

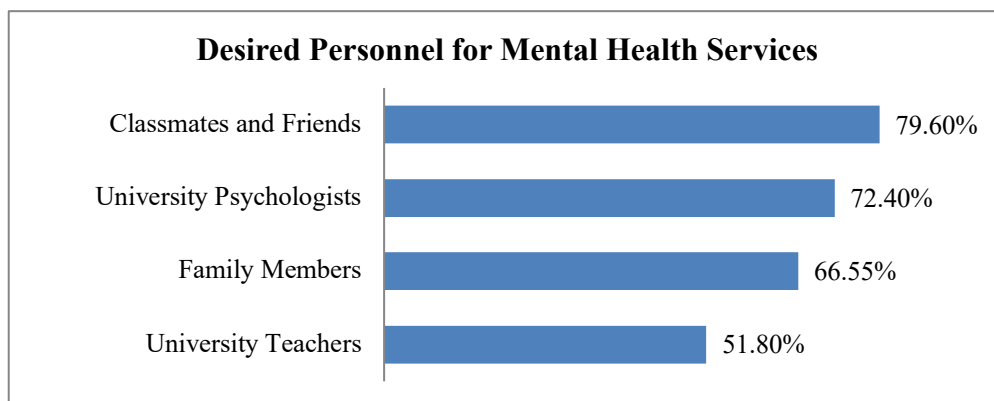
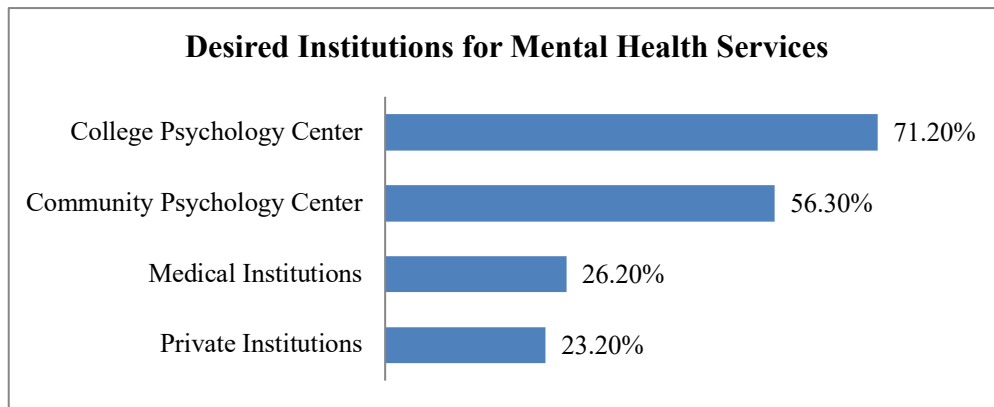
Mental Health Education for Chinese College Students

Guo Lingxiu

I . Introduction

Mental health problems constitute a significant impediment to academic and social success for college students worldwide. It is widely agreed that healthy mental state could contribute to good academic performance and accomplishments in other aspects of college life; while poor mental state, conversely, might lead to underachievement or even dropout. According to the recent findings of the WHO World Mental Health International College Student project, which covers 14,000 college students across 8 countries, approximately 35% of students had an undiagnosed mental disorder.^[1] China is no exception on this issue, with a considerable number of college students suffering from depression and anxiety, among other mental health problems. A survey in 2018 showed that students with feelings of depression and anxiety accounted for 99.87% and 22.57% of the sample, respectively.^[2] These statistics should arouse full attention to the mental well-being of college students, even as one of the key influencing factors of the quality of higher education.

In addition to clinical intervention, of course, for diagnosed cases of mental illness, the cure also lies in college education system, which can provide essential and effective means to prevent and alleviate this phenomenon. Since learning and living environment varies from campus to campus, the college, both as one of the major causes of the problem and as a professional educational institution, is naturally better-equipped to provide tailored support for its own students. Besides, university workers are generally well aware of the common sources of stress faced by college students, ranging from rigorous coursework and extracurricular activities, to interpersonal relationships, job-hunting and finance management. Furthermore, research indicated that college-based institutions and personnel are among the top choices that college students would turn to for mental health services.^[3] This also recognizes mental health education as an indispensable and crucial part of quality education on individuals, with its unique role in catering for personal needs and guaranteeing the basis of personal growth.



Data Source: Investigation and Evaluation of Mental Health Service Needs of Chinese College Students^[3]

In China, in order to tackle the issue and enhance college students' overall mental health condition, an integrated approach of mental health education has been adopted. However, there are still a number of problems in practice that hinder this approach from being fully effective. Improvement measures should be taken to better take care of the psychological and educational needs of college students, especially in this special period when the pandemic still has significant impacts on campus life.

This paper tries to analyze the main problems existing in the current system of mental health education in Chinese universities, proposes corresponding solutions to address the issue, and develops feasibility analysis on one core aspect of the measures. A conclusion is then made to summarize the proposal and to call for more reflections on this topic.

II. Current Situation Analysis

1. College mental health education methods in China

Having recognized mental health problem as one of the major concerns for the well-being of college students, China's Ministry of Education formulated the *Implementation Outline for Mental Health Education for College Students in Regular Colleges and Universities (Trial)* in 2002, stating that a network of mental health education should be formed which closely integrates in-class and extra-curricular activities, education and guidance, consultation and self-assistance efforts.^[4]

In years of practice, the methods adopted by Chinese universities can be roughly divided into the following three categories: thematic training, psychological counseling and course learning.^[5] Thematic training includes a series of activities designed to help students arouse self-awareness and timely discover potential psychological problems, among which mental health assessment is most commonly used by colleges to find those who need further intervention. Psychological counseling is typically one-on-one consultation to assist students in solving psychological dilemmas. Course learning is the curriculum for mental health education.

2. Existing problems in practice

a. Focus on diagnosis and treatment rather than prevention

One of the most common extracurricular activities organized by Chinese colleges regarding this topic is the mental health questionnaire, often required to fill out by students once or twice a year. It serves as a tool to identify students that might be going through a mental health crisis. Once identified as having psychological problems, the student mostly has to take a compulsory interview to confirm whether s/he has a mental illness and whether s/he will behave abnormally, and receive clinical treatment if necessary. On the other hand, students that show smaller tendency to have mental disorders in the survey are deemed healthy, without further verification on the accountability of the result. This has become a major loophole in the monitoring and prevention of psychological problems. Moreover, many consultants in college draw inadequate attention to those who come to them yet without evident mental disorders.^[6]

b. Unsatisfactory course effect

Most colleges offer compulsory mental health courses to provide psychological guidance, but often with homogeneous contents that do not take the evaluation of case-by-case progress into account. These courses, if accompanied with not-well-designed assignments, might even add to the academic burden of college students.

c. Lack of professionalism in mental health consultants

Some full-time and part-time mental health education practitioners who work as consultants in college have not undergone professional training in psychological counseling and are unfamiliar with psychological testing techniques and psychological counseling methods. This might result in inaccurate attribution of mental health problems and greatly undermine the effectiveness of the consultation.

d. Limited ways to call for mental health assistance

When in need of professional mental health assistance, most college students have rather limited channels to ask for help, especially when the effect of traditional face-to-face counseling doesn't turn out to be prominent.

III. Proposed Solutions and feasibility

A. Proposed Solutions

1. Improve the curriculum relevant to mental health education

a. Mental health courses

According to *Basic Requirements for the Teaching of Mental Health Education Courses in Regular Colleges and Universities*, an official guidance published by the Ministry of Education, such courses should integrate knowledge transfer, psychological experience and behavior training.^[7] The latter two aspects need special attention, as they require more complex teaching skills and are often overlooked in practice. Teachers should focus more on personalized training, such as case study and immersive emotional experience through sitcom performance, so that every student could benefit from a unique journey of self-discovery. Even in the teaching of essential common knowledge, teachers should guide students to reflect deeper on the connection with their own thoughts and experiences.

b. Psychology courses

Colleges should incorporate more psychology courses into the scope of general education courses, for students of different majors to choose from. Both the variety and the quantity of psychology courses should be enriched, so that broader psychological learning needs of more students can be taken care of. Professional knowledge of psychology could help promote self-awareness and self-cognition, thus to some extent, improving students' self-psychological intervention ability.

2. Improve the quality of psychological education professionals

a. Teachers of mental health courses

Improving the teaching evaluation mechanism of mental health courses would encourage teachers to enhance curriculum design and course delivery. The degree of individuality and flexibility of curriculum design should be taken into consideration in students' evaluation of teaching. For teachers with relatively low evaluations, college should take measures such as reducing the number of their classes and strengthening training for them.

b. Psychological counselors on campus

The psychological counselors on campus should be selected with strict standards to guarantee the quality of counseling. Personnel without relevant academic and professional qualifications should not engage in mental health counseling for college students. Also, an effective assessment and evaluation mechanism should be in place to play a supervisory role on these counselors. College should value the feedback of each student after consultation, so as to take appropriate reward and punishment measures to the consultant.

c. Professional psychological counselors off campus

It is also a good option to hire professional psychologists outside the college to do campus consultations regularly.

3. Expand channels and methods of mental health assistance

Mental health assistance on campus can take on many formats, including but

not limited to anonymous and non-anonymous counseling, online and offline counseling, text-based, telephone and video counseling, and supervised psychological support group, etc. Colleges should also actively investigate other needs of students, and make flexible adjustments as per their requests.

4. Strengthen campus publicity of mental health knowledge

Colleges should carry out a variety of extracurricular activities, for instance lectures, psychodrama and psychological workshops, to popularize psychological knowledge and help remove the stigma of mental disorders such as depression. It is also crucial to publicize psychological assistance channels on campus and make sure students have good knowledge of where to seek for help. In general, colleges should strive to create a friendly environment that encourages students to attach importance to their mental health, face their psychological problems squarely, and provide support for whoever is experiencing psychological frustration around them.

B. Feasibility

Improving the quality of psychological education professionals lies at the core of the four solutions to enhance college mental health education, as these people also constitute the main body of the implementers of other measures. The following are several suggestions for possible countermeasures to deal with potential difficulties in the process of building such a team.

1. Teachers and psychological counselors on campus

A stricter selection of mental health education professionals might result in a lack of staff to perform the duties. This requires joint effort from both the college and the educational department of the country to solve the difficulty. College could improve the salary of relevant positions to attract psychological experts or young talents to choose universities for their career path, and meanwhile provide training for those disqualified staff to help them reach the standard faster. The educational department could introduce policies to coordinate with personnel transfer and training in colleges, such as providing financial support by setting up special funds for college mental health education, and organizing talent exchange programs between universities, to encourage more colleges to reflect and take actions on the issue.

2. Professional psychological counselors off campus

Professional psychological counselors generally have their own channels to build connection with customers, and often with high consultation fees, so it can be hard to regularly hire them for campus counseling. Regarding this problem, it is recommended that the college establish long-term cooperative relationships with well-known consulting agencies, and provide campus promotion for its off-campus business in order to reduce costs. Passing on the extra costs directly to students should not be accepted.

IV. Conclusion

This paper reveals the severe problem of college students' mental health concerns, examines the current practice of college mental health education in China, points out several actions that require improving, and tries to make suggestions from four aspects of the educational system: curriculum, professionals, channels of intervention, and campus publicity. In China, despite a relatively large amount of literature on students' mental health, there is not much to discuss the effective reform plan of colleges and universities on mental health education, while the psychological problems of college students remain serious. This issue still calls on extensive attention and rapid action in the efforts to leverage high-quality higher education in China.

References

- [1] WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project: Prevalence and Distribution of Mental Disorders[J]. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 2018, 127(7), 623-638.
- [2] Xu Yinghua. Investigation on the Mental Health of College Students[J]. *China Public Health Management*, 2018, 1, 138-140.
- [3] Huang Xiting et al. Investigation and Evaluation of Mental Health Service Needs of Chinese College Students[J]. *Journal of Southwest University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2011, 3, 1-5.
- [4] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Implementation Outline for Mental Health Education for College Students in Regular Colleges and Universities (Trial). 2002. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A12/szs_lef/moe_1407/moe_1411/s6874/s3020/201001/t

20100117_76892.html

[5] Zhang Dajun. A Probe into Several Theories of College Mental Health Education[J]. *Journal of Southwest Normal University*, 2006, 3, 130-136.

[6] Peng Xiaoling. Misunderstandings and Countermeasures of Mental Health Education in Universities[J]. *Journal of Southwest Normal University*, 2002, 4, 21-25.

[7] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Basic Requirements for the Teaching of Mental Health Education Courses in Regular Colleges and Universities. 2011. Retrieved from

http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A12/moe_1407/s3020/201105/t20110528_120774.htm

1