Unpleasant experiences and events in the past make it difficult for me to live my life the way I want." The Indonesian version of the AAQ-II measuring tool has a good level of internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.913$ ). Based on this research data, the AAQ-II reliability value is  $\alpha = 0.822$ , which means it has good reliability.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

This research analysis begins by carrying out descriptive analysis of variables. In this analysis, the hypothetical mean is obtained based on the middle value of the lowest and highest scores on a research instrument. The hypothetical mean of the psychological distress measuring instrument is 2.5, while the hypothetical mean of the psychological inflexibility measuring instrument is 4. The empirical mean of

psychological distress, anxiety dimensions, depression dimensions, and psychological inflexibility appears to be greater than the hypothetical mean. Therefore, it can be concluded that the participants in this study had high levels of psychological distress and psychological inflexibility, this can be seen in the results of the analysis in [Table 2](#).

**Table 2.** Descriptive Description of Variables

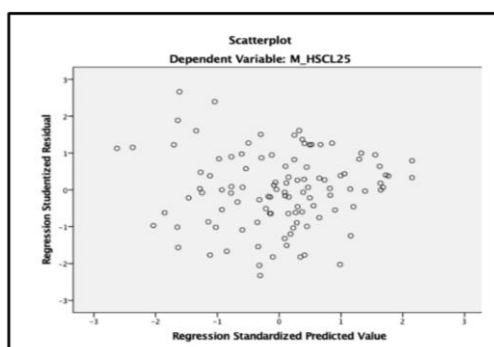
Variable	Hypothetical Mean	Empirical Mean	Elementary School	Min.	Max.
Psychological Distress	2.5	2.89	0.52	1.7	3.8
Worry	2.5	2.91	0.7	1.50	4.0
Depression	2.5	2.87	0.5	1.53	3.8
Psychological Inflexibility	4	5.1	1.03	2.43	7.0

After obtaining the results of the descriptive analysis of the research variables, it was then continued with the normality test and heteroscedasticity test. First, a normality test was carried out to see the distribution of research variable data, namely psychological distress and psychological inflexibility. The normality test in this study was carried out using the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test with the Monte Carlo method. The results of the normality test show that all research variables and their dimensions have a significance above 0.05, so it can be concluded that the two research variables are normally distributed. Further details of the normality test results can be seen in [Table 3](#).

**Table 3.** Normality Test

Variable	p	Description
Psychological Distress	0.749	Normal
Worry	0.222	Normal
Depression	0.394	Normal
Psychological Inflexibility	0.187	Normal

Second, heteroscedasticity and linearity tests were carried out using scatterplot graphs and it was found that the data points were spread randomly, both above and below point 0, and no particular patterns were visible in the graph. Homoscedasticity occurs when the points on the plot are spread out and there is no particular pattern such as a funnel (indicating heteroscedasticity) or a curve (indicating the data is not linear). This shows that the research data is classified as homoscedastic and linear. The scatterplot graph can be seen at [Figure 1](#).



**Figure 1.** Scatterplots

After obtaining the assumption test results, the research analysis then continued with hypothesis testing. First, a correlation test between variables was carried out using Pearson Correlation. The results show that there is a significant positive correlation between psychological inflexibility and psychological distress ( $r = 0.542$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), which means that the higher the psychological inflexibility, the higher the psychological distress. In addition, there was a significant positive correlation between psychological inflexibility and the anxiety dimension ( $r = 0.404$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and the depression dimension ( $r = 0.572$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This means that the higher the individual's psychological inflexibility, the higher the individual's symptoms of anxiety and depression. Detailed data can be seen at [Table 4](#).

**Table 4. Correlation Test**

Variables / Dimensions	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Psychological Inflexibility	1			
Psychological Distress	0.499**	1		
Dimensions of Anxiety	0.363**	0.891**	1	
Dimensions of Depression	0.530**	0.920**	0.670**	1

\*\*p < .001 (2-tailed)

Once it is known that there is a correlation between variables, the hypothesis test is carried out using a simple regression test. The results showed that psychological inflexibility was a significant predictor of psychological distress ( $R^2 = 0.249$ ;  $r = 0.499$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). This means that psychological inflexibility contributes 24.9% to psychological distress, while 75.1% is influenced by other factors. The contribution of psychological inflexibility to psychological distress is moderate (9% - 24%). Detailed data can be seen at [Table 5](#).

**Table 5. Regression Test**

Variable	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	p	Information
Psychological Inflexibility	0.499	0.249	34.78	< 0.001	Significant

Based on the data above, it is found that the linear regression equation of psychological inflexibility and psychological distress can be formulated as  $Y = 1.601 + 0.252 X$ . Regression equation explains that if the psychological inflexibility score is zero (0), then the psychological distress score is 1,601. Then for every one (1) increase in the psychological inflexibility score, the psychological distress score will increase by 0.252. Thus, these results indicate that psychological inflexibility is a significant predictor of psychological distress in individuals who experience QLC. In more detail the regression coefficient data can be seen in [Table 6](#).

**Table 6. Regression Coefficient Data**

	Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.601	0.222		7.21	< 0.001
	Psychological Inflexibility	0.252	0.043	0.499	5.90	< 0.001

## Discussion

This research was carried out with the aim of determining the role of psychological inflexibility on psychological distress in individuals experiencing QLC. This research found that psychological inflexibility was found to be a significant predictor of psychological distress. Psychological inflexibility contributed 24.9% to psychological distress, while 75.1% was influenced by other factors. These results mean that the higher the psychological inflexibility of individuals experiencing QLC, the higher the psychological distress experienced by the individual. In other words, the inflexible psychological reaction patterns of individuals experiencing QLC have been shown to predict more severe symptoms of anxiety and depression ([Agarwal et al., 2020](#); [Arini, 2021](#)). These results then show that high psychological inflexibility can predict higher psychological distress, this can happen because individuals with high psychological inflexibility tend to be too integrated with their thoughts (cognitive fusion) ([Agarwal et al., 2020](#); [Oktaviani & Soetjningsih, 2023](#)). As a result of the cognitive fusion process, individuals can avoid and escape unpleasant internal events (such as thoughts, feelings, memories, and urges), even when these events cause behavior that is detrimental to them, for example by closing themselves off from the social environment, taking drugs, and procrastinate excessively ([Herdian & Wijaya, 2022](#); [Veda & Rahayu, 2023](#)). The more time and energy a person spends avoiding or getting rid of unwanted thoughts (or other internal experiences), the greater the likelihood that he or she will experience long-term psychological distress and develop a mental disorder ([Hendarto & Ambarwati, 2020](#); [Puspitaningrum & Pudjiati, 2021](#); [Riza et al., 2023](#)).

Someone who has an inflexible psychological condition tends to focus too much on the past and future, so they pay less attention to the current situation. Individuals also lack recognition of their current identity (for example the values they hold and their life goals), giving rise to impulsive/reactive behavior rather than being guided by the values they hold ([Lani & Kristinawati, 2023](#); [Muliani et al., 2021](#)).

Therefore, when individuals who experience QLC have a combination of these psychological inflexibility processes at an extreme level, the individual can experience higher psychological distress as well (Ashari et al., 2022; Zwagery & Yuniarramah, 2021). In other words, the more rigid a person's psychological reaction pattern is, the higher the symptoms of depression and anxiety will be. It is further explained that individuals who experience QLC and have rigid psychological reaction patterns can consider their thoughts as facts and are too controlled by their thoughts, thus avoiding situations that can trigger negative thoughts (A'anisah & Bintari, 2023; Citrahartani & Dewi, 2023). When individuals are so afraid of facing unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or situations that they avoid various triggers, the individual's behavior will become very limited, detrimental, or even dangerous (such as consuming narcotics, avoiding social interactions, and excessive procrastination) (Christiawan et al., 2022; Zein et al., 2023).

The results obtained in this study are in line with the results of previous research, which also revealed that cognitive flexibility and spirituality can be joint predictors of distress tolerance in a sample of early adults (Pesau, 2023). Other research results also reveal that psychological flexibility has a significant influence on cabin fever levels during the Covid-19 pandemic (Salimah & Prathama, 2022). So based on several research results, it can be said that psychological distress in individuals experiencing QLC can be influenced by psychological inflexibility.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This research found that psychological inflexibility was found to be a significant predictor of psychological distress. Psychological inflexibility contributed 24.9% to psychological distress. The higher the psychological inflexibility an individual has, the higher the psychological distress they experience. This means that individuals in QLC who have inflexible psychological reaction patterns may experience more severe symptoms of anxiety and depression.

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