

Analyses and Improvement Strategies of Mental Health Literacy for Normal College Students —A Case Study on Guangxi Vocational Normal University

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Abstract: With the proactive and joint efforts of the Chinese government and the whole society, great achievements have been made for mental health education in Chinese universities. However, we find that some problems remain in the mental health education in the universities. For example, the emphasis was made more on imparting mental health knowledge rather than developing practical skills, and the trainings focus more on self-help and ignore seeking for external assistance. These are not conducive to developing and improving the mental health literacy for college students, especially for normal college students. By collecting data through questionnaire surveys in Guangxi Vocational Normal University, this paper analyzes the status quo of mental health literacy of normal college students. The results showed that the overall mental health literacy of normal college students is not high, and girls perform better than boys in three aspects including mental health knowledge, behaviors and awareness. In particular, girls have higher average scores than boys in terms of awareness. There is a significant positive correlation between awareness and behaviors, and awareness has a significant effect on behavior prediction. To improve the mental health literacy of normal college students, this paper puts forward some policy suggestions based on the research findings.

Keywords: normal university; college students; mental health literacy; strategy

1. Introduction

Mental health literacy refers to the relevant knowledge and concepts that help us understand, cope with or prevent mental diseases. It consists of five elements: knowledge of preventing mental diseases, identifying mental diseases, knowledge of seeking for help and available treatment, strategies and knowledge related to self-help for general mental problems, and the skills to offer help to patients with mental diseases or those in psychological crisis^[1]. Since the Australian scholar A. F. Jorm formally proposed the concept of mental health literacy in 1997,

the connotation and dimensions of mental health literacy have been constantly updated and expanded. Chinese scholar Jiang Guangrong put forward a new structure of mental health literacy based on previous studies, which include two dimensions such as “coping with mental diseases—promoting mental health” and “self-help—helping others” as well as three aspects including knowledge, attitude and behavioral habits. This paper makes a more comprehensive interpretation of mental health literacy, and it points out that mental health literacy should include not only coping with mental disease but also maintaining and promoting mental health. In addition, the objects of mental health literacy should include not only the individuals themselves but also others^[2].

Though great achievements have been made for mental health education in Chinese universities as the result of joint efforts of the Chinese government and the whole society. However, we find that some problems remain in the process of mental health education in the universities. For example, the emphasis was made more on imparting knowledge rather than developing practical skills, and the trainings focuses more on self-help and ignore seeking for external assistance. These are not conducive to developing and improving the mental health literacy for college students, especially for normal college students. Because they are supposed to become teachers in the future and will become role models for the students to grow healthily. Therefore, a good mental health literacy will play a significant role in maintaining and promoting mental health for themselves as well as the students in the future. By analyzing the status quo of mental health literacy for normal college students, this paper aims to understand its influencing factors and put forward coping strategies so as to provide some references for further study of mental health literacy for college students.

2. Literature Review

The research on mental health literacy has been a hot topic in the field of psychology, and previous literature has made in-dept studies on the mental health literacy of college students. Regarding the status quo of mental health literacy for college students, Lou Chun et al. (2021) conducted questionnaire surveys on the mental health literacy of 804 college students in Hangzhou City of China. The results showed that there is lack of awareness among college students in the understanding and treatment of mental diseases, but they can identify general mental diseases and maintain good empathy towards the mental patients. Zhang Jinsheng et al. (2022) adopted stratified sampling method to select 578 full-time undergraduate students from 3 universities in Hangzhou City as the research objects to study the status quo of mental health literacy. The results showed that the overall score for mental health literacy of college students was 116.08 +9.52, which is at a moderate level. Zhang Dian et al. (2023) selected 8014 undergraduates who were newly enrolled in 2022 from a comprehensive university in Henan Province of China, and the research showed that the mental health literacy of college freshmen was at a moderate level. In addition, female students and the college freshmen who had attended mental health education courses or read books related to psychology showed better performance in the mental health literacy.

In terms of interventions on the mental health literacy of college students, Xu Aijing (2020) and Su Hua (2023) made interventions in the mental health education courses for college students, and the results showed that the interventions significantly improved the mental health literacy

of the respondents in the survey. Liu Jiajing (2020) proposed a network intervention program for mental health literacy and successfully improved the mental health literacy and mental health of the respondents. Jia Yafei et al. (2023) selected 12,850 college students in the study, and the results showed that college students with higher mental health literacy were more likely to seek professional help or advise to seek for help.

At present, scholars in China and across the world are increasingly focusing on the mental health literacy of college students. Their researches mainly focus on the status quo of mental health literacy of college students, influencing factors and interventions from the perspective of psychology, pedagogy, sociology and other disciplines, and they put forward the countermeasures and suggestions for developing the mental health literacy of college students. These research results provide valuable research materials for this paper. Taking Guangxi Vocational Normal University as an example, this paper analyzes the status quo of mental health literacy for normal college students and analyzes the causes with an aim to provide some reference for the development of college students' mental health literacy.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research objects

Using the stratified sampling method, online surveys were conducted for students from Guangxi Vocational Normal University, and 357 valid questionnaires were collected. The surveys covered 74 boys (20.73%) and 283 girls (79.27%). Among them, there are 135 freshmen (37.82%), 57 sophomores (15.97%), 60 junior students (16.81%) and 105 senior students (29.41%).

3.2 Research tool

The paper adopted the Mental Health Literacy Questionnaire developed by the National Mental Health Assessment and Development Center, Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences. The questionnaire covers three aspects of measurement such as mental health knowledge, behaviors and awareness. The knowledge component consists of five parts: mental illness, physical and mental health, intervention and suicide prevention, children's mental health and basic knowledge and principle. There are 50 true or false questions. A higher score shows a better performance in mental health knowledge. The behavioral component consists of four aspects: emotional awareness, cognitive reevaluation, interpersonal support, and distraction. The component has 14 questions, with 4 scoring points, including 3 reverse scoring questions. A mean value will be adopted for each component, which is the result of total scores divided by the number of questions, with a score ranging from 1 to 4. A higher score shows more obvious behavior characteristic. The awareness component consists of three questions. The mean value will be adopted with a score ranging from 1 to 4. A higher score shows that more attention is paid to mental health^[3].

3.3 Data Statistics and Analysis

After the questionnaires were collected, all questionnaires were preliminarily checked, and then spss19.0 statistical software was used to make statistic analyses on the questionnaire data.

Table 1 Total scores of mental health knowledge, behaviors and awareness in sample population, gender and grade

Dimension	M	SD
<i>Knowledgegy</i>	33.47	4.43
<i>Behaviors</i>	33.55	4.62
<i>Awareness</i>	3.67	1.28

Table 2 Difference test in mental health knowledge, behaviors and awareness for different genders

Gender	M±SD	t	p	Gender
<i>Knowledgegy</i>	Boys	32.78±4.75	-1.496	0.136
	Girls	33.65±4.33		
<i>Behaviors</i>	Boys	33.19±4.95	-0.764	0.445
	Girls	33.65±4.53		
<i>Awareness</i>	Boys	3.58±1.12	-2.003*	0.048
	Girls	4.00±1.71		

Table 3 Difference test in mental health knowledge, behaviors and awareness for different genders and grades

Dimension	Groups				F	p
	<i>Freshmen</i>	<i>Sophomores</i>	<i>Juniors tudents</i>	<i>Seniorstude nts</i>		
<i>Knowledgegy</i>	33.43±4.29	32.6±4.48	33.27±5.21	34.1±4.04	1.513	0.211
<i>Behaviors</i>	32.96±4.54	33.77±5.24	33.93±4.85	33.98±4.20	1.215	0.304
<i>Awareness</i>	3.637±1.19	3.47±0.95	3.55±1.02	3.88±1.28	1.578	0.194

Table 4 Correlations among mental health knowledge, behaviors and awareness

	<i>Knowledgegy</i>	<i>Behaviors</i>	<i>Awareness</i>
<i>Knowledgegy</i>	1		
<i>Behaviors</i>	0.140**	1	
<i>Awareness</i>	-0.096	0.142**	1

4. Research Results

4.1 Analysis on the status quo of mental health literacy for normal college students

4.1.1 Lack of understanding on mental health knowledge

This study found that normal college students' overall scores of mental health knowledge remain at a moderate level (as shown in Table 1), and college students have a certain understanding of basic mental health knowledge, but they lack the understanding of in-depth knowledge in the field such as related knowledge of mental diseases and crisis interventions.

This shows that though universities are paying more attention to mental health education, they need to have a clear understanding on the nature of mental health education. In terms of gender comparison (as shown in Table 2), girls score higher than the average, while male students score lower than the average, indicating that girls have more mental health knowledge than boys. This in part shows that girls perform better than boys in the general courses such as mental health education. In terms of grade comparison (as shown in Table 2), senior students score the highest, while freshmen score the lowest. In addition, attending different lectures or activities related to psychology or mental health in colleges will increase their knowledge in the field.

4.1.2 Lack of methods for promoting mental health and coping with mental diseases

The results of this study showed that there was no significant difference between gender and grade in terms of behaviors, indicating that normal college students do not have many ways and approaches to promote mental health or cope with mental diseases. From the gender perspective (as shown in Table 2), the results of the questionnaire surveys showed that girls scored only slightly higher than boys, indicating that girls had not learned the right methods to deal with mental disease and maintain mental health in their studies or through other channels. As a result, they also lack the solutions the same as boys when facing psychological problems. In terms of grades (as shown in Table 3), the scores are not high for each grade group. Senior students scored the highest while the freshmen scored the lowest. One reason for this is that freshmen spend most of their time and energy studying before entering colleges and do not have enough access to mental health knowledge, and therefore lack the methods to cope with mental health problems. While senior students are more likely to acquire skills to improve mental health as they stay longer in the universities that focus on the mental health of students.

4.1.3 Strong awareness of mental health

The study results showed that girls scored higher than boys in terms of awareness, and the difference is significant (as shown in Table 2), which is consistent with the research finding by Chen Zhiyan in 2018^[4]. From the perspective of grade (as shown in Table 3), there is no obvious difference in the scores for each grade group, and the scores are generally high, indicating that normal college students have strong awareness of mental health. Mental health awareness is the individual's cognition, attention and sensitivity to their own emotions and psychological states. In fact, since colleges and universities carried out mental health education, the mental health awareness of college students has shown a trend of constant growth. This shows that university students focus on the importance of mental health and its education, and they also pay attention to the changes in their own mental state. However, their understanding of mental health knowledge is rather superficial. When individual students realize that they are suffering from psychological problems, they are unable to receive necessary support at critical time because their lack of understanding of mental health knowledge and the ability to seek for help. It can be seen from Table 4 that mental health knowledge is not related to awareness.

4.2 Analyses on the causes of insufficient mental health literacy for normal college students

4.2.1 Limitations of mental health education in the universities

Although positive progress has been made in mental health education in Chinese universities in recent years, and the mental health literacy of university students has keep improving. However, some problems remain in the education and development of mental health literacy in the universities. For example, the ways of teaching management have rooms for improvement and need to better cater to individual needs. Other problems include unreasonable course arrangement, lack of enthusiasm for improving the mental health literacy and teaching capacity of teachers, as well as lack of focus on helping students improve mental health knowledge and skills. All these factors determine that the mental health literacy of college students is not high and remains to be fully developed.

The limitations are very obvious in the design of course contents: The teaching contents are mainly limited to students' self-help and do not take into account helping others. In addition, the teaching focus more on the preventions of and solutions to mental problems and less on the development of mental health literacy. For normal college students, their future careers require them to be able to "help themselves" as well as "help others". However, the mental health textbooks used in most Chinese universities are mainly related to general psychology and include some other knowledge such as physiological psychology and abnormal psychology as appropriate. Therefore, the teaching focuses more on imparting basic mental health knowledge. Though it may involve the teaching of knowledge of psychological diseases or the methods of maintaining health and coping with diseases. Such contents account for a tiny part of the teaching contents. This further show that the mental health education in Chinese universities focus more on imparting mental health knowledge and less on developing practical mental health skills.

4.2.2 Lack of attention on mental health among university students

Although college students are aware of the importance of mental health, they do not pay enough attention to it. The reason behind includes environments as well as personal reasons. First of all, although mental health education is a compulsory general course, there are arbitrariness in the arrangement of teachers and the neglect of course assessment show that the course do not draw enough attention like other specialized courses. As a result, most students do not take it very serious in the mental health education. Second, the contents of the course focus more on theoretical knowledge, and the examples of mental health described in the textbooks are out of line with actual psychological needs of the students. As a result, the students are not able to solve their practical problems through the course and therefore gradually lose their interests in the course. Third, some students underestimate the negative impacts of mental illness and thus ignore mental health, while some others hold the concept of hiding sickness for fear of treatment and take an escape attitude toward mental health. Whatever the case, these students will not face up to mental health and will adopt negative coping strategies in face of psychological problems.

4.2.3 Lack of willingness in obtaining mental health information among college students

People's access to information become more diverse in the age of Internet. To improve the mental health literacy of college students, schools and some psychological organizations have made use of social media platforms that have engagement and interactions with college students such as WeChat groups, official WeChat accounts, short video platform Douyin, Weibo, websites, among others, to promote and deliver mental health knowledge, but such efforts bring little effect. Because, compared with the less interesting mental health information, other trending information such as entertainment, sports, social hotspot issues are more appealing to college students. Together with other events such as online games and online shopping, college students normally would not take the initiative to access to mental health information without deliberate guidance and outreach efforts^[5].

5. Conclusions and Suggestions

5.1 Conclusions

By taking Guangxi Vocational Normal University as an example, this paper studies the status quo of mental health literacy for normal college students. The results show that the overall mental health literacy of normal college students was not high, and girls scored higher than boys in terms of mental health knowledge, behaviors and awareness, in particular with a higher average score than boys in terms of awareness. The awareness is positively correlated with the behaviors, and the awareness has a significant effect on behavior prediction. The reasons for insufficient mental health literacy among college students include lack of mental health education in the universities, lack of attention to mental health from college students, as well as lack of willingness of obtaining mental health information among college students. Based on the above research conclusions, this paper proposes the corresponding suggestions as follows.

5.2 Suggestions

5.2.1 Improving the education mechanism to develop mental health literacy

Currently, all the Chinese universities have established their own working mechanism for mental health education, which include the five-level network construction for mental health education, capacity building for the teachers, and the development of educational curriculum system, among others^[6]. However, the leadership of normal universities should adapt to the changes of the times and transform the fundamental concept of mental health education to set the primary task to improve the mental health literacy of college students. They should take into account the features of normal universities in the top-level design, set clear educational objectives and develop reasonable educational contents. To ensure overall improvement in the mental health quality of college students, the universities should arrange the courses and teaching hours in a scientific manner and make reform the mental health education curriculum. On the basis of adjusting and improving the original curriculum structure and teaching contents, efforts should be made to increase the teaching of the causes, symptoms, development process,

severity and consequences of mental health problems. In addition, practical mental health skills should be included in the teaching to help students have a more intuitive feeling in maintaining mental health. Guangxi Vocational Normal University has been actively improving the education mechanism and exploring new concepts to apply new approaches and new models in developing mental health literacy for its students. To take the curriculum design as an example, the university offers normal college students the mental health course aiming at helping them better understand the overall mental state and behaviors of the students they are going to teach in the future as well as master the basic methods and techniques needed for future psychological counseling and assistance.

5.2.2 Providing better guidance to change students' concept on mental health literacy

First of all, efforts should be made to change the students' views on mental health education. The teachers should integrate the psychological examples in the textbooks with real-life scenarios to help students realize that mental health is an integral part of their daily lives. In addition, scenes may be created based on the theories to allow the students to do role-playing to verify the theories to enhance the students' participation and experience so as to stimulate their interests in mental health. Second, the lessons from the ideological and political course that involve extensive engagement of all teachers and whole-process education should be learned to advance teaching reform with an aim to improve mental health literacy. It is suggested that teachers in various disciplines actively integrate mental health knowledge, skills and attitudes towards mental health and values into their daily teaching process so that students can improve their mental health literacy in a subconscious manner. Third, the disregard, escape or even hostility toward mental illness will not help improve the mental health literacy. Therefore, we should provide better guidance for those students to correctly understand the nature and the negative impacts of mental illness as well as the solutions and approaches to cope with it to eliminate misunderstandings and prejudices and help students hold the right attitude towards mental health. In practice, Guangxi Vocational Normal University encourages its teachers to carry out teaching reforms to connect textbook knowledge to reality, integrate theory with practice, as well as adopt both online and offline resources in mental health education so as to improve the mental health literacy for students in terms of both concepts and knowledge of mental health.

5.2.3 Strengthening the use of resources to enhance students' willingness to obtain mental health information

First, the universities should make full use of their effective resources to create a positive and harmonious environment for mental health education and carry out a series of mental health events according to the characteristics of students and their mental health needs. For example, they can organize the mental health knowledge contest to encourage students to understand the basic mental health knowledge, hold the thematic debate contest to change students' biased attitude and concept on mental health, or carry out the mental health drama contest to help students understand the occurrence mechanism and the countermeasures of mental health. In addition, the universities can also help students broaden their knowledge in the field through lectures or workshops on mental health. These will provide students with better experience and more growth opportunities through a variety of mental health activities.

Second, the Internet should become an important resource for college students to have quick access to professional mental health knowledge. However, the mental health education online platforms established by some universities or mental health organizations keep feeding the mental health knowledge that they think is professional and helpful but in fact it is outdated and unappealing to students. Such acts ignore the students' psychological needs or do not take into full account of college students' habits of getting information, and thus fail to draw students' attention. There are diverse forms of mental health education on the Internet. A combination of music and texts or images and videos can help provide rich contents on mental health education and offer interesting audio-visual information. For example, the Japanese scholar Ojio Yasutaka et al. [7] advised to use animation film and M.H. Li and others [8] proposed to improve mental health literacy by designing social network video games. In addition, we can even give the initiative to the students and encourage them to actively participate in the online knowledge sharing and publicity for mental health in such events as writing articles on the Internet, holding radio programs or even shooting micro-video on mental health. All these will help students to explore and realize the significance of mental health and improve their mental health literacy in the learning, experience and thinking process.

By following this work approach and making full use of fast-developing online education, the Mental Health Education and Counseling Center of Guangxi Vocational Normal University arranges professional teachers from the university or invites external experts to give live-streaming lectures on mental health education at a fixed time for the students of different grades and majors. During the interactions, the teachers or experts advise the students to face up to and understand the mental diseases, eliminate their misconceptions and prejudices on mental diseases, master the right approaches to addressing mental problems, and improve their mental health literacy. These novel and convenient approaches to spreading mental health knowledge are well received by the students who are actively participating in such live-streaming lectures and interactions. In addition, the teachers are encouraged to provide guidance for students in attending different competitions such as mental health drama contest, mental health knowledge contest or psychological skill competition. Such activities help students acquire mental health knowledge and develop psychological skills in an immersive manner and develop their capability to self-regulate their mental distress.

All in all, as China is paying more attention to improving its national mental health literacy and a growing number of scholars conduct research on the mental health literacy of college students, relevant recommendations and research findings may have practical implications. The university leadership may as well put in place such recommendations and research findings based on their respective realities so as to improve the mental health literacy of college students and satisfy the practical needs of the universities in improving the overall quality of talent training.

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