

Research on the Reform of College Student Mental Health Education Courses with a Positive Psychology Orientation

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Abstract

Aiming at the problems existing in college students’ mental health courses, this paper integrates the relevant modules and systems of positive psychology into college students’ mental health courses from the perspective of positive psychology, so as to help college students experience more positive emotions, improve positive personality traits, meet future stress challenges and have a more positive and happy life.

Key words: Mental health education; Positive psychology; Curriculum reform

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1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the “2022 Chinese National Mental Health Report,” published by the Chinese Academy of Sciences, a survey of nearly 80,000 college students’ mental health was conducted. The report revealed that the detection rates for depression and anxiety risk were approximately 21.48% and 45.28%, respectively. Furthermore, 50.44% of college

students expressed intentions to pursue postgraduate studies, and these students exhibited significantly higher anxiety risks compared to those without such intentions. The main sources of stress for college students included “heavy academic workload,” “missing family,” and “uncertainty about future career choices.” Urban registered students had significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety risk compared to rural registered students, and students from prestigious institutions had higher rates than those from non-prestigious institutions. Undergraduate students exhibited significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety risk compared to vocational college students.

Another study published in “Psychological Frontiers” investigated the mental health status of around 100,000 college students across 43 cities and 23 universities in China, revealing an average mental disorder prevalence rate of 22.8%. Students had low self-identity and self-esteem, lacked interest in learning, motivation for achievement, and had vague self-awareness and future life plans. Many college students are now pursuing “small certainties” – immediate sensory satisfaction and happiness – often neglecting future planning and long-term perseverance and effort. Overall, existing research paints a concerning picture of the mental health of college students in China.

The “Guidelines for Mental Health Education in Higher Education Institutions” issued by the Ministry of Education in 2018 emphasized the need to promote mental health knowledge, unlock students’ psychological potential, nurture positive psychological qualities, and promote students’ holistic development. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the development and reform of college student mental health education courses.

The reasons for the high detection rates of mental health problems among college students are complex. Research indicates that global wealth inequality, with the combined wealth of 2,153 billionaires in 2019 equating to the total wealth of the poorest 4.6 billion people,

has led to increased negative emotions worldwide. The intensification of socio-economic disparities has contributed to social instability and uncertainty. The virtual nature of online communication has also exacerbated anxiety among some college students. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of college students, revealing insufficient coping strategies and psychological resilience. The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, specialized industry divisions, increased competition, and employment pressures have further contributed to the ongoing mental health issues among college students.

2. EXISTING PROBLEMS IN COLLEGE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION COURSES

Content of Teaching: Currently, the curriculum for college student mental health education in domestic universities complies with the basic requirements outlined in the “Basic Requirements for Teaching of College Student Mental Health Education Courses” issued by the Ministry of Education in May 2011. The main curriculum system and knowledge modules include topics such as adaptation to university life, self-awareness, study skills, interpersonal relationships, sex and love, emotional and time management, personality development, career planning, and life education. These contents primarily focus on addressing psychological issues, emphasizing the dissemination of mental health knowledge. What is lacking, however, are elements that foster positive personality traits, psychological resilience, gratitude, immersive experiences, and the stimulation and cultivation of positive emotions among college students. The current curriculum fails to enhance students’ sense of happiness and value, help them discover and develop their character strengths, unlock their potential, and cultivate positive thinking. The existing college student mental health education curriculum is no longer sufficient to address the impact of rapid societal development on college students’ mental health. It falls short in developing students’ ability to apply mental health knowledge to analyze and solve real-world problems effectively.

From the Perspective of Teaching Methods:

Firstly, the four years of college are a crucial period for the formation of students’ self-awareness, worldview, and values. Students of different ages, majors, and genders exhibit significant differences in psychological development, making college student mental health education need to be characterized by stages, variability, and richness. However, at present, psychological surveys of college students are not conducted every year in most schools. Most universities perform a uniform psychological health survey of all students during freshman enrollment, identifying students with

psychological issues to establish psychological records and provide follow-up counseling. Students who do not show psychological problems during the initial survey might still develop issues during their college years. If schools do not conduct continuous tracking surveys of college students, psychological problems may go undetected. Furthermore, many universities lack comprehensive assessments of college students’ subjective well-being, only addressing psychological issues once they become apparent.

Secondly, the utilization of college counseling centers is relatively low, and there is limited availability of psychological practical activities related to personal development. Some college students are reluctant to seek counseling from school teachers due to privacy concerns. Instead, they turn to family and friends or search for individuals with similar experiences online to share their thoughts and experiences. Some students with psychological issues may not accurately assess their own mental state, and some even avoid facing their problems, leading to the gradual worsening of their issues and irreversible consequences. College counseling and assistance services have some lag and passivity.

Thirdly, from the perspective of teachers, college student mental health courses are often compulsory courses for general education at most universities. Full-time and part-time teachers are responsible for teaching mental health courses to students from different departments every semester. Teachers have a heavy workload and face significant research pressures. In the classroom, teachers should create a positive atmosphere and engage with students through appreciation, understanding, and empathy. Through emotional resonance, students’ positive emotions can be enhanced, sparking their interest in learning and fostering positive personality traits. However, the mental health of college instructors is not always optimistic. According to existing research, teachers with doctoral degrees have poor mental health, and a significant proportion of lecturers and professors also face mental health challenges. Suboptimal teacher mental health can impact teaching quality. Due to heavy teaching loads and the repetition of content, some teachers may simply deliver knowledge without meaningful interaction with students, resulting in a lack of student-teacher interaction and emotional communication. Teachers often prioritize teaching plans and tasks, neglecting the stimulation of students’ positive emotions and the cultivation of good personality and mental health.

Fourthly, course evaluation is relatively one-dimensional, lacking continuous tracking measurement of college students’ mental health and a comprehensive evaluation system for the course. Many universities only conduct psychological surveys for freshmen and do not track students continuously. Without establishing dynamic psychological survey records for each student to monitor their psychological changes throughout their four years

of college, it becomes challenging to identify and assist students with emerging psychological issues in a timely manner. Course evaluation in college student mental health education primarily relies on final exam scores, and as long as students pass the exam, the university assumes they have grasped the basic knowledge of mental health. However, there is often a lack of detailed evaluation of the application of mental health knowledge and stress coping methods. There is a shortage of diverse activities aimed at promoting happiness and positive emotions among college students.

Fifthly, the latest research findings in the field of mental health are underutilized in college student mental health education courses. These courses often lack timeliness and fail to generate student interest or emotional resonance. For example, in the section on romantic psychology within college student mental health education, topics mainly revolve around sex, motivations for love, love theories, and coping with heartbreak. However, many young people today hold pessimistic views on marriage and love, often influenced by media or external factors, leading to significant fear of marriage and relationships. In response to these societal trends, college student mental health courses do not always provide effective strategies for students to establish positive and healthy intimate relationships.

3. THE ROLE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Since the establishment of positive psychology, many countries have introduced courses in this field. In China, researchers have gradually shifted their focus from adopting concepts to integrating content and exploring methods in positive psychology teaching. Positive psychology possesses a dual attribute of academic education and emotional development, making it suitable for achieving both goals in college student mental health education.

Positive psychology can play a crucial role in college student mental health education by stimulating students' enthusiasm for learning, helping them cope positively with stress and challenges, teaching them to handle setbacks optimistically, nurturing positive personality traits and emotional intelligence, and promoting overall psychological well-being. Currently, most positive psychology courses in Chinese universities are designed for psychology majors, while non-psychology majors mainly receive basic knowledge of psychology and practical methods for dealing with college student mental health issues. The emphasis tends to be on academic education rather than fostering positive emotions, discovering and shaping positive personality traits, and immersive experiences.

Positive psychology emphasizes a people-centric approach, advocating for the analysis of human nature

from a positive perspective, valuing humanistic care, tapping into the inner potential of college students, nurturing emotional intelligence and resilience, and experiencing happiness. Positive emotional experiences, the cultivation of positive personality traits, and the development of a positive social support system are three main aspects of positive psychology research. Integrating positive psychology into the objectives and content of college student mental health education courses is important. It involves continuously focusing on eliciting positive emotions and tapping into the personal potential of the majority of "ordinary college students," cultivating positive personality traits, and combining examples from the lives and studies of college students to increase their sense of happiness. This can further enrich the content of college student mental health education courses.

It is recommended to incorporate relevant knowledge of positive psychology into college student mental health education courses. Firstly, positive emotions, as proposed by American emotion psychologist Barbara Fredrickson, encompass joy, serenity, gratitude, interest, hope, pride, motivation, awe, love, and amusement. Positive emotions can stimulate creative and divergent thinking, improve interpersonal relationships, and broaden attention spans. Psychological studies have confirmed that individuals make better decisions and experience increased subjective well-being, success, and health when they are in a positive emotional state. In teaching, various forms of instruction should be employed to allow students to experience positive emotions and learn how to evoke these emotions, which can have many positive effects on college student mental health. The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions describes the relationship between positive emotional experiences and personal growth as follows:

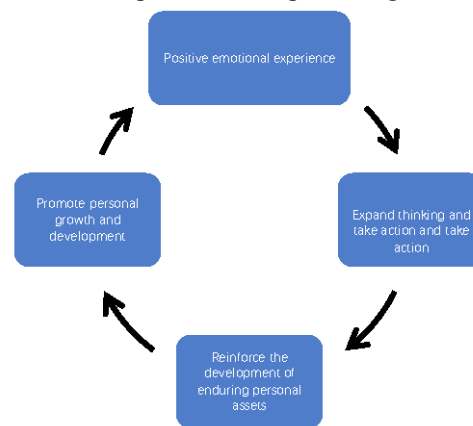


Figure 1
Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions

In this model, positive emotional experiences occupy a central position. In the teaching process, educators should not only be adept at eliciting positive emotions in the classroom and enabling students to experience the effects of positive emotions but also teach students how to trigger

and experience their own positive emotions. Many college students tend to be influenced by negative emotions when facing difficulties and setbacks. They may become trapped in negative emotions and struggle to overcome them. The relevant theories of positive psychology can help them not reject negative emotions but rather emerge from them more quickly, using positive emotions to guide their learning and lives.

Secondly, positive psychology advocates the cultivation of positive personality traits in individuals. This includes discovering and establishing one's own character strengths, cultivating knowledge related to positive values, and designing classroom activities. It's important for students to recognize the importance of positive personality traits such as humor, optimism, and gratitude, and learn how to enhance their self-esteem and psychological resilience. Increasing experiences of happiness and other related knowledge and practical activities can also be incorporated. Positive psychology posits that personality can be shaped through nurture. Through assessments conducted in teaching, college students can gain insight into their own personality traits, discover their strengths, and build and shape their own strengths. Under the influence of these strengths, they can experience greater happiness. Positive psychology research explores how combining character strengths with moral development positively impacts an individual's sense of happiness. For example, characteristics such as creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, and a love of learning from the VIA Character Strengths model are part of the defining features of wisdom. A wise person is more likely to experience happiness. Helping college students identify their character strengths and magnify them into virtues will promote a happier life for them.

Thirdly, positive interpersonal relationships, including intimate relationships, friendships, and social relationships, should be part of the knowledge and classroom activities. Several aspects of interpersonal relationships affect happiness, including gratitude, awe, and love. Among all interpersonal relationships, family relationships are the most primal and crucial. They play a significant role in the future development of college students. Many college students struggle to handle conflicts within their families, leading to various psychological issues. These issues may persist as they enter college, potentially impacting their choice of majors, motivation for learning, academic goals, and career direction. It is necessary to include the relationship between the original family and psychological development as a mandatory component of the curriculum. The teaching objectives are to help students recognize the influence of the original family on their psychological growth, guide students in understanding and accepting their parents and original families, and teach them to take responsibility for themselves. Students should learn how to communicate with their families positively and manage

these relationships. In practical teaching activities, more family-school interactions, parent-child interviews, student-created family psychological dramas, and parental psychological counseling can be introduced to promote collaborative efforts between parents and schools in enhancing college students' mental health.

Fourthly, stress management strategies and methods should be taught, as college students will face complex social environments and various stressors after graduation. Currently, college student mental health education lacks stress management strategies related to positive psychology, such as meditation, mindfulness, journal writing, physical activity, games, music, art, massage, abdominal breathing, healthy emotional expression, aromatherapy, pet care, and a balanced diet.

4. FEASIBILITY ANALYSIS OF INTEGRATING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY INTO COLLEGE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION COURSES

According to the framework promoted by the World Health Organization for enhancing students' mental health, students' psychological well-being is supported by three main components. Firstly, it encompasses the school's teaching and curriculum. Secondly, it relates to the school's values and the environment both within and around the school. Lastly, it relies on the collaborative efforts of families and communities. From these three aspects, the mental health education courses in universities should align with the positive humanistic environment and cultural background fostered by families, communities, and the school.

Research that incorporates the principles of positive psychology into college student mental health education has shown that students favor teaching methods such as classroom lectures, case analysis, and behavioral training. Studies conducted by the teaching team led by Fan Fumin have confirmed that incorporating the concepts of positive psychology into group counseling can elevate the subjective sense of happiness among the experimental group and reduce levels of anxiety and depression. Although empirical research results specifically integrating positive psychology into college student mental health education are relatively scarce, the trend in existing research on college student mental health education courses suggests that educators are increasingly recognizing the impact of positive psychology. They are gradually incorporating relevant content and emphasizing the elicitation, awareness, and experience of positive emotions in teaching activities. Additionally, they focus on shaping positive personality traits in students. The emphasis is on harnessing individuals' character strengths rather than merely addressing weaknesses. This approach

aims to develop personal potential, unearth inherent character strengths, respect individual differences, highlight personalization, and encourage students to showcase their uniqueness, thereby helping them find a path for personalized growth. Positive psychology encourages students to experience more positive emotions such as happiness, trust, cooperation, and optimism during the learning process. This can stimulate more creative thinking and foster a conducive learning environment, ultimately enhancing the quality of education. The enrichment of college student mental health education courses can occur in both teaching formats and content:

Increase experiential learning to facilitate emotional resonance between students and teachers. This helps students experience more positive emotions during their studies, boosting their motivation and further enriching the content of college student mental health education. It is essential to enhance the cultural leadership function of universities by fostering a positive and happy campus culture and environment. This creates an atmosphere conducive to positive emotions among college students. Integrating patriotic elements into the curriculum and promoting love for traditional culture are also important.

Conduct annual assessments of college students' sense of happiness and implement four-year psychological tracking for students during their time at university. Strengthen communication between academic departments and counselors to promptly identify and address students' psychological issues. For students interested in psychology, universities can offer positive psychology as an elective course taught by dedicated psychology instructors.

Consider implementing emotion-tracking mobile applications (apps) developed by foreign universities, such as Mood Prism and Talk Life. These apps effectively monitor students' emotional states and can rapidly assist students in overcoming emotional challenges. Empirical research has demonstrated that these apps lead to significant improvements in the mental health and reduction of depression among college students. These

apps are characterized by ease of use, low cost, privacy protection, and personalization, making them highly efficient for use among the college student population.

The rapid development of information technology on the internet has brought about a wealth of information and challenges. In a future society marked by the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, humans will need specific capabilities to lead fulfilling lives. As noted by Chinese positive psychologist Peng Kaiping, humans have distinct advantages over artificial intelligence in areas such as aesthetics, happiness, visual thinking, empathy, and sympathy. It is these advantages that will enable humans to lead happy lives in the future.

Integrating positive psychology into college student mental health education is essential and can significantly contribute to the psychological well-being of college students. It helps them overcome future challenges and stressors while experiencing a greater sense of happiness.

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