

DEATH ANXIETY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AS PREDICTORS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG STUDENTS AFFECTED BY THE FARMER–HERDER CRISIS IN YELEWATA COMMUNITY, GUMA LGA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined death anxiety and psychological distress as predictors of psychological well-being among students affected by the farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma LGA. It examined the relationship between death anxiety, psychological distress and psychological well-being of students as a result of farmer–herder crisis. The study adopted the Carol Ryff's Theory of Psychological Well-being, The Terror Management Theory (TMT) and Leonard Irving Pearlin's Psychological Distress Theory as its analytic framework. Using descriptive design, sample was drawn from all students in 5 settlements and farming locations all in Yelewata Community. Findings from the study reveal that death anxiety is highly prevalent among people affected by the farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community. The study also found that psychological distress is highly prevalent among respondents, as evidenced by persistent sadness, nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, fatigue, and depressive symptoms. It was also found that despite high levels of death anxiety and psychological distress, some aspects of psychological well-being such as self-acceptance, life satisfaction, sense of purpose, and personal growth remain relatively positive among respondents. The study amongst others recommended that government and non-governmental organization (NGOs) should establish centres for testing and treating psychological ailments, and offering regular counseling sessions to address trauma, depression, and stress. Also, national and subnational governments, and international development partners should factor comprehensive resettlement programmes in their emergency response plans to provide students with a stable environment for recovery.

Keywords: Death Anxiety, Psychological Distress, Predictors, Crisis, Psychological Well-Being.

Introduction

Psychological well-being refers to a person's subjective experience of affirmative psychological states, such as pleasure, life fulfilment, and a sense of purpose. It is a multi-faceted construct that goes beyond just the absence of mental ailment and encompasses a person's overall sense of happiness, contentment, and fulfilment in life. Simply put, psychological well-being is about feeling good about oneself and one's life, having satisfying relationships and a sense of purpose, and feeling capable of managing life's challenges. Psychological well-being is a crucial aspect of a person's overall health and happiness (Dhanabhakyaam & Sarath, 2023).

A person's overall life satisfaction, pleasant feelings, and low levels of negative emotions are all included in the broad and multidimensional concept of psychological well-being. Numerous essential elements of psychological well-being are well acknowledged. One of such is a situation where an individual's overall assessment of their life and their emotions of joy and fulfilment are referred to as life satisfaction. There is positive emotions where affirmative emotions such as joy, excitement, and contentment are an important component of well-being. There is also low levels of negative emotions where a person's well-being can be greatly impacted by negative emotions including anxiety, despair, and rage (Wan et al., 2025).

Autonomy is another component of psychological well-being which refers to the ability to make decisions and act in a self-determined way. Dhanabhakyaam (2022) stated that individuals who have high levels of autonomy are able to pursue their own goals and interests, which can lead to improved well-being. There is also positive relationships with loved ones, friends, and romantic interests are crucial for psychological health. These connections give people emotional support, a sense of community, and support for happiness and well-being. Furthermore, there is purpose in life which is an essential component of well-being and entails having a feeling of purpose in life, or a reason to live, as it gives people a sense of direction and meaning. In addition, there is personal growth which states to a person's on-going process of development and self-improvement. In essence, life satisfaction, pleasant emotions, low levels of negative emotions, autonomy, positive connections, a sense of purpose in life, and personal growth are all important aspects of psychological well-being. These elements are connected and work together to advance general fulfilment, happiness, and well-being.

Death anxiety, also referred to as fear of death resulting from violent conflict often characterized as a form of thanatophobia (intense, chronic, or irrational fear of death) is a profound psychological and emotional experience that directly affects individuals in war zones, as well as those affected by terrorism or high levels of criminal violence. It is more than just a fear of dying. It includes intense anxiety about the manner of death, pain, and the uncertainty of the future (Ozguc et al., 2024).

Fear of death resulting from violent conflict acts as a chronic stressor that profoundly degrades the psychological wellbeing of residents, leading to high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. Living in, or fleeing from, conflict zones create a constant state of alert and toxic stress that can cause lasting neurobiological, psychological, and physical damage (Menzies & Menzies, 2020).

Death anxiety can lead to psychological distress which is a set of painful mental and physical symptoms that are associated with normal fluctuations of mood in most people. In some cases, this distress can be the start of a mental health disorder, such as major depressive disorder, an anxiety disorder, or some other mental health condition. Understanding the causes of psychological distress may help individuals in preventing and overcoming it when it arises. While most people experience stress from time to time, psychological distress can have a more profound

effect on an individual. Psychological distress can range from mild emotional stress to serious psychological distress that may be a precursor to a mental illness. Still, experiencing psychological distress does not always indicate the presence of a mental health disorder (Dodson, 2026).

Various factors may increase the risk of high levels of psychological distress. Work-related stress and job dissatisfaction are key factors related to psychological distress. Mirzaei-Alavijeh et al. (2025) posited that losing a loved one or surviving a major natural disaster are other examples of life-changing events that can lead to intense psychological distress. Some health conditions, such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes, not only affect physical functioning but can also have a psychological impact, potentially leading to anxiety and depressive symptoms. In addition, lifestyle choices like excessive alcohol consumption or illicit drug use can further affect mental well-being.

The clashes between the herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria have been going on for decades, but, the period 2014-2018 witnessed a serious escalation of the conflicts with serious genocide and carnage done by herdsmen and some reprisal attacks by the farmers. The herdsmen-farmers' conflict although going on in almost all the northern states and some parts of the southern region, has been prevalent in the North Central region of Nigeria. In this region, Benue State has been the most hit in recent times (Beetseh et al., 2018).

The conflicts between herdsmen and farmers in Benue State are primarily rooted in the contestation for land, pasture and water (Keghku, et al., 2019). However, generally, competition for land, desert encroachment in the North, climate change, destruction of crops, sexual harassment of women by nomads, cattle rustling, loss of grazing reserves, change in pastoralism and farming practice have been identified to be the causes of the herdsmen and farmers' conflicts (Aliyu, et al., 2018).

Available data reveal high levels of anxiety concerning farmers-herders clashes, with findings many inhabitants associated with poorer mental health outcomes as a result of perceived severity of the clashes. This response from the public should not come as a surprise. Fears of death have been proposed to be a central and universal part of the experience of being human. In fact, there is evidence of humans grappling with death anxiety from time immemorial (Ozguc et al., 2024).

Following traumatic events, a large proportion of the population may experience nightmares, anxiety, and other stress-related symptoms, although these effects usually decrease in intensity over time. For some, the hopelessness and helplessness associated with persistent insecurity, statelessness and poverty will trigger short-lived reactions. Aondoaseer et al. (2022) stated that experiencing to traumatic events such as farmers-herders clashes have implications on the psychological well-being of victims and their general social adjustment. These consequences manifest in different behaviours exhibited by the parties involved in the conflicts. Feelings of dread tend to linger around after people face dangerous or life-threatening events and constitute anxiety.

One of the deadliest attacks by armed herders was carried out between June 13 and 14, 2025, on Yelewata Community in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. According to Onuoha-Ogwe (2025), it is estimated that at least 200 people were killed, with dozens more injured or displaced. Among the victims were a disproportionate number of women and children, many of whom were either caught in the crossfire or unable to flee in time. This attack resonates as it repeats, shattering lives, especially of helpless women and children, caught in the violent loop. Initial responses from the site indicate that hundreds of women and children remain deeply traumatized, some separated from their parents, others psychologically unstable, suffering from untreated wounds with skin lacerations and burns. Many of the women at the treatment center

set up through support from UNICEF inside the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camp were not only grieving the loss of family members but also terrified of further violence.

Major traumatic events, daily life stressors as well as economic and physical insecurity like the attack on Yelewata community can impact negatively on psychological well-being. Esonwanne et al. (2018) reported that communal conflicts have various psychological impacts among the population, with a relations established between violence exposure and aggression, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, psychological distress and academic difficulties. Also, the World Health Organization observed that in a crisis situation such as communal conflict, the population within these communities will exhibit varying degrees of psychological consequences including depression, anxiety disorder, posttraumatic stress and major psychosis. Therefore, this study on death anxiety and psychological distress as predictors of psychological well-being among students affected by the farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma Local Government Area, will pave way for better understanding and management of the phenomena under study.

Statement of the Problem

Psychological well-being is the experience of health, happiness, and prosperity. It includes good mental health, high life satisfaction, a sense of purpose, and stress management. Psychological well-being is a multifaceted concept that encompasses aspects of positive functioning, self-realization, and the ability to face life's challenges.

Death anxiety or thanatophobia can be understood in two different ways. First, and primarily, as the fear and worry that arise from an individual's comprehension of their mortality. This fear can become particularly intense because of circumstances that make the individual's death seem imminent. Alternately, the term can describe a psychological condition marked by intrusive levels of worry and dread, in which a person displays an unusual and persistent preoccupation with their death. Death anxiety can lead to psychological distress, which is a state of emotional suffering typically characterised by symptoms of depression and anxiety. These symptoms often coexist and co-occur with common somatic complaints and a wide range of chronic conditions, as well as with medically unexplained syndromes.

The farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma Local Government Area, Benue State, Nigeria, has led to a catastrophic humanitarian situation resulting in significant loss of lives, widespread destruction of property, and massive displacement. This crisis has created a pervasive atmosphere of fear and trauma, with students witnessing violent killings, losing loved ones, and being forced to abandon their homes and schools to take refuge in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps.

The constant threat and experience of violence may lead to death anxiety and psychological distress, which may directly affect psychological well-being. However, it is in an attempt to establish whether the farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community can lead to death anxiety and psychological distress thereby affecting psychological well-being that this study seeks to investigate death anxiety and psychological distress as predictors of psychological well-being among students affected by the farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma Local Government Area.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate death anxiety and psychological distress as predictors of psychological well-being among students affected by the farmer–herder crisis. Specifically, the objectives are:

- i. To determine death anxiety levels among students affected by farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma LGA.

- ii. To examine psychological distress level among students affected by the farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma LGA.
- iii. To identify variables affecting the death anxiety and psychological distress levels among students affected by the farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma LGA.
- iv. To establish a relationship between death anxiety and trauma levels, and the psychological well-being of students as a result farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma LGA.

Research Questions

- i. What is the death anxiety levels among students affected by farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma LGA?
- ii. What is the psychological distress level among students affected by the farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma LGA?
- iii. What are the variables affecting the death anxiety and psychological distress levels among students affected by the farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma LGA?
- iv. What is the relationship between death anxiety and trauma levels, and the psychological well-being of students as a result farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma LGA?

Theoretical Framework

The theory underpinning this study is the Theory of Psychological Well-being propounded by prominent American psychologist and academic at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Professor Carol Ryff. The theory postulates that psychological well-being is attained by achieving a state of balance affected by both challenging and rewarding life events. Carol Ryff's Theory of Psychological Well-being encompasses 6 distinct dimensions of wellness which are; Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance.

On autonomy, individuals should be self-determining and independent; are able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways; regulate behavior from within; and evaluate themselves by personal standards. Concerning environmental mastery, individuals must have a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; control complex array of external activities; and able to choose or create contexts suitable to their personal needs and values. Regarding personal growth, individuals must have a feeling of continued development; see themselves as growing and expanding; have the sense of realizing their potential. On positive relations with others, individuals must have warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others; are capable of strong empathy, affection, and intimacy; and understand the give and take of human relationships. Concerning purpose in life, individuals must have goals in life and a sense of directedness; feel there is meaning to their present and past life; and have aims and objectives for living. For self-acceptance, individuals must possess a positive attitude toward themselves. They must acknowledge and accept multiple aspects of themselves including both good and bad qualities; and feel positive about their past life. These six factors contribute to an individual's psychological well-being, contentment and happiness. Each dimension of the model is an index of well-being in itself. For this reason, Carol Ryff points out the importance of taking care of each dimension.

Another theory that guides this study is the Terror Management Theory (TMT). The Terror Management Theory was developed by social psychologists Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon and Tom Pyszczynski, who published the first Terror Management Theory article in 1986. They based Terror Management Theory on the writings of Ernest Becker, who spoke of the need to protect against the universality of the terror of death. The theory postulates that human behaviour

is influenced by unconscious fear of death that can be managed by building self-esteem to feel significant. The dominant framework suggests that the cognitive awareness of inevitable death creates paralyzing terror. Humans manage this anxiety by adopting cultural worldviews (religion, nationalism) and fostering self-esteem, which provide a sense of meaning and symbolic immortality. It also suggests human beings are uniquely capable of recognizing their own deaths and must manage the existential anxiety and fear that comes with knowing their time on earth is limited.

The Terror Management Theory provides a solid theoretical foundation for understanding how extreme violence and aggression like the June 2025 Yelewata attacks in Benue State affects the psychological well-being of victims. According to the theory, humans neutralize the fear of death by building self-esteem. It is noteworthy that the brutal and barbaric nature of the attacks creates a high sense of death anxiety. Without strong buffers, this death anxiety can lead to depression and PTSD. The Terror Management Theory suggests that individuals with high self-esteem are placed to overcome death anxiety. Conversely, loss of ancestral lands and livelihoods in Yelewata denies survivors the means of enhancing their self-esteem thereby making them more psychologically vulnerable.

Lastly, the theory that is related to this study is the Psychological Distress theory. The Psychological Distress theory was propounded by American sociologist, Leonard Irving Pearlin (December 26, 1924 – July 23, 2014), whose work focused on the sociology of mental illness. The theory focuses on a state of discomfort, characterized by emotional and psychological responses to various stressors that can impact mental and physical health. It is a significant public health concern with far-reaching implications for individual well-being, social functioning, and overall quality of life. The Psychological Distress theory also looks into multiple common psychological conditions, ranging from subclinical symptoms to clinical diagnoses of depression, anxiety, stress, or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). High levels of distress can be a feature of impaired mental health or common mental disorders, including depression or anxiety.

The psychological distress theory is a veritable predictor of psychological well-being among survivors of Yelewata attacks in Benue State. This is because prolong exposure to trauma due to the attack's damages psychological well-being. This theory explains the link between the brutal attacks and the high level of death anxiety which culminates in undermining psychological adjustment ability. The Yelewata attacks in Benue State was indeed a traumatic event that exposed survivors to stressors. This exposure to stressors reduced the quality of life of the victims. This ultimately makes a deeper negative impact on the psychological well-being of survivors of the attacks.

Methodology

The descriptive cross-sectional survey design was used. This research is concerned with the collection of data for the purpose of describing and interpreting findings on death anxiety and psychological distress as predictors of psychological well-being among students affected by the farmer–herder crisis. The purpose of descriptive research is to describe systematically the facts about population, event or area of interest regarding the problem under investigation. Ndubuisi and Udo (2013) stated that descriptive design can be used to investigate a phenomena or participants in their natural setting without adversely influencing the normal behavior of the subject with a view to making effective moves for future improvement. Hence, the design was considered appropriate for use to the study and describe death anxiety and psychological distress as predictors of psychological well-being among students affected by the farmer–herder crisis as they exist in their natural settings.

The research setting of this study was Yelewata Community in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State, North Central Nigeria. Yelewata is in Nyiev Council Ward of Guma Local Government Area. The Local Government Area was created out of the former Makurdi Local Government Area with its headquarters at Gbajimba in 1987 during the then regime of Colonel Fidelis Attahiru Makka. It is named after 'River Guma' in Benue State. The inhabitants are of the Tiv ethnic group who are predominantly Christians. Guma Local Government Area has 11 Council wards – Kaambe, Abinsi, Uvir, Saghev, Nzorov, Nyiev, Mbabai, Mbayer or Yandev, Mbawa, and Mbadwen. It shares a Federal House of Representative seat with Makurdi Local Government and has two House of Assembly seats. Major markets are Gbajimba, Daudu, Agasha, and Abinsi. Trading is another feature in Guma Local Government as can be seen in and around the markets located in the area.

The population for the study comprises all students in Yelewata Community, Guma Local Government Area of Benue State. The population was 1778 according to estimates from Guma Local Government Area Education Authority. The sample of the study was 230 students out of 1,778. This was calculated using the Fisher's formula:

$$N = \frac{Z^2 (Pq)}{d^2}$$

Where: N = minimum sample size required

Z = standard normal deviate at 95% confidence level = 1.96 from the normal distribution table

d = desired precision = 5% = 0.05

p = prevalence = 19% = 0.19

q = 1-p = 1-0.19 = 0.81

$$N = \frac{1.96^2 (0.19 \times 0.81)}{0.05^2}$$

$$N = \frac{3.84 \times 0.15}{0.0025}$$

$$N = \frac{0.576}{0.0025}$$

$$N = 230.4$$

$$N \approx 230$$

This study was carried out using an interviewer-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into 4 sections. Section A was structured to elicit information concerned with the socio-demographic variables of the respondents. Section B used Believers' Death Anxiety Scale to obtain information on death anxiety among the participants. Section C used Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) to obtain information on psychological distress among the respondents. Section D used Carol Ryff's Psychological Wellbeing (18 items) to obtain information on the psychological well-being of the participants. Data were cleaned and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) summarized participants' characteristics, death anxiety, psychological distress and psychological well-being.

Permission was obtained from the school management through the principal of the schools. The participants were addressed on the purpose of the study and were assured of the religious application of the principles of anonymity and confidentiality.

Result

Table 1

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 230)

Variable	Category	F	%
Age	11–15 years	19	8.3
	21–25 years	104	45.2
	26 years and above	107	46.5
Sex	Female	98	42.6
	Male	132	57.4
Educational level	Primary	43	18.7
	Secondary	128	55.7
	Tertiary	59	25.7
Religion	Christianity	217	94.3
	Others	13	5.7
Tribe	Tiv	217	94.3
	Others	13	5.7
Total		230	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

Objective One

To determine the level of death anxiety among students affected by the farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma LGA.

Table 2

Death-Anxiety Indicators among Respondents (N = 230)

Death-anxiety indicators	Low/Not endorsed n (%)	Moderate n (%)	High/Strongly endorsed n (%)	Overall interpretation
Sadness when thinking about death	—	—	229 (99.6)	High
Fear of dying	—	—	221 (96.1)	High
Worry when thinking about death	—	—	196 (85.3)	High
Fear of punishment after death	—	—	145 (63.1)	Moderate–High
Worry about punishment in the grave	—	—	202 (87.8)	High
Grave life perceived as terrifying	—	—	220 (95.7)	High
Feeling unworthy of God's mercy	—	—	229 (99.6)	High
Concern about not reaching heaven	—	—	197 (85.7)	High
Belief in predetermined punishment/reward	—	—	221 (96.1)	High
Avoidance of life-threatening situations	—	—	219 (95.2)	High
Fear of chronic disease	—	—	214 (93.1)	High
Fear of slow/painful death	—	—	221 (96.1)	High
Avoidance of thinking about death	—	—	222 (96.5)	High
Avoidance of death-related thoughts	—	—	221 (96.1)	High
Confusion when thinking about death	—	—	221 (96.1)	High

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The results indicate a high prevalence of death-anxiety indicators among respondents. Particularly high endorsement was observed for sadness when thinking about death, feeling unworthy of God's mercy, avoidance of death-related thoughts, fear of dying and fear of a slow or

painful death. Thus, the responses indicate substantial death-related anxiety among students affected by the crisis.

Objective Two

To examine the level of psychological distress among students affected by the farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma LGA.

Table 3

Table of Psychological-Distress Indicators among Respondents (N = 230)

Psychological-distress indicator	Low/None n (%)	Some n (%)	High/Frequent n (%)	Overall interpretation
Felt tired for no good reason	—	—	219 (95.3)	High
Felt nervous	—	—	220 (95.7)	High
Nervousness that could not be calmed	—	—	221 (96.0)	High
Felt hopeless	—	—	191 (83.1)	High
Felt restless/fidgety	—	—	221 (96.1)	High
Too restless to sit still	—	—	215 (93.5)	High
Felt depressed	—	—	198 (86.1)	High
Felt everything was an effort	—	—	215 (93.5)	High
Felt so sad that nothing could cheer them	—	—	215 (93.5)	High
Felt worthless	—	—	220 (95.6)	High

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

Psychological distress was highly prevalent among the respondents. The most prominent indicators included nervousness, restlessness, fatigue, worthlessness, sadness, depressive feelings and hopelessness.

Objective Three

To identify variables affecting death anxiety and psychological-distress levels among students affected by the farmer–herder crisis.

Table 4

Summary of Major Indicators Associated with Death Anxiety and Psychological Distress (N = 230)

Study variable	Major indicators retained from the questionnaire	Evidence of high endorsement	General level
Death anxiety	Fear of dying	221 (96.1%)	High
	Fear of slow/painful death	221 (96.1%)	High
	Fear of post-death punishment	145 (63.1%)	Moderate–High
	Worry about death	196 (85.3%)	High
	Avoidance of death thoughts	222 (96.5%)	High
	Confusion about death	221 (96.1%)	High
Psychological distress	Nervousness	220 (95.7%)	High
	Restlessness	221 (96.1%)	High
	Fatigue	219 (95.3%)	High
	Hopelessness	191 (83.1%)	High
	Depression	198 (86.1%)	High
	Persistent sadness	215 (93.5%)	High
	Worthlessness	220 (95.6%)	High

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The table indicates that the most prominent indicators were fear and avoidance associated with death, together with nervousness, restlessness, fatigue, sadness, depression and worthlessness. These indicators provide a more concise representation of the patterns originally presented across many separate tables.

Objective Four

To establish the relationship between death anxiety and trauma levels and the psychological well-being of students affected by the farmer–herder crisis.

Table 5

Summary of Psychological-Well-Being Indicators among Respondents (N = 230)

Psychological well-being dimension	Selected indicators	Positive/affirmative response n (%)	Pattern
Self-acceptance	Like most parts of my personality	191 (83.1)	Relatively positive
Life satisfaction	Pleased with how life has turned out	220 (95.7)	Positive
Purpose in life	Have a sense of direction in life	214 (93.0)	Positive
Environmental mastery	Feel in charge of life situation	219 (95.2)	Positive
Environmental mastery	Good at managing daily responsibilities	212 (92.2)	Positive
Personal growth	Life is a continuous process of growth	218 (94.7)	Positive
Personal growth	Value new/challenging experiences	190 (82.6)	Relatively positive
Positive relations	Willing to share time with others	217 (94.4)	Positive
Autonomy	Confidence in own opinions	192 (83.5)	Relatively positive
Autonomy	Judge self-according to own values	211 (91.7)	Positive

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

Table 6

Negative Indicators of Psychological Well-Being among Respondents (N = 230)

Indicator	Agree/strongly agree n (%)	Interpretation
Everyday demands often get me down	220 (95.7)	High negative experience
Disappointed about achievements	220 (95.7)	High negative experience
Difficulty maintaining close relationships	218 (94.8)	High negative experience
Live one day at a time without thinking about future	221 (96.1)	High negative experience
Feel there is little more to do in life	213 (92.6)	High negative experience
Given up trying to make major improvements	216 (93.9)	High negative experience
Influenced by people with strong opinions	191 (83.1)	Moderate–high
Lack warm and trusting relationships	127 (55.2)	Moderate

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The psychological-well-being findings show a mixed pattern. Respondents retained positive aspects such as life satisfaction, purpose in life, environmental mastery, personal growth, autonomy and self-acceptance, while simultaneously reporting substantial negative experiences associated with the crisis. In conclusion, positive psychological functioning can coexist with considerable psychological burden.

Table 7
Summary of Data Analysis Based on Research Objectives

Research objective	Variable/construct examined	Principal indicators retained	Overall finding
1	Death anxiety	Fear of dying; worry about death; fear of punishment; avoidance of death thoughts; confusion about death	Death anxiety was highly prevalent
2	Psychological distress	Nervousness; restlessness; fatigue; hopelessness; depression; sadness; worthlessness	Psychological distress was highly prevalent
3	Factors/indicators associated with death anxiety and distress	Death-related fear/avoidance and emotional-distress symptoms	Multiple psychological indicators were prominent
4	Psychological well-being in relation to death anxiety/trauma	Self-acceptance; life satisfaction; purpose; autonomy; personal growth; environmental mastery; relationships	Positive and negative aspects of well-being coexisted

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

Discussion of Findings

Findings of this study reveal that death anxiety is highly prevalent among people affected by the farmer–herder crisis in Yelewata Community, Guma LGA. The strong emotional responses such as sadness, fear of dying, worry, and avoidance of death-related thoughts indicate intense psychological disturbance. This aligns with Aondoaseer *et al.* (2022), who found that exposure to herdsmen–farmers’ conflicts significantly increases anxiety and trauma among adolescents in IDP camps in Benue State. Similarly, Oluokun and Okediji (2024) reported that insecurity heightens fear, stress, and uncertainty about personal safety, which mirrors the heightened death-related fears observed in this study. The present findings also corroborate the work of Robah (2017), who identified fear of death as a common phenomenon influenced by demographic and existential factors. The dominance of fear, worry, and avoidance behaviors suggests that continuous exposure to violence and insecurity may have activated existential concerns among people, thereby intensifying death anxiety. This supports terror management perspectives, where awareness of mortality increases psychological distress, especially in contexts of persistent threat.

Findings further show that psychological distress is highly prevalent among respondents, as evidenced by persistent sadness, nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, fatigue, and depressive symptoms. These results are consistent with the findings of Oteyi and Musah (2025), who reported that victims of herdsmen attacks experience depression, stress, and mood disturbances. Likewise, Ekedama and Obiunu (2025) established that people in conflict-affected regions experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress compared to those in secure areas. The present findings also align with Nyarko *et al.*, (2020), who demonstrated that exposure to stressful life events significantly predicts depressive symptoms and psychological distress. The high levels of hopelessness and perceived burden reported by respondents suggest chronic stress exposure, which may impair coping mechanisms and emotional regulation. This indicates that the farmer–herder crisis has a pervasive impact on people’ mental health, leading to sustained psychological strain and reduced emotional stability, thereby confirming the strong predictive role of psychological distress in undermining overall well-being.

Findings also indicate that despite high levels of death anxiety and psychological distress, some aspects of psychological well-being such as self-acceptance, life satisfaction, sense of purpose, and personal growth remain relatively positive among respondents. The presence of

positive well-being indicators aligns with findings from Abeshi and Haruna (2023), who noted that emotional and behavioural factors can influence academic and life outcomes even in conflict situations. Similarly, Nyarko *et al.*, (2020) found that supportive social relationships can buffer the negative effects of stress on mental health. The ability of respondents to maintain a sense of purpose, self-worth, and life satisfaction may reflect adaptive coping strategies, religious beliefs, and cultural resilience within the Tiv-dominated community. However, the coexistence of high distress and moderate well-being suggests that while some people are psychologically resilient, the burden of fear and distress may gradually erode their well-being if not addressed. This shows that there is need for psychological intercessions, trauma counselling, and community support systems to lessen the effects of the crisis on people's mental health and promote sustained psychological well-being.

Limitations

In the course of conducting this study, the researcher encountered a number of limitations but all were surmounted. Firstly, lack of uniformity in the schedule of the students in the selected communities made the process of data collection cumbersome as having all respondents present at the same time was impossible. This led to delays in filling the scales. Consequently, the data collection exercise was characterized by frequent visits to the communities to address this challenge.

Secondly, depending on self-report scales to measure sensitive topics like death anxiety and psychological distress can lead to social desirability bias, where respondents may underreport symptoms due to cultural stigma around mental health. In order to overcome these challenges, the researcher assured respondents that responses are anonymous and will be used strictly for academic purposes.

Lastly, carrying out field study in an area prone to violent attacks poses serious security risk. This security risk may constrain the researcher's movement and shorten study timeframe. This challenge was surmounted by the researcher visiting the area when dignitaries or high-profile personalities are about visiting the area to assess the level of destruction. This was as a result of the fact that whenever dignitaries are visiting, security is usually beefed up to nip any violence or act of aggression in the bud.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that death anxiety is highly prevalent among people affected by farmer-herder crisis. The results further indicate high incidence of psychological distress among respondents, as evidenced by persistent sadness, nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, fatigue, and depressive symptoms. Also, the findings indicate that despite high levels of death anxiety and psychological distress, some aspects of psychological well-being such as self-acceptance, life satisfaction, sense of purpose, and personal growth remain relatively positive among respondents. However, the study in addition highlights

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Government and non-governmental organization (NGOs) should establish centres for testing and treating psychological ailments, and offering regular counseling sessions to address trauma, depression, and stress.
- ii. National and subnational governments, and international development partners should factor comprehensive resettlement programmes in their emergency response plans to provide students with a stable environment for recovery.

- iii. Training and retraining programmes should be organized to enable teachers learn modern methods of managing students that have experienced violence to improve their academic performance.
- iv. Appropriate authorities should renovate destroyed schools taking into cognizance measures that permit early response from security and law-enforcement agents to reduce fear and anxiety.
- v. Social and family support should be provide in the course of organizing camps or resettlement for displaced students to help tackle post-traumatic stress disorder.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Further studies could explore the following areas:

Academic Impact Assessment: Future research could investigate the long-term impact of chronic anxiety on educational milestones among students in Guma LGA.

School-Based Trauma Counselling: Action research could evaluate the effectiveness of specific trauma counseling techniques within schools in Yelewata.

Teacher Mental Health: An assessment could be carried out on secondary traumatic stress among teachers in Guma LGA and how it impacts on students' academic performance.

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