

Psychological Well-Being and Life Skills in Emerging Adulthood: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Emerging adulthood is a critical developmental period marked by significant transitions, identity exploration, and increasing psychological demands. During this stage, young adults face academic, career-related, and interpersonal challenges that can influence their psychological well-being. In recent years, life skills have gained attention as important psychosocial resources that support adaptive functioning and positive mental health. The present narrative review examines the relationship between psychological well-being and life skills during emerging adulthood, with particular emphasis on educational and developing-country contexts. Drawing on literature from psychology and education, the review synthesizes theoretical perspectives and empirical findings related to psychological well-being, life skills, and their interconnections. Psychological well-being is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing positive functioning, emotional regulation, autonomy, and purpose in life. Life skills, including decision-making, problem-solving, emotional regulation, communication, and interpersonal competence, are discussed as key protective factors that enhance well-being during transitional life stages. The review further highlights the role of life skills education in promoting resilience and mental health among emerging adults, particularly within higher education settings. The review identifies important gaps in existing research, including the need for longitudinal, culturally sensitive, and intervention-based studies. Overall, the findings underscore the significance of integrating life skills education into educational and mental health initiatives to promote psychological well-being during emerging adulthood.

Keywords: *Psychological well-being, life skills, emerging adulthood, positive psychology, higher education, mental health promotion*

Psychological well-being has emerged as a central concern in contemporary psychology and education, particularly within the framework of positive psychology, which emphasizes strengths, adaptive functioning, and optimal human development (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The period of emerging adulthood is marked by rapid social, academic, and occupational transitions that place substantial psychological demands on young people. While these transitions offer opportunities for personal growth and self-exploration, they also increase vulnerability to stress, uncertainty, and emotional difficulties (Arnett, 2000).

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In educational contexts, particularly in developing countries such as India, emerging adults often face additional challenges related to academic competition, career ambiguity, financial pressure, and shifting family expectations. These factors can significantly influence psychological well-being, making the promotion of adaptive psychological resources an important priority for higher education institutions and mental health professionals. Psychological well-being is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing positive emotions, effective functioning, purpose in life, and the capacity to manage everyday stressors (Ryff, 1989).

Within this positive psychological framework, increasing attention has been directed toward internal resources that support adaptive functioning during transitional life phases. One such resource is life skills. Life skills refer to a set of psychosocial abilities that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life, including decision-making, problem-solving, communication, emotional regulation, critical thinking, and interpersonal competence (World Health Organization [WHO], 1997). These skills are especially relevant during emerging adulthood, when individuals are required to make independent decisions and assume greater responsibility for their personal, academic, and social lives.

Research in educational and psychological domains suggests that life skills function as protective factors that enhance resilience and support psychological well-being (Lippman et al., 2015). In the Indian higher education context, life skills education has been increasingly advocated as a means of promoting mental health, academic adjustment, and employability among young adults. However, despite growing interest in both psychological well-being and life skills, the literature remains fragmented, with limited integrative reviews examining how life skills contribute to well-being during emerging adulthood.

Therefore, a narrative synthesis of existing research is warranted to consolidate current knowledge and provide a clearer conceptual understanding of the relationship between life skills and psychological well-being in emerging adults. The present review aims to examine theoretical perspectives and empirical findings on psychological well-being and life skills, with particular attention to their relevance in educational settings and developing-country contexts.

Emerging Adulthood: Conceptual Overview

Emerging adulthood is a distinct developmental phase typically spanning the ages of approximately 18 to 25 years, characterized by identity exploration, increased autonomy, and transitional instability (Arnett, 2000). This stage is conceptually different from adolescence and adulthood, as individuals are no longer dependent adolescents but have not yet assumed enduring adult roles in areas such as career, marriage, and long-term responsibility. Emerging adulthood is therefore marked by exploration and experimentation across educational, occupational, relational, and personal domains.

From a psychological perspective, emerging adulthood is often described as a period of heightened instability and change. Young adults may experience frequent shifts in academic pathways, career aspirations, living arrangements, and social relationships. Although these changes can foster self-discovery and personal growth, they may also contribute to increased stress, anxiety, and uncertainty, particularly when adequate coping resources are lacking (Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006). As a result, psychological well-being during this phase tends to fluctuate, making emerging adults especially sensitive to both risk and protective factors.

Cognitively, emerging adulthood is associated with the development of advanced reasoning abilities, reflective thinking, and greater self-awareness. Emotionally, individuals are required to regulate their own emotions more independently, often without the structured support systems available during adolescence. Socially, emerging adults must navigate new interpersonal relationships, establish intimacy, and adapt to diverse academic and occupational environments. In collectivistic cultures such as India, these developmental tasks are often shaped by strong family involvement and societal expectations, which may further influence well-being outcomes.

Given these developmental characteristics, emerging adulthood represents a critical period for the acquisition and application of life skills. Skills such as decision-making, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and effective communication become essential for managing academic pressures, career-related uncertainty, and interpersonal challenges. Empirical evidence suggests that individuals who possess stronger life skills are better equipped to cope with stress and maintain psychological well-being during transitional life stages (Hodge et al., 2017).

Understanding emerging adulthood as a unique developmental stage provides an important framework for examining psychological well-being and life skills together. Rather than viewing emotional difficulties during this phase as pathological, it is more appropriate to conceptualize them as part of a normative developmental process that can be positively shaped through targeted skill development and supportive educational environments. This perspective highlights the importance of integrating life skills education into higher education and mental health initiatives aimed at promoting well-being among emerging adults.

Psychological Well-Being in Emerging Adulthood

Psychological well-being during emerging adulthood has received increasing scholarly attention due to the unique developmental challenges associated with this life stage. Unlike adolescence, where emotional regulation is often supported by external structures such as family and school, emerging adulthood requires individuals to assume greater responsibility for their own psychological functioning. Psychological well-being in this context is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct involving positive emotions, personal growth, autonomy, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and positive interpersonal relationships (Ryff, 1989).

Emerging adulthood is characterized by heightened exploration and instability, which can influence well-being both positively and negatively. On one hand, opportunities for identity exploration and increased autonomy may foster personal growth and self-discovery. On the other hand, uncertainty related to academic performance, career prospects, financial independence, and intimate relationships may contribute to stress, anxiety, and emotional distress (Arnett, 2015). Research suggests that emerging adults report fluctuating levels of psychological well-being, making this stage particularly sensitive to contextual and personal factors (Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004).

In educational settings, psychological well-being plays a crucial role in academic engagement, motivation, and overall adjustment. Students with higher levels of well-being tend to demonstrate better coping strategies, greater resilience, and more positive academic outcomes, whereas those experiencing low well-being may be at increased risk for burnout, disengagement, and mental health difficulties. In developing countries such as India, these

challenges are often intensified by competitive academic environments, societal expectations, and limited access to mental health resources.

Positive psychology perspectives emphasize that psychological well-being is not merely the absence of distress but involves the presence of positive functioning and adaptive capacities (Seligman, 2011). From this viewpoint, enhancing well-being during emerging adulthood requires attention to internal psychological resources that enable individuals to manage developmental demands effectively. Identifying and strengthening such resources is particularly important for preventive mental health approaches within higher education and youth development programs.

Life Skills: Definition and Core Domains

Life skills are widely recognized as essential psychosocial abilities that enable individuals to effectively manage the demands and challenges of everyday life. The World Health Organization defines life skills as abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that allow individuals to deal effectively with life's stresses and challenges (World Health Organization [WHO], 1997). These skills are not innate but can be learned and strengthened through education, training, and experience, making them especially relevant for developmental interventions.

Life skills encompass a broad range of cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal competencies. Commonly identified domains include decision-making, problem-solving, critical and creative thinking, effective communication, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and stress management (WHO, 1997). Together, these skills support adaptive functioning across academic, social, and occupational contexts. During emerging adulthood, when individuals are required to make independent decisions and manage multiple role transitions, life skills become particularly salient.

In educational contexts, life skills are increasingly viewed as foundational competencies that complement academic knowledge. Research indicates that life skills contribute to improved academic adjustment, enhanced emotional resilience, and better social functioning among students (Lippman et al., 2015). In the Indian higher education system, life skills education has been promoted through curricular and co-curricular initiatives aimed at fostering employability, emotional competence, and holistic development.

From a psychological perspective, life skills function as protective factors that buffer against stress and promote psychological well-being. Skills such as emotional regulation and problem-solving enable individuals to respond adaptively to stressors, while interpersonal and communication skills facilitate social support and relationship satisfaction. Self-awareness and critical thinking further contribute to informed decision-making and goal-directed behavior, which are central to positive psychological functioning.

Given the developmental characteristics of emerging adulthood, the acquisition and application of life skills are critical for maintaining psychological well-being. Rather than addressing psychological difficulties only after they arise, life skills education offers a proactive approach that equips young adults with tools to navigate developmental challenges effectively. This highlights the importance of integrating life skills frameworks into educational and mental health initiatives targeting emerging adults.

Role of Life Skills in Enhancing Psychological Well-Being

Life skills play a central role in enhancing psychological well-being during emerging adulthood by equipping individuals with adaptive capacities to manage developmental challenges effectively. As emerging adults navigate academic pressures, career uncertainty, evolving relationships, and increasing autonomy, the presence of well-developed life skills can significantly influence how these demands are perceived and managed. Rather than eliminating stressors, life skills enable individuals to respond to challenges in constructive and psychologically healthy ways.

Decision-making and problem-solving skills contribute to psychological well-being by fostering a sense of control and competence. Emerging adults who are able to evaluate options, anticipate consequences, and make informed choices are more likely to experience autonomy and environmental mastery—key components of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989). In contrast, poor decision-making abilities may increase feelings of confusion, helplessness, and distress, particularly in high-stakes academic and career contexts.

Emotional regulation and stress management skills are especially critical during this developmental phase. Emerging adulthood is associated with emotional fluctuations and heightened sensitivity to failure, evaluation, and uncertainty. Life skills related to emotional awareness, coping, and regulation help individuals manage negative emotions such as anxiety and frustration, thereby promoting emotional stability and resilience (Gross, 2015). Research suggests that individuals with stronger emotional regulation skills report higher levels of well-being and lower levels of psychological distress.

Interpersonal and communication skills further contribute to psychological well-being by facilitating supportive social relationships. Positive relationships serve as important buffers against stress and are strongly linked to well-being outcomes. Emerging adults with effective communication and empathy skills are better able to establish meaningful connections, seek social support, and resolve interpersonal conflicts, all of which enhance psychological well-being (Keyes, 2002). In collectivistic cultural contexts, such as India, interpersonal competence may be particularly important for maintaining harmony within family and social networks.

Self-awareness and critical thinking skills also play a significant role in promoting well-being by enabling reflective self-evaluation and goal-directed behavior. Self-aware individuals are more likely to recognize their strengths and limitations, set realistic goals, and engage in purposeful activities, thereby fostering personal growth and life satisfaction. Collectively, these findings suggest that life skills function as psychological resources that support positive functioning and well-being during emerging adulthood.

Implications for Education and Mental Health Promotion

The relationship between life skills and psychological well-being has important implications for educational practice and mental health promotion, particularly within higher education settings. As emerging adulthood often coincides with the pursuit of higher education, academic institutions represent critical contexts for fostering both life skills and well-being. Integrating life skills education into formal curricula and co-curricular programs can serve as a proactive approach to promoting mental health among young adults.

Educational programs that emphasize life skills development can enhance students' capacity to cope with academic stress, adapt to changing demands, and maintain psychological well-

being. Life skills training initiatives focusing on emotional regulation, communication, problem-solving, and decision-making have been shown to improve resilience and reduce vulnerability to mental health difficulties. Such programs align with preventive mental health approaches that aim to strengthen protective factors rather than solely addressing psychological problems after they arise.

In the Indian higher education context, the inclusion of life skills education is particularly relevant given the increasing prevalence of academic stress, career uncertainty, and mental health concerns among students. Incorporating life skills modules into undergraduate and postgraduate curricula can contribute to holistic development by addressing emotional, social, and psychological needs alongside academic learning. Faculty members, counselors, and mental health professionals can play a key role in designing and implementing life skills-based interventions tailored to the developmental needs of emerging adults.

From a policy perspective, the promotion of life skills as a core component of education can support broader mental health objectives. Collaboration between educational institutions and mental health services may facilitate the development of integrated programs that enhance psychological well-being at both individual and institutional levels. Such initiatives are particularly important in resource-limited settings, where preventive approaches can reduce the burden on mental health services.

Overall, emphasizing life skills development within educational and mental health frameworks offers a promising pathway for enhancing psychological well-being during emerging adulthood. By equipping young adults with adaptive skills, institutions can support not only academic success but also long-term mental health and positive functioning.

Gaps in Literature and Future Directions

Despite growing recognition of the importance of psychological well-being and life skills during emerging adulthood, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, much of the available research has examined life skills and well-being as separate constructs, with relatively few studies explicitly investigating their integrated relationship. This fragmentation limits a comprehensive understanding of how specific life skills contribute to different dimensions of psychological well-being during emerging adulthood.

Second, a substantial proportion of existing studies are cross-sectional in nature, which restricts conclusions about developmental trajectories and causal relationships. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how life skills develop over time and how they influence psychological well-being across the course of emerging adulthood. Such designs would provide deeper insight into whether life skills act as antecedents, mediators, or outcomes of psychological well-being.

Third, there is a relative lack of culturally sensitive research, particularly in developing-country contexts such as India. Many life skills frameworks and measures have been developed in Western contexts and may not fully capture culturally relevant skills or well-being indicators. Future research should prioritize culturally grounded approaches that consider sociocultural values, family structures, and educational systems influencing emerging adults' experiences.

Additionally, intervention-based studies examining the effectiveness of life skills training programs on psychological well-being remain limited. While conceptual and correlational

evidence supports the role of life skills as protective factors, more empirical research is needed to evaluate structured life skills interventions within educational settings. Such research would strengthen the evidence base for integrating life skills education into higher education curricula and mental health promotion initiatives.

Future research may also benefit from examining specific life skills in relation to distinct components of psychological well-being, rather than treating both constructs as global entities. This approach would allow for a more nuanced understanding of which skills are most influential at different stages of emerging adulthood and in diverse educational and sociocultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

Emerging adulthood represents a critical developmental period characterized by significant transitions, opportunities, and psychological challenges. The present narrative review highlights the important role of life skills as adaptive psychosocial resources that contribute to psychological well-being during this formative stage. By enabling effective decision-making, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and interpersonal functioning, life skills support positive psychological functioning and resilience among emerging adults.

The review underscores that psychological well-being in emerging adulthood is not solely determined by external circumstances but is strongly influenced by internal capacities that can be developed through education and supportive environments. Life skills education, therefore, offers a proactive and preventive approach to mental health promotion, particularly within higher education settings where emerging adults face multiple developmental demands.

From an educational and mental health perspective, integrating life skills frameworks into academic curricula and student support services can enhance holistic development and long-term well-being. Such integration is especially relevant in developing-country contexts, where increasing academic pressures and limited mental health resources necessitate preventive and skill-based approaches.

In conclusion, strengthening life skills among emerging adults holds significant promise for promoting psychological well-being and positive functioning. Continued research and practice focused on life skills development can contribute meaningfully to youth mental health, educational success, and overall quality of life during emerging adulthood.

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Conflict of Interest

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