

How Existential Isolation Limits Empathetic Understanding in Healthcare Professionals

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INTRODUCTION

- Existential isolation (EI) is feeling alone in one's subjective experience of the world – as if other people can't relate.
 - e.g., A patient describing their chronic pain to a doctor might feel that the doctor hears the words but doesn't truly grasp what it feels like to live with that pain every day.
- Because of this perceived disconnection, existentially isolated individuals may find it harder to take others' perspectives; that is, to predict or understand others' emotional reactions.
- Thus, people who score high on EI may express less empathetic concern for others.
- The present research examined this idea within healthcare professionals (physicians and nurses).

METHOD

The study was conducted cross-sectionally with Prolific participants.

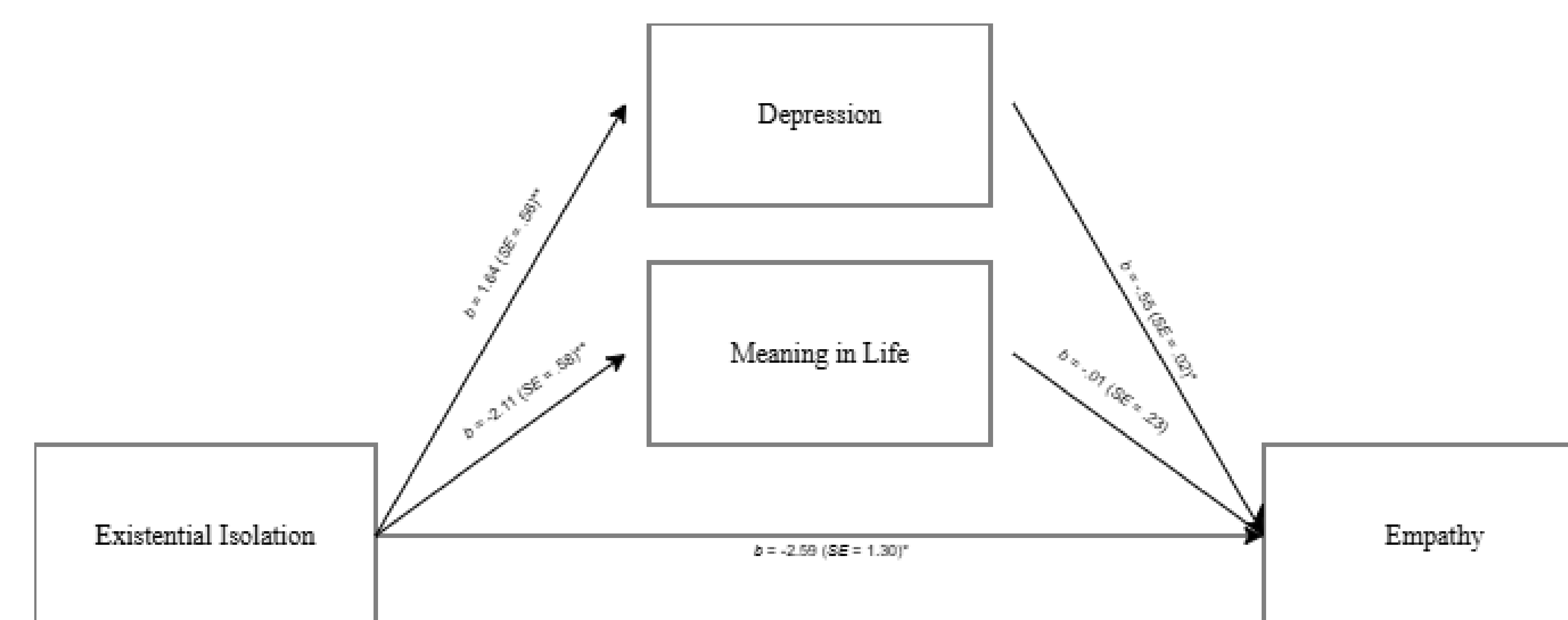
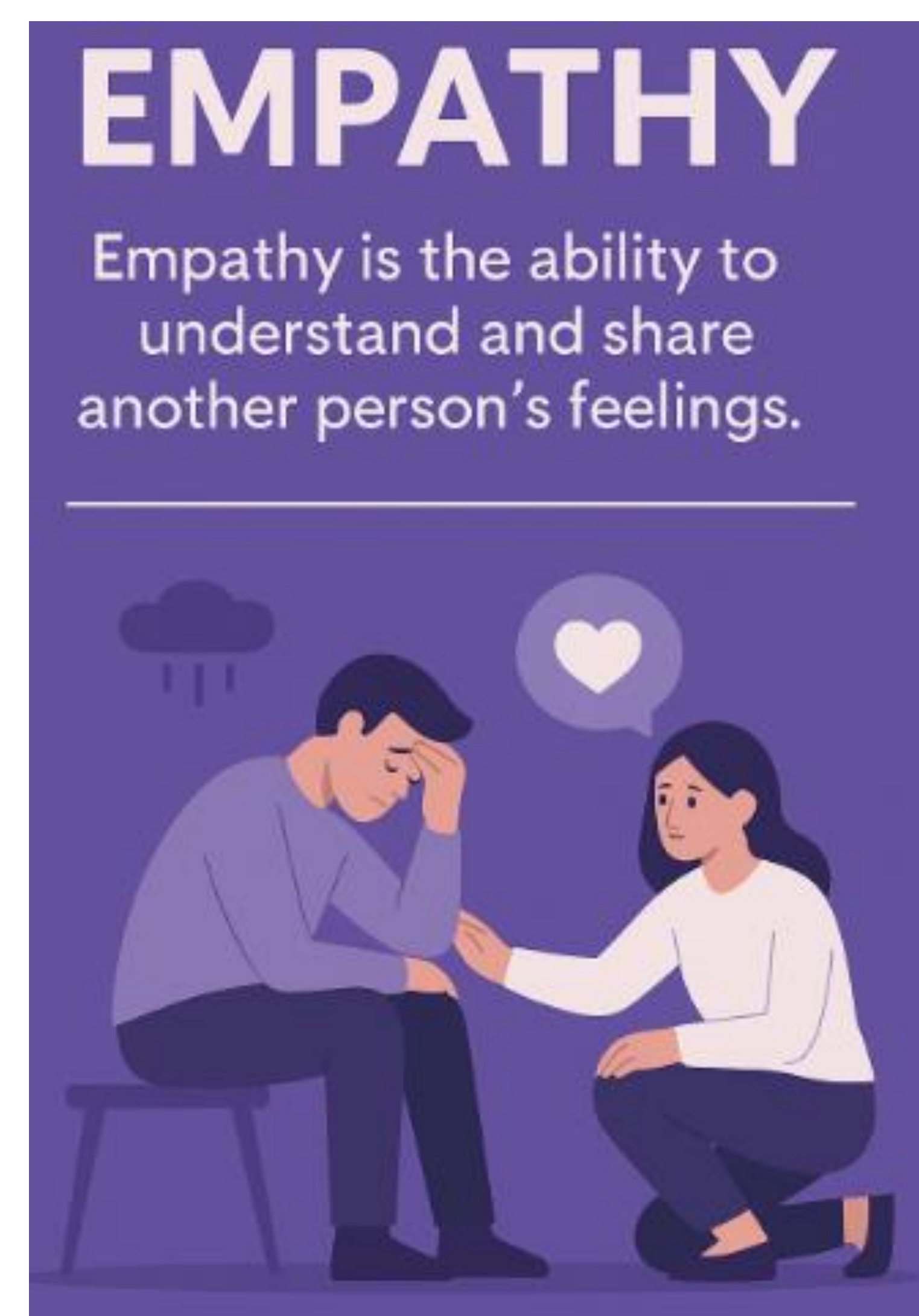
- $N = 352$ Prolific participants (265 women, 88 men).
- Measured EI: Six items; $\alpha = .86$
 - "People do not often share my perspective."
- Measured Empathy in Health Professionals; Twenty items; $\alpha = .88$
 - "My patients feel better when I understand their feelings."
- Completed three well-being measures
 - Depression: Ten items; $\alpha = .89$
 - "I felt that everything I did was an effort."
 - Presence of Meaning in Life: Five items; $\alpha = .93$
 - "My life has no clear purpose."

KEY FINDINGS

Correlations

	Existential Isolation	Presence of Meaning in Life	Empathy	Depression
Existential Isolation	1	-.327**	-.172**	.340**
Presence of Meaning in Life	-.327**	1	.235**	-.537**
Empathy	-.172**	.235**	1	-.198**
Depression	.340**	-.537**	-.198**	1
	.000	.000	.000	.000
	357	352	352	352
	.000	.000	.000	.000
	352	352	352	352
	.001	.000	.000	.000
	352	352	352	352
	.000	.000	.000	.000
	352	352	352	352

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).



- EI is associated with reduced empathy for their patients in physicians and nurses.

DISCUSSION

- EI was heavily linked to lower empathy for their patients in both physician and nurses.
- EI was also positively correlated with depression for both physicians and nurses.
- Overall, empathy significantly mediated the relationship between EI and depression and presence of meaning in life.
- Overall, feeling misunderstood—not simply being alone—reduces empathy, underscoring the importance of fostering shared understanding, especially within health professionals.
- This study extends previous lab findings that EI is significantly linked to a decrease in empathic concern, and that this finding also specifically exists in regard to patients as well
- Future studies should examine effective ways to ameliorate EI specifically for healthcare professionals.

APPLIED IMPLICATIONS

- This study is the first of its kind to explore the effects of EI on patient care in healthcare professionals.
- These findings suggest that EI is detrimental to healthcare professionals' well-being (decreased well-being and lower meaning in life) as well as affecting the way that they care for patients.
- Recognizing and addressing EI could improve therapeutic alliance, treatment adherence, and overall healthcare professional and patient well-being.