

A Systematic Review of Psychological Interventions to Promote Emotional Well-Being & Coping to Reduce Mental Health Issues in University Students Over the Course of Their Study

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ABSTRACT

University students are deemed as highly vulnerable to mental health issues due to continuous pressure and stress caused by environment, global crises, academic workload and high expectations from families, peers, and society. That is why it is essential to evaluate interventions to tackle various mental health-related challenges on a day-to-day basis. This review gives a comprehensive insight into the prevalence and efficacy of psychological interventions in order to support emotional wellbeing of college students and prevent the development of more serious mental health problems. **Aim:** This paper aims to assess literature on the potential impact of psychological interventions on university students' emotional wellbeing and coping to reduce mental health issues. **Method:** All the relevant studies were extensively selected from information-rich databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, Emerald Insight, Europe PMC, and, PsycInfo. Key terms and concepts that were expressed as synonymous keywords refined the search strategy. Several studies appeared, but, were filtered using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The data was analysed, interpreted and concluded. **Results:** Psychological mental health programs improve the ability to achieve and maintain a positive psychosocial state to cope with the adversities of everyday life. This body of literature based on psychological interventions for college students was systematically reviewed and analyzed. The analysis elucidated that interventions can promote emotional wellbeing and coping to reduce mental health issues. **Conclusion:** The present study encourages a focus on developing holistic, university led interventions to improve mental health for one and all. This focused approach would enable college authorities to design effective interventions that address the physical, psychological, social and emotional wellbeing of students.

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The natural transition to higher education of university students is associated with a wide range of social, academic, physical, emotional and wellness related pressures and maladaptive coping concerns. The never-ending plethora of diverse demands causes most of them acute psychological distress. They experience many coping challenges. and their lack of emotional well-being leads to mental health issues (**Wynaden, 2013**).

Most of them, if not all, are hooked to the internet and very active on social media platforms, which makes them crave ‘ideal self’ and puts them in acute discomfort with their real self. Their dwindling self-worth feeds their sense of insecurity and makes them feel as “not good enough”. Since childhood, there is a lot of focus on physical health care and nutrition but negligible focus on mental health care. The direct impact of this ignorance is self-esteem related issues, manifesting in many addiction and health risk related behaviours as an individual ages (**Awad, 2022**). This developmental apathy towards mental health care has lifelong, if not just long-term consequences.

Research shows us that it manifests as poor quality of overall wellness and adversely impacts mental health specifically, as seen in university students (**Hashemi, 2021; Proshok, 2023**). Due to a lack of confidence, often they are victims of peer pressure as well as actual bullying and cyber bullying (**Ho, 2023**). They lack confidence, suffer from low self-esteem, and their falling sense of self-worth in the face of growing responsibilities negatively impacts their overall wellbeing and mental health, in particular (**Merten, 2022**). Anxiety, Depression, sleep problems, eating disorders, relationship challenges, increase risk of suicide and self-harm, rage, lack of focus, maladaptive coping strategies like chemical dependency, unsafe sex and lack of motivation are some of the common problems, afflicting an increasing number of these students.

What is alarming is that they are now considered a highly vulnerable and ‘at-risk’ population (**Wynaden, 2013**). Moreover, the transition to higher education is itself associated with a range of emotional, social and academic demands that can cause psychological distress. Traditionally, various forms of psychological interventions have been done for university students which have been reviewed here. Some of the concerns expressed by scientists in this arena include the lack of good literature on this topic, poor methodology reporting, mixed outcomes of studies and the questionable quality of available data resources. To overcome these concerns, a growing crop of researchers are now advocating embedding psychological interventions in curriculums and pedagogy, as the way forward (**Upsher, 2022**). This study is a small scientific step in that direction.

Aim:

This paper aims to assess literature on the beneficial impact of psychological interventions on university students’ emotional wellbeing and coping to reduce mental health issues.

Hypothesis:

H₁- Psychological Interventions to promote Emotional Well-Being and coping Reduce Mental Health Issues in University Students.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

University students

Search Strategy

All the relevant studies were extensively selected from information-rich databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, Emerald Insight, Europe PMC, and, PsycInfo. Key terms and concepts that were expressed as synonymous keywords refined the search strategy. Several studies appeared, but, were filtered using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The data was analysed, interpreted and concluded.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

The studies were included in the review, only if:

- Study used psychological interventions for university students.
- Reduction of Mental health issue/s was the area of concern of the study.
- Study used hybrid, online or offline, qualitative or quantitative analysis.

Exclusion criteria:

The studies were not included in the review, when:

- Study used interventions on other populations like gender or racial specific, victims of domestic violence, clinical patients, adolescents and others.
- The article or journal was dated before the year 2010.
- The study was not peer reviewed.

Procedure

Systematic Review of Literature of Psychological Interventions for University Students:

In the present day, there is a variety of interventions for university students, and researchers aim to evaluate their efficiency. A 2011 study addressed the methods of prevention of emotional stress and related mental health disorders in university students. While “the onset of mental illness in 75% of cases is between 17 and 24 years,” students are more vulnerable to it due to academic pressure, workload, and the necessity to meet the expectations of families, professors, and peers (Ahorsu, 2021, p. 1). At the same time, seeking mental health assistance remains stigmatized – thus, a considerable number of young people prefer to hide their emotional discomfort rather than visit counseling centers. Instead, they use negative coping strategies like drug usage, mindless alcohol consumption, gaming addiction and other high-risk, thrill-seeking behaviours.

The study combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches in relation to data collection on the basis of participants’ involvement in the project program. Aiming to prevent suicide and improve the general emotional well-being of students, the program consisted of two parts – mental health promotion and coping-strategy-based group workshops (Ahorsu, 2021). 62 university students were involved in the program, and its efficiency was evaluated on the basis of their self-administered questionnaires, post-activity immediate feedback, and group discussions. According to the results, the major improvement was in mental health awareness. In other words, while there was no significant improvement in help-seeking behavior, students acquired essential coping skills and strategies that would allow them to help themselves improve their mental health and avoid psychological issues in the future.

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In another 2019 article, the efficiency of Internet interventions for the improvement of university students' mental health was evaluated, which said that "12–46% of all university students are affected by mental health disorders in any given year" due to high expectations of society, low academic achievements, and college dropouts" (**Harrer, 2019**). At the same time, a considerable number of studies are dedicated to the examination of Internet-delivered programs' ability to improve young people's mental well-being.

Thus, in the format of a systematic review and meta-analysis, researchers collected and analyzed 48 peer-reviewed articles and dissertations dedicated to this topic. The inclusion criterion was the presence of randomized control trials in which the impact of an Internet intervention for the management of mental health issues had been evaluated on the basis of the comparison of the results of control and intervention groups. According to the results, Internet interventions may impact university students' mental well-being, but their effects are from small to moderate. In particular, Internet interventions have an impact on stress, anxiety, and depression. They also tend to improve people's mental wellness in the case of discharging their roles and responsibilities and reducing eating disorder symptoms.

The expediency of modern technologies for the improvement of mental health has become more and more substantial. This 2020 study aimed to estimate the expediency of the use of a fully automated mobile health intervention for the promotion of mental wellness for university students. Their quantitative research implied a 2-arm, single-blind, parallel-group randomized controlled trial. The participants were 654 university students with mental health issues who were recruited via digital advertising in health care centers. They were randomly divided into the intervention group, which was supposed to use a mobile health program, and the control group, which had traditional treatment. Data was collected through follow-up questionnaires, and according to the results, the use of the mobile program substantially contributed to students' positive mental health, characterized by positive individual and social functioning and positive feelings and emotions. In other words, a mobile intervention promotes mental wellness, and these outcomes may contribute to the general understanding of the efficiency of different types of assistance for university students (**Bendtsen, 2020**).

Nurturing Mental Health through popular psychological interventions reflects in good student retention and leads to higher student engagement. In this current scenario, emphasis on mindfulness and other psychological constructs like self-esteem and confidence have shown good results. A cross-sectional study on 363 university students in Lebanon evaluated the association between mindfulness, self-esteem and perfectionism in university students. Mindfulness is a concept that has been increasing in popularity over the last few years, and has been shown to improve psychological issues such as anxiety, insomnia and stress. The effect of mindfulness-based interventions has extended to other psychological variables, including self-esteem. Self-esteem was found to be a pathway for a positive relationship between mindfulness and life satisfaction. In this sample of Lebanese university students, people with higher self-esteem and lower perfectionism scores were less likely to exhibit maladaptive behavior, such as justifying failure and internalizing invalid success. Furthermore, self-esteem mediated the relationship between mindfulness and other psychological variables in multiple studies. Results showed that higher self-esteem was significantly associated with more mindfulness, and enhancing self-esteem amplified the positive effects of mindfulness, which subsequently reflected positively on other behavioral problems (**Awad, 2022**).

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A 2021 study and report by **Wroclaw University of Technology** analyzed the therapeutic effect of cognitive behaviour therapy on psychological stress, depression, and other negative emotions of college students with suicide ideation. 114 people from 1,158 college students with suicide ideation in the Wuhan area were divided into an experimental group and a control group in this study. Students in the experimental group were given cognitive behaviour therapy, and students in the control group were not intervened in any way. The suicide ideation scale, psychological stress test rating, and self-reporting inventory were used to evaluate the subjects in the pre-test stage, intermediate-test stage, and the tracking-test stage. Results depicted that negative emotions such as psychological stress, depression, and anxiety of the college student with suicide ideation could be effectively improved by cognitive behaviour therapy, and the level of suicide ideation could be reduced.

One more quantitative study addressed the impact of mindfulness practices on the mental well-being of medical and psychology students who were particularly vulnerable to stress-related mental health disorders. Researchers organized a randomized controlled trial in which 288 participants were allocated to either intervention or control groups. Students in the intervention group were involved in the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program, while students in the control group received no treatment; data was collected through self-reported questionnaires. According to the results, no significant differences related to the promotion of emotional wellness were observed between groups, and the outcomes were predicted by the increased number of mindfulness exercises and a higher level of attendance in the intervention group (**De Vibe, 2013**).

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) have been found to help university students' mental health. Empirical research suggests that they can improve wellness, resilience, stress, and academic achievement. The benefits have been found to extend beyond academic life and into the daily lives of young adults, benefiting their social and personal lives. The surge in mental health problems among university students is causing substantial harm to their well-being and hindering their ability to operate. Low- and middle-income countries' vulnerability is exacerbated by socioeconomic and political tensions, necessitating a cost-effective indigenous response. As a result, this 2023 study aimed to inform a big conclusive trial by examining the feasibility and accessibility of a randomised controlled trial (RCT) design testing a culturally customised online Mindfulness Training Course (MTC) used to reduce stress and well-being among Pakistani university students. It was evaluated and found to be useful (**Sarfaraz, 2023**).

Cyberbullying is the act of posting news, comments, videos, photos that include annoyance or threatening content to ridicule or humiliate others to cause psychological injury through technology equipment and social networks. Cyberbullying is on the rise among college students. A study (**Ho, 2023**) found positive coping strategies reduce cyberbullying victimization and significantly reduce depression symptoms in Vietnamese college students. Prior studies have shown that cyberbullying victims have high levels of depression, and that approach coping strategies can reduce the risk of depression. In addition, students with a high risk of cyberbullying and high use of approach coping strategies have the lowest risk of depression.

Researchers conducted a study which was aimed at addressing the decline in mental health on university campuses by examining the effects of three interventions. It reported that university students suffer from high levels of anxiety, depression, and suicide. Counseling centers on university campuses are struggling to meet increased demand. The study reported that cost to

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students and universities could be buffered by offering coping skill-building training programs and psychological interventions (**Seppälä, 2020**).

A 2022 University of Missouri study found that first-year college students who used stories to express themselves in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic reported less stress and more confidence in their academic work. Humans are natural storytellers, and when they used storytelling to make sense of their lives, they were able to cope up positively and valiantly inspire of their losses. The team of psychologists sought to document what life was like for those youths at the time and then followed up to scientifically elucidate the positive impact of this storytelling intervention.

A high prevalence of mental distress has been observed among students internationally. There are increasing numbers of students reporting mental health conditions and seeking support through university counselling services worldwide, including the UK, USA, and Australia. While the challenge of poor student mental health has often been discussed in the context of mental health services, recent guidance advocates for a ‘whole-university’ approach, whereby all aspects of university life should be targeted to promote positive well-being. A 2022 study examined the effectiveness of curriculum-embedded interventions on student well-being at university. The module focused on developing attributes students require after graduating, in order to be ready for work or further study, including communication skills, digital skills, and self-care. In order to embed mental well-being in the curriculum, researchers advocate pedagogical infusion of mental health resources and well-being content (**Upsher, 2022**).

Implications

Mental health and well-being issues in college are on the rise. A study by the Healthy Minds Network and the American College Health Association found that students' anxiety at post-secondary institution increased from 17% to 31% in just six years. Globally, the story is the same. This study also found that a student with mental health issues is twice as likely to drop out as he would otherwise. Thus, it is time that university authorities, policymakers and all other stakeholders in higher education treat the mental health of their students as a top priority (**Upsher, 2022**).

While popular psychological interventions of different kinds namely mindfulness, coping and cognitive behaviour therapy have gained widespread reach, some time-tested effective ones like storytelling interventions are still in nascent stage (**Malighetti, 2023**). Multiple studies address the influence of storytelling on specific groups of people (for example: women undergoing domestic violence, clinical patients etc.) and its impact on their mental health (**Mannel, 2018; De Vecchi, 2017**).

Researchers (**O'Donnell, 2019**) have discussed the impact of storytelling on the emotional well-being of people. However, there are very few studies on the overall impact (including psychological) of storytelling interventions for university students. One such peer reviewed study report for university students was included for this paper, which met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Gifted storytellers are prized and are considered inspiring. While there is a lot of emphasis on the power of storytelling for young children, there is a lack of awareness on how this powerful resource of emotional well-being can benefit adults. As people age, they tend to look at storytelling with disdain and something that is ‘childish’. Thus, this basic but effective intervention resource gets lost from the lives of many, as they age. Their personal

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discontent gets amplified and their dissatisfaction level keeps rising steadily and they become more prone to mental health issues.

Feasibility of psychological interventions remains a huge area of concern and is a major reason for reluctance to introduce such measures in universities. Successful and feasible models of psychological interventions for coping have proved useful in changing reluctant mindsets of university authorities (Sarfraz, 2023).

Future trends

Curriculum based interventions for university students may emerge as more efficient in comparison with hybrid or digital programs as there is greater accountability. Further, they tend to be more intensive and ensure a higher level of attendance. Storytelling interventions in organisations is gaining interest. It is hoped, that this trend will be visible in university psychosocial interventions, too.

RESULT

The bottom line of this systematic review is that different kinds of psychological interventions have shown their effectiveness and validity. Both categories, whether preventive interventions or timely support ones, are beneficial for students. Emphasis on good mental health for overall wellness and psychosocial functioning reaps benefits for all. Whether administered online, hybrid, offline or as a curriculum initiative, their effectiveness and generalizability cannot be denied. These have shown their efficacy and tend to resonate with diverse population of university students.

CONCLUSION

The hypothesis was found to be true. Psychological interventions to promote emotional well-being and coping, reduce mental health issues in university students.

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Conflict of Interest

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