

## Self-efficacy as a Mediator in the Relationship between Meaning in Life and Mental Health in Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explored the link between meaning in life and self-efficacy in young adults. Further, the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between meaning in life and mental health was investigated. For this purpose, the sample was collected from 150 young adults going to college in Jammu (93 females, 62 %; 57 males, 38 %). The tools used were Meaning in Life Questionnaire by Steger et al., 2006, General Self-efficacy scale (GSE) by Schwarzer and Jerusalem, 1995 and short form of Mental Health Continuum (MHC-SF) by Keyes, 2009. Analysis included descriptive statistics, the scales were tested for internal consistency, and correlations were analyzed with simple linear regression. Also, mediation analysis was conducted to determine the role of self-efficacy in the relation between meaning in life and mental health. The results showed a significant relationship between meaning in life and self-efficacy. Also, self-efficacy was found to be a statistically significant mediator of the relationship between meaning in life and mental health among young adults. The study highlights the vital role of self-efficacy for the healthy development and well-being of young adults. The study also provides foundation for further studies of the factors that influence the mental health of individuals.

**Keywords:** *College, Meaning in Life, Mental Health, Self-efficacy, Young Adults*

The present world population estimates given by United Nations reveal that out of about 7.8 billion people, every sixth person worldwide falls in the category of young adults, with age range of 18 years to 29 years, forming around 16% of the global population. India has the largest population of young adults in the world and in order to harness their potential it is important to ensure that they have good health, both physical and mental (Chadda, 2018).

Young adults are going through the phase of many developmental changes, not only in academic aspect but also other areas of their life like personal, social and financial. In educational domain, young adulthood is the age of transitioning from school to college (Dhurup & Reddy, 2013). During this time, students are confronted with many stresses and pressures like the college environment, completion of their degree, finding jobs, financial

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independence, and maintaining good relationships (Coetzee & Oosthuizen, 2012). All these factors may develop mental health issues in students which could further lead to negative impact on their physical health, social relationships and academic performance.

In a research study conducted on Australian adults falling in the age range of 18 to 24, results showed prevalence of 27% of mental disorders, which was highest than any other age group (Andrews, 1999). Similar results were reported by the American students with 11% mood disorders and 12% anxiety disorders (Blancko, 2008) and 11% suicidal ideations was reported in a sample of Chinese university students (li, 2014). In India, a study conducted on young population in 2009, revealed that overall 3.9 percent youth reported suicidal behavior (Pillai, 2009). Another study conducted on young adults in the age range of 15 to 29 years in Hyderabad showed the suicidal rate of around 35% in youth with higher percentage in girls than boys (Leo, 2003). This calls for further research and clinical attention in college going students of India in order to understand their mental health, prevent and treat such issues in its early stages (Gull, 2016; Nami, et al., 2014).

### ***Mental health***

World health organization takes a holistic view on health by including both the positive and negative aspects. It is defined as the “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 2003). Mental health is more than merely the absence of mental disorders and illnesses, as understood in a general manner, rather these are the two ends of a continuum that encompass all the mental health issues faced by the population (Smit, 2015). Mental health can be explained in terms of the ability of an individual to become aware of his intellectual and emotional capacities, which in turn help to overcome the daily stresses faced by him/her. It refers to the enhancement of efficiencies of individuals, so that they can achieve their desired goals, work in a productive manner and reach the highest state of well-being (Smit, 2015).

Previously conducted research suggests that having a lower level of mental health has negative consequences in different aspects of life of the individual. Whereas, good mental health positively impacts personal resources of an individual like communication with others, accepting one’s own self, mastery over the environment, goal setting and direction towards development of self (Mostafai, 2012; Wising & Fourie, 2000). In a study conducted on 321 Venezuelan college students, it was found that favorable mental health conditions were associated with increased social support and lower academic stress (Torija et al., 2016). Brian (2002) after reviewing studies based on youth problems and behaviours found that positive mental health is related to success and happiness whereas poor mental health is related to negative outcomes like poor academic performance and anti-social behaviours (Gupta & Kumar, 2010).

### ***Self-efficacy***

Student’s adjustment to college life and overall general happiness and mental health may depend on subjective and personal factors like resilience, motivation, meaning in life, and self-efficacy (Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2016; Chamanabad et al., 2011; Van Zyl & Dhurup, 2018). One of such factors which affect mental health is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy plays an essential role in different aspects of life and determines how a person thinks, feels and behaves (Maddux, 2002). Higher levels of self-efficacy may lead to change in negative thought processes, better decision making and thus predicts better mental health (Kim, 2003; Pajares & Schunk, 2002).

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Self-efficacy essentially can be explained as a person's belief in his own capability to perform a task or behaviour based on the skills that he/she has (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy can be categorized in two types, that is, global self-efficacy and specific self-efficacy (Gregg, 2009). Global self-efficacy refers to the problem solving ability of an individual to cope up with general life challenges, whereas, specific self-efficacy refers to situation or domain specific abilities to perform a behaviour or task like academic, social or emotional (Bandura et al., 2001).

In accordance to the social cognitive theory given by Bandura (2001), individuals who think that they have high self-efficacy that is they have the ability to do well on a task, generally approach towards a difficult task, try to master it and keep on persisting with the task until they give their best performance. On the other hand, a person who has low efficacy tends to avoid the difficult task or is less likely to approach it. The behavior is not persistent and performance is also poor (Dewitz & Walsh 2002; Gupta & Kumar, 2010). Bandura explained the sources through which self-efficacy can be improved. The first one is performance accomplishment. When a person has been able to perform well on a task in the past, he will develop high self-efficacy for that task in future. Secondly, vicarious learning also plays a role in enhancing one's self-efficacy as the person observes someone else doing the task and learns to do it in a better manner. Social persuasion is the third source of self-efficacy improvement. When a person is encouraged and given reinforcements to do a particular task, he/she tends to do it efficiently leading to high self-efficacy beliefs. Lastly emotional arousal influences one's self-efficacy beliefs. More distressing emotions a person feels when doing a task will lead to lower level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1997)

Previous research suggests that self-efficacy is positively related to constructs like quality of life, happiness and well-being (Ersanli, 2015) and negatively related to mental stress, depression and anxiety (Lenz et al., 2002). Having low level of self-efficacy may lead to low level of success rates, motivation level and being ambitious in general (Bandura, 1986; Dinther et al., 2011; Groten et al., 2019). In the field of academics, it has been seen that self-efficacy is positively related to the academic success and performance of students (Pajares and Schunk, 2002; Vuong et al., 2010). In a study conducted on 334 students of South Africa, it was found that higher self-efficacy scores predicted both higher satisfaction with life and happiness in both males and females (Van Zyl & Dhurup, 2018). In another study conducted on 321 university students, positive relation was found between self-efficacy and general health (Mostafai, 2012). A descriptive correlational study was conducted by Chamanabad et al., (2011) on 150 M.D. students in Iran. The results showed statistically significant correlation between self-efficacy and mental health (Chamanabad et al., 2011).

Empirical evidence also shows association between self-efficacy and meaning in life (Dewitz & Walsh, 2002). A study conducted by Dewitz and collegus (2002) on 344 undergraduate college students showed that self-efficacy was significantly and positively correlated with purpose in life. Meaning or purpose in life is an important construct that has shown to be highly impactful on other mental health related constructs like happiness, mental attitudes, high values (Molasso, 2006; Lane, 2014). Similar results were obtained in a study conducted on a sample of elderly people in Korea, showing positive relationship between self-efficacy and meaning in life (Byun, et al. 2017). Previous literature highlights the role of meaning in life in enhancing self-efficacy during stressful life events (Miao et al., 2017; Rush et al., 2109; Sherman & Simonton, 2012; Shrira et al., 2015). Study on 174 patients in Poland showed significant relationship between meaning in life, self-efficacy and

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well-being. Further self-efficacy acted as a mediator in the relationship between meaning in life and life satisfaction and positive affect (Krok & Gerymski, 2019). This suggests that having a sense of purpose and meaning enhances one's belief in obtaining a desired goal which further leads to a sense of satisfaction, good mental health and well-being (Rush et al., 2019). Another cross sectional study on a sample of 94 participants indicated that self-efficacy acted as a mediator in the relationship between meaning in life and physical activity. Based on the above empirical data we assume that self-efficacy might also act as a mediator between meaning in life and mental health in young adults going to college in India (Krok & Gerymski, 2019)

### *Purpose of the study*

Although previous literature suggests the associations between meaning in life and mental health, there is still lack of evidence regarding the underlying mechanism that accounts for variability between the two constructs. In order to explore this relationship, in the present study we investigated the link between meaning in life and mental health through self-efficacy. The goal of this research was to evaluate whether self-efficacy statistically mediated the relationship between meaning in life and mental health. Also, there is dearth of literature that looks at the direct association between self-efficacy beliefs and meaning in life in college going young adults in India. Based on the knowledge gap in the previous literature, the following hypotheses were formulated:

### *Hypotheses*

- Meaning in life is positively related to self-efficacy in young adults.
- Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between meaning in life and mental health in young adults.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This section of paper discusses about the research plan, the participants who responded in the study, the instruments used, procedure of data collection and analysis of the results. This study followed a quantitative non-experimental cross-sectional research design.

### *Participants and Procedure*

The research sample comprised of college students who were studying in the Jammu district in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Respondents were assured of confidentiality of their responses and were informed that they can withdraw from the research at any point of time. All participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before participating in the study. Data was collected using cross-sectional design from 200 students of both private and government colleges working within the Jammu region. Convenience sampling technique was used to collect data. A total of 200 participants were approached for the study, 150 respondents agreed and completed the questionnaire, thus making a response rate of 75%. From a total of 150, 93 (62%) were females, while 57 (38%) were males. Participants were 21 years old on average (SD= 2.68) age ranges from 18 to 29 years, 73 students (48.7%) belong to the rural area while 77 students (51.3%) belong to the urban area of Jammu region. 62 students belong to the private institutions while rest of the 88 students belongs to the government institutions.

### *Measures*

The measures used in the present study are presented below.

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- **Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)** (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006): It consists of 10 items using a 7-item scale ranging from 1 (Absolutely true) to 7 (Absolutely untrue). The sub-dimensions of the scale include (1) Presence of Meaning (how much respondents feel their lives have meaning), and (2) Search for Meaning (how much respondents strive to find meaning and understanding in their lives).
- **Mental Health Continuum (MHC-SF) Scale** (Keyes, 2009): This scale consists of 14 items rated upon a 6-point scale, ranging from 0 (Never) to 6 (Everyday). Score ranges from 0-70. The sub-dimensions include Hedonic emotional well-being, Eudaimonic social well-being and Eudaimonic psychological well-being.
- **General Self-efficacy scale (GSE)** (Schwarzer, & Jerusalem, 1995): This scale consists of 10 items rated upon a 4-point rating scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (exactly true). Score ranges from 10-40. The total score of the scale reveals the self-efficacy score of the participant.

### Statistical analysis

In the present study, in order to test the relationships, data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software (version 23.0). Both descriptive and inferential statistics were computed in line with the purpose of the study. Frequency distributions were computed in order to profile the respondents in terms of their demographic characteristics. In addition to this mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013).

### Results and Interpretation

**Table 1: Means, standard deviations, cronbach's alphas and bivariate correlations among scale scores**

SN	Variable	1	2	3	M	SD	Alpha
1	Meaning in life (MIL)	-	.41**	.47**	51.2	8.23	.66
2	Mental health (MH)	-	-	.48**	46.03	11.81	.83
3	Self-efficacy (SE)	-	-	.	29.42	5.50	.80

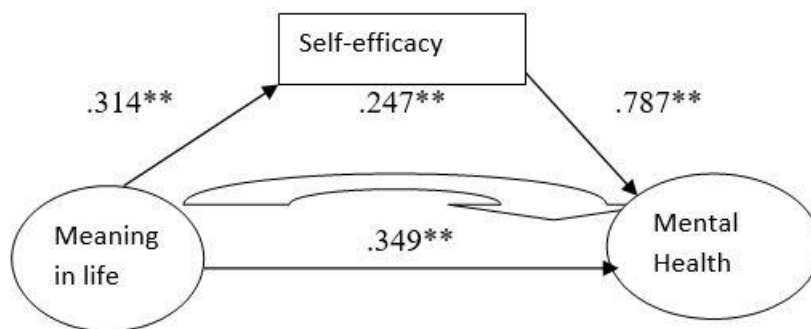
\* \*\*correlation significant at 0.01 level

Table 1 shows means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlation among the variables of the study. The Pearson correlation results( $r$ ) two tailed indicated medium but highly significant relationship exists between the scale of meaning in life, mental health and self-efficacy.

### Mediation results for self-efficacy, meaning in life and mental health

Results revealed that the effects of self-efficacy mediated the effect of the relationship between meaning in life and mental health. Meaning in life also is a significant predictor to mental health,  $b = .597$ ,  $t(148) = 5.55$ ,  $p < .000$ , and meaning in life is a significant predictor of the mediator self-efficacy,  $b = .314$ ,  $t(148) = 6.45$ ,  $p < .000$ . With the inclusion of the self-efficacy as a mediator, controlling for meaning in life, was significant,  $b = .788$ ,  $t(148) = 4.62$ ,  $p < .000$ . further, the analyses revealed that, controlling for the mediator (self-efficacy), the meaning in life with mental health was again a significant predictor but slightly lower  $b$  value,  $b = .349$ ,  $t(147) = 3.068$ ,  $p < .002$ . In this case the effect size was, .247 with a 95% confidence interval which did not include zero; that is to say the effect was significantly greater than zero at  $\alpha = .05$ . Thus, self-efficacy was a statistically significant mediator between the meaning in life and mental health.

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**Figure 1. Resultant model of the study \*\* =  $p < .01$**

**Table 2: Bootstrap Results of Effects of Mediation between Meaning in life and Mental health (MIL→SE→MH)**

	b	S.E.	95% CL	
			Lower limit	Upper limit
Total effects	.597	.107	.384	.809
Indirect effects	.247	.64	.130	.389
Direct effects	.349	.113	.125	.575

Table 2 represents the results of total, direct and indirect effects of the meaning in life on mental health. Thus, following the Hayes’ (2013) approach we claim an indirect association between meaning in life and mental health through self-efficacy.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the role of self-efficacy in the relationship between meaning in life and mental health in college going young adults in India. This study highlighted the association between these constructs and demonstrated that self-efficacy acts as a significant mediator in the relationship between meaning in life and mental health in young adults. Also, correlational analyses revealed that meaning in life and self-efficacy were significantly and positively related with each other, thus accepting both the proposed hypotheses. The results are consistent with the previous literature which demonstrates association between meaning in life and self-efficacy (Baczowski, 2015; Dewitz et al., 2009). Lane and Schutts (2014) found a positive association between self-efficacy and meaning in life in a sample of 217 college students (Lane & Schutts, 2014).

The findings of the study that reveal self-efficacy as a mediator in the relationship between meaning in life and mental health are in line with the study conducted by Krok and Gerymski (2019), in which they investigated association between self-efficacy, meaning in life and subjective well-being among 176 cardiac patients in Poland. The study found that self-efficacy was a partial mediator in the relationship between meaning in life with life satisfaction and positive affect. The findings are also in line with the study carried out by Rush and colleagues (2019) in which they examined self-efficacy, meaning in life and physical activity in 94 participants falling in the age range of 18 years to 89 years. The study found that self-efficacy statistically mediated the relationship between meaning in life and physical activity.

There are certain limitations of the study. The sample size of the present study was relatively small. This may create problem for generalizing the results to all the other young adults of

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India. Another limitation was the design of the study which was correlational and cross sectional. Thus, causal relationship between the variables cannot be determined. To account for this issue in future studies, data can be collected over multiple time points. Also, research using longitudinal designs will help to better able to inform an understanding of the relationship between meaning in life, self-efficacy and mental health. Future studies can replicate the study with other populations like schools or other higher educational institutions like universities. Further, interventions studies can be taken up to improve self-efficacy and meaning in life and see its impact on academic performance and well-being.

### CONCLUSION

The present study shows the relationship between meaning in life, self-efficacy and mental health among college going young adults in India. It further highlights the role of self-efficacy as a mediator in the relationship between meaning in life and mental health. The findings in this study are relevant for not only teachers and counselors but also college management and parents of the students who can help and guide them to develop confidence in their own abilities to accomplish tasks and face challenging situations in life. Developing faith in one's own potential will help the students to be more successful in their academic as well as personal life. The study also highlights the role of interventions to develop self-efficacy and meaning in life as they serve as important protective factors against common mental health issues in young adults like stress, depression, and suicidal tendencies. Also, initiatives like conducting seminars, workshops and awareness programmes need to be taken for enhancing self-efficacy, sense of meaning and mental health of students so that there can be healthy and balanced growth of the youth of the country.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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