

The Relationship between Personality Traits and Depression among Teachers with Prolonged Illnesses

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the relationship between personality and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses. A total of 527 teachers (43.3% male and 56.7% female) were selected as respondents utilizing a cluster sampling method. This study employed the Big Five Inventory (BFI) questionnaire and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) to assess the respondents' personality traits and levels of depression. Pearson correlation statistical analysis was utilized to examine the association between personality and depression. The analytical results indicated a significant relationship between personality traits and depression. Specifically, the test results demonstrated significant correlations between depression among teachers with prolonged illnesses and the personality traits of Neuroticism ($r = 0.266$, $p < 0.01$), Extraversion ($r = -0.532$, $p < 0.01$), Openness ($r = -0.106$, $p < 0.05$), Agreeableness ($r = -0.647$, $p < 0.01$), and Conscientiousness ($r = -0.493$, $p < 0.01$). Overall, the implications of this study emphasize the critical need for teachers to cultivate a positive social environment and establish robust moral support networks with colleagues and family members to sustain their mental well-being. Furthermore, school administrators, District Education Offices (PPD), and the Ministry of Education should develop supportive platforms providing infrastructural, moral, and safety reinforcements for educators managing prolonged illnesses.

Keywords: Personality, Depression, Emotional Well-Being, Mental Well-Being

Introduction

Teachers are individuals entrusted with the responsibility of educating and supporting students. In the Malaysian education context, teachers play a pivotal role in shaping students' academic, emotional, and social development (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). However, the increasing complexity of teachers' responsibilities, coupled with high occupational demands, may adversely affect their mental health and psychological well-being. Teachers are among the professional groups at risk of experiencing psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, and depression, particularly due to demanding workloads and challenging work environments (Adrian et al., 2021; Edreina & Shahlan, 2024). Mental health is an essential component of an individual's overall well-being and ability to function effectively in daily life (Munusamy et al., 2024).

These challenges may become more pronounced among teachers who experience prolonged illnesses or chronic health conditions. Chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, hypertension, and cancer, often require long-term management and may interfere with individuals' daily functioning, occupational responsibilities, and quality of life. For teachers, the additional demands associated with managing prolonged health conditions may compound existing occupational stress and increase vulnerability to psychological difficulties. One important psychological outcome associated with chronic illness is depression. Depression is a mental health disorder characterized by persistent sadness, diminished interest or pleasure in activities, fatigue, and difficulties in social and occupational functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; World Health Organization, 2023). It is also frequently identified as a significant comorbidity among individuals living with chronic diseases. Evidence suggests that individuals with chronic illnesses have a greater risk of experiencing depression than the general population (World Health Organization, 2023).

Nevertheless, the presence of a chronic illness does not necessarily result in depression among all individuals (Wang et al., 2025). This variation indicates that individual psychological characteristics may influence how people perceive, manage, and respond to the challenges associated with prolonged illness. Among these characteristics, personality is particularly relevant because it influences individuals' perceptions, coping responses, emotional regulation, and reactions to stressful life experiences (Kotov et al., 2010; Malouff et al., 2005). Recent evidence further suggests that personality characteristics may be associated with individuals' vulnerability to depression (Yang et al., 2024). Therefore, examining personality may provide a more comprehensive understanding of why some individuals experiencing prolonged illness are more vulnerable to depressive symptoms than others.

Despite the growing literature on chronic illness, depression, and personality, research specifically examining the relationship between personality and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illness remains limited. Previous studies have predominantly focused on the general population, patients with specific chronic diseases, or student populations, with comparatively less attention given to teachers who continue to face occupational responsibilities while managing prolonged health conditions. This represents an important research gap because teachers occupy a distinctive occupational position in which psychological well-being may have implications not only for their personal functioning but also for their professional performance and interactions with students.

The novelty of the present study lies in its specific focus on the influence of personality traits on depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illness. By examining this relatively underexplored population, the study extends existing knowledge on the psychological factors associated with depression in the context of chronic health challenges. The study also contributes to the field of social sciences by integrating psychological and occupational perspectives to enhance understanding of how individual personality characteristics may be associated with mental health outcomes among educators experiencing prolonged illness. Such knowledge may provide an empirical basis for school administrators, counselors, and policymakers to develop more targeted psychological support and intervention strategies for teachers facing prolonged health challenges.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the influence of personality traits on depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illness. Understanding this relationship is important for identifying psychological factors that may be associated with teachers' vulnerability to depression and for informing appropriate preventive and supportive interventions within the educational setting.

Teachers are individuals entrusted with the responsibility of educating and supporting students. In the Malaysian education context, teachers play a pivotal role in shaping students' academic, emotional, and social development (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). However, the increasing complexity of teachers' responsibilities, coupled with high occupational demands, may adversely affect their mental health and psychological well-being. Teachers are among the professional groups at risk of experiencing psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, and depression, particularly due to demanding workloads and challenging work environments (Adrian et al., 2021; Edreina & Shahlan, 2024). Mental health is an essential component of an individual's overall well-being and ability to function effectively in daily life (Munusamy et al., 2024).

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Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to identify the relationship between personality traits and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses.

Specific Objectives

- To identify the relationship between the Neuroticism personality trait and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses.
- To identify the relationship between the Extraversion personality trait and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses.
- To identify the relationship between the Openness personality trait and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses.
- To identify the relationship between the Agreeableness personality trait and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses.
- To identify the relationship between the Conscientiousness personality trait and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses.

Variables

Independent Variables

Personality (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness).

Dependent Variable

Depression experienced by teachers with prolonged illnesses.

Theory Big Five Personality Theory

The Big Five Personality Theory, introduced by Paul Costa Jr. and Robert McCrae, elucidates that an individual's personality comprises five primary dimensions: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Neuroticism refers to the propensity to experience negative emotions such as anxiety and depression, while Extraversion describes social, active, and optimistic traits. Openness refers to receptivity to new ideas and experiences; Agreeableness involves traits of empathy and cooperation; while Conscientiousness encompasses self-discipline, responsibility, and effective self-management. This model is extensively utilized in psychological research to explain individual differences in behavior, psychological well-being, and mental health (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Depression

Depression is a mental health issue that manifests in response to an individual's environment, physical condition, cognitive style, and coping mechanisms. The theoretical framework for depression in the context of this study is grounded in the Cognitive Theory of Depression introduced by Aaron T. Beck (1976). According to this theory, depression occurs when an individual harbors negative cognitive patterns regarding themselves, their environment, and their future. The Cognitive Triad posits that individuals who interpret life experiences negatively are more susceptible to developing depressive symptoms when confronted with stress or chronic illnesses.

Literature Review

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated a significant relationship between personality and depression. Among the five personality dimensions, Neuroticism is identified as the most robust risk factor for depression. Individuals exhibiting high levels of Neuroticism are prone to experiencing negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, emotional instability, and prolonged psychological distress. Conversely, individuals with high levels of Extraversion and Conscientiousness are found to be more proficient in regulating emotions, cultivating positive social relationships, and adopting highly effective adaptive coping strategies, thereby mitigating the risk of depression.

These findings are corroborated by Yang et al. (2024), who determined that Neuroticism and Extraversion are significant predictors of depressive symptoms across diverse age demographics. The study indicated that individuals with high levels of Neuroticism are more predisposed to depressive symptoms, whereas those with high levels of Extraversion exhibit lower levels of depression. These empirical results reinforce the perspective that personality traits play a fundamental role in determining an individual's vulnerability to mental health disorders.

Furthermore, a study by Cai et al. (2024) discovered that the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and depression is also mediated by other psychological factors, such as self-efficacy. Individuals possessing positive personality traits were found to have higher levels of self-efficacy, which consequently diminishes their propensity to experience depressive symptoms. This finding suggests that personality not only influences depression directly but also operates through specific psychological mechanisms.

Additionally, research by de la Fuente et al. (2024) demonstrated that the dimensions of Conscientiousness and emotional stability have a positive relationship with self-regulation capabilities, adaptive coping strategies, and positive health behaviors. Individuals possessing these characteristics are better equipped to manage stress and sustain psychological well-being when navigating life's challenges. Conversely, individuals with elevated levels of Neuroticism are more susceptible to emotional distress, which can precipitate depressive symptoms.

Overall, the synthesis of the literature indicates that the Big Five personality model is a critical psychological framework for understanding variations in depression levels among individuals. Neuroticism is found to escalate the risk of depression, while Extraversion and Conscientiousness function as protective factors against mental health afflictions. Although the nexus between personality and depression has been extensively documented across various populations, research specifically focusing on teachers afflicted with chronic illnesses remains scarce. Therefore, this study was conducted to bridge this empirical gap by examining the role of the Big Five personality traits in elucidating the severity of depression among teachers with chronic diseases.

Methodology Study Sampling

The sample for this study comprised teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses under the purview of the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE). Data regarding teachers within this category were obtained from the Psychology and Counseling Division, MOE. Based on the acquired data, a total of 527 teachers were identified as suffering from prolonged illnesses. Consequently, this study involved the entire population of teachers with prolonged illnesses as the study respondents.

The researcher employed a cluster sampling method for respondent selection. Purposive sampling is a technique where the entire target population is divided into specific groups or clusters, and samples are then selected from those specific clusters (Hussin et al., 2014). According to Antonius (2013), cluster sampling is highly pragmatic and cost-effective as the sample is drawn directly from the selected clusters.

Instruments

Part B: The Big Five Inventory (BFI)

This instrument was utilized to measure the five principal dimensions of personality: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. This inventory has demonstrated robust reliability and validity in assessing personality traits (John & Srivastava, 1999).

Part F: Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)

The BDI was deployed to evaluate the level of depression among the respondents. This instrument consists of 21 items encompassing an array of depressive symptoms, including negative emotions, sleep disturbances, appetite changes, and loss of interest. In this study, the researcher utilized the Malay-translated and culturally adapted version validated by Khairani et al. (2020) to ensure linguistic and contextual appropriateness.

Data Collection Techniques

The sample for this study consisted of teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses under the administration of the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE). Information regarding teachers in this category was procured from the Psychology and Counseling Division, MOE. Based on the data obtained, a total of 527 teachers were identified as experiencing prolonged illnesses. Therefore, this study incorporated the entire population of teachers with prolonged illnesses as respondents. The researcher selected a cluster sampling method to execute the sample selection.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed utilizing SPSS software. The Pearson correlation statistical method was employed to test the research hypotheses. The following table presents the acceptance and rejection criteria for the study's hypotheses:

Hypothesis	Significance Level	Correlation	Accept/Reject
To identify the relationship between the Neuroticism personality trait and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses.	.266	.000	Accept
To identify the relationship between the Extraversion personality trait and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses.	-.532	.000	Accept
To identify the relationship between the Openness personality trait and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses.	-.106	.017	Accept
To identify the relationship between the Agreeableness personality trait and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses.	-.647	.000	Accept
To identify the relationship between the Conscientiousness personality trait and depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses.	-.493	.000	Accept

The table above illustrates the Pearson correlation analysis concerning the relationship between personality traits and depression among teachers with prolonged illnesses. The empirical results reveal significant correlations between depression among teachers with prolonged illnesses and the personality traits of Neuroticism ($r = 0.266$, $p < 0.01$), Extraversion ($r = -0.532$, $p < 0.01$), Openness ($r = -0.106$, $p < 0.05$), Agreeableness ($r = -0.647$, $p < 0.01$), and Conscientiousness ($r = -0.493$, $p < 0.01$).

A positive relationship exists between Neuroticism and depression. This indicates that elevated levels of Neuroticism correspond with higher levels of depression, and conversely, lower Neuroticism is associated with reduced depression. Meanwhile, the relationships between Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness with depression among teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses exhibit negative correlations. When traits of Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness are highly manifested, the severity of depression is low, whereas lower manifestations of these traits correlate with heightened depressive states.

Conclusion and Implications of the Study

The study's findings demonstrate that female teachers experiencing prolonged illnesses possess higher levels of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness compared to their male counterparts. These results are consistent with research by Costa and McCrae (1992), which indicated that women typically exhibit more positive interpersonal traits such as empathy, cooperation, and concern for others. This study aligns with the findings of Cai et al. (2024), discovering that depression is significantly modulated by psychological factors such as self-efficacy.

Furthermore, the elevated level of Conscientiousness among female educators may reflect a heightened propensity for discipline in managing occupational responsibilities and personal health, despite battling chronic conditions. Conversely, the lack of significant variance in Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Openness suggests that the lived experience of teachers enduring prolonged illnesses may forge relatively homogenous personality paradigms across genders and personality types (McCrae et al., 2008). This study is substantiated by de la Fuente et al. (2024), illustrating that the traits of Conscientiousness and emotional stability share a positive association with self-regulation capabilities, adaptive coping mechanisms, and positive health behaviors. Individuals possessing these traits demonstrate superior proficiency in managing stress and sustaining psychological well-being amidst adversity. Conversely, those with elevated Neuroticism are more vulnerable to emotional distress, frequently culminating in depressive symptoms.

Nevertheless, not all individuals confronting chronic illnesses manifest equivalent degrees of depression. This heterogeneity may be dictated by personality dimensions that shape an individual's cognitive evaluation, management, and responsiveness to life stressors. Specific traits, notably Neuroticism, were found to be significantly correlated with an escalated risk of depression, whereas attributes such as Conscientiousness and emotional stability function as vital protective factors (Cai et al., 2024).

Recent literature underscores that Neuroticism serves as a consistent predictor of depression, whereas Extraversion and Conscientiousness operate as robust protective mechanisms against psychological deterioration (Yang et al., 2024; Cai et al., 2024). Consequently, the Big Five personality framework is validated as a highly appropriate theoretical model for explicating the variance in depressive symptomatology among educators afflicted by chronic illnesses. A profound comprehension of this dynamic empowers educational institutions, counselors, and policymakers to formulate meticulously targeted and effective interventions geared toward fortifying the psychological well-being of teachers.

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