

# Research on the Enhancement Path of University Students' Mental Health through Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy in the Post-Pandemic Era

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**Abstract:** *Despite the lifting of lockdown measures and the restoration of normalcy in daily life and production, the current population of university students continues to be affected by the aftermath of the pandemic. While they resume their regular academic, personal, and study routines, significant changes have occurred in their pre-existing social cognition, emotions, values, and behavioral patterns compared to the pre-pandemic era. University students are at a crucial stage of psychological and intellectual development, displaying evident social characteristics, yet their overall psychological traits remain relatively immature. Consequently, they are susceptible to external influences, leading to fluctuations in their mental state and occasional manifestation of severe negative emotions. In the post-pandemic era, it is imperative to comprehensively analyze and deeply investigate the psychological changes in university students, forming the basis for establishing a diversified path towards enhancing their mental health capabilities. Emphasis should be placed on aiding and empowering university students to develop adaptive problem-solving skills, devising scientifically efficient psychological counseling strategies, guiding them to actively engage in social activities, thus enabling them to cope better with real-life situations. Simultaneously, a robust educational effort should be undertaken, providing support for the holistic development of the mental and physical well-being of university students.*

**Keywords:** *Post-pandemic era; University students; Mental health*

## 1. Post-Pandemic Era University Students' Psychological Health Status

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant global public health event in recent years, which has had widespread and long-term effects on the psychological health of various human social groups, particularly university students. Over the past nearly three years, many students have lived in prolonged restrictive environments, leading to increased psychological challenges among university students as they entered campus life. Compared to the pre-pandemic era, they experience more pressures and emotional disturbances related to academics, interpersonal relationships, and future employment prospects. Senior university students, affected by pandemic-related social events, have exhibited a myriad of psychological health issues, such as indecisiveness in career choices, uncertain job prospects, and an unstable social support system. Common psychological issues among university students include anxiety, avoidance of interpersonal relationships, and heightened sensitivity to social interactions. If these emotional challenges are not effectively addressed and managed, they can give rise to a range of psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct research on the stress levels of different groups of university students during different periods, continuously observe the impact of social events on their mental health enhancement, and promptly identify solutions and paths to provide appropriate support services for these distressed university students. These issues are imperative to be addressed by higher education institutions.

### 1.1 Generally Low Levels of Psychological Health Knowledge Among Students

According to the literature review, the post-pandemic era university students have relatively low scores in terms of psychological health knowledge, although most of them possess some awareness of psychological health-related knowledge and behaviors <sup>[1]</sup>. While researchers may have considered the sample size from Chen Zhiyan et al.'s survey on national psychological health literacy (N=14,895), it should be noted that Chen Zhiyan et al.'s study had a larger sample size and included special

occupational groups such as mental health workers, medical and health workers, and educators [2]. Furthermore, the research conducted by He Junyi indicates that university students generally exhibit herd mentality, more severe negative emotions, and some biased value systems. Consequently, university students' level of psychological health knowledge remains relatively weak and low compared to adults in the post-pandemic era.

### ***1.2 Gender Influence on University Students' Psychological Health Status***

Research literature shows that male university students have a noticeably lower level of awareness of psychological health issues compared to their female counterparts, and female university students demonstrate better psychological health capabilities. Different research outcomes indicate that gender norms and gender role expectations contribute to differences in sensitivity and coping strategies concerning psychological issues between males and females. Females are more likely to directly perceive emotional problems and actively seek help when facing psychological distress, while males tend to cope independently and are less inclined to talk to others or seek assistance from mental health professionals. University students exhibit similar gender differences, resulting in inconsistencies and variations in the development of psychological health capabilities between male and female university students, which is consistent with the research results of Sun Bin, Gorczynski, and others [3]-[5].

### ***1.3 Age Influence on University Students' Psychological Health Status***

Studies have indicated that individuals aged 18 to 19 years have the highest average levels of knowledge, behaviors, and literacy in terms of psychological health. However, previous research suggests that with increasing age and education level, senior university students tend to have higher psychological health capabilities. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities have placed significant emphasis on student psychological health education for an extended period, especially with a heightened focus on mental health for incoming freshmen. As a result, younger university students have shown higher levels of understanding in terms of psychological health knowledge during the university phase.

## **2. Mindfulness and Cognitive Therapy Overview**

### ***2.1 Mindfulness Training***

Mindfulness is a unique way of paying attention, focusing on the present moment without judgment. It involves observing one's state of mind during mindfulness practices, emphasizing non-evaluative observation and whole-body experiencing of present sensations while maintaining a clear and conscious awareness. Mindfulness can be considered both as a psychological state and a trait possessed by individuals.

Mindfulness can be understood from three different perspectives: firstly, as an active cognitive process; secondly, as an emphasis on the present state or characteristics of things; and finally, as a combination of both active and passive aspects. Mindfulness training engages elements of metacognitive attentional focus, metacognitive automatic attitudes, metacognitive self, and metacognitive values, helping individuals shift from being actors and recipients to being observers and witnesses. Individuals with higher levels of mindfulness possess a clearer understanding of themselves and the reality around them, enabling them to perceive the essence of problems and find rational solutions to cope with life challenges. Therefore, mindfulness training has significant effects, enhancing individual well-being and improving psychological disorders and maladaptive behaviors. Mindfulness training is suitable for various fields, including medicine and other domains.

### ***2.2 Cognitive Therapy***

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is a psychological therapeutic approach developed based on Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) by cognitive psychologists John Teasdale, Mark Williams, and Zindel Segal at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States. This therapy integrates techniques from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and elements of psychoeducation to address psychological mechanisms that lead to depression relapse, providing patients with a complete course in group mindfulness. Numerous studies have confirmed the significant efficacy of MBCT in treating depression, anxiety, and other psychosomatic issues. The core of MBCT

is gentle and systematic mindfulness training<sup>[6]-[8]</sup>.

In the field of mindfulness, the University of Oxford has been devoted to researching MBCT and collaborating with the education system to promote the application of mindfulness education in primary and secondary schools, introducing the concept of mindfulness at an early stage of individuals' lives to enhance their mental well-being. In recent years, domestic psychologists and enthusiasts have also started to study and apply MBCT in individual psychological health services.

### **3. University Mindfulness Training Education Status**

#### ***3.1 Research on Mindfulness Training Variables***

Mindfulness training is a simple and feasible practice, suitable for conducting group counseling and small group counseling for university students. Currently, many scholars in China have started to focus on the mental health of university students by exploring the effects of mindfulness training on improving their psychological well-being. Numerous research findings have indicated that mindfulness training significantly improves various dependent variables related to individuals' mental health, sleep quality, academic fatigue, mood states, psychological capital, smartphone dependence, and anxiety, among others<sup>[9-10]</sup>.

#### ***3.2 Main Techniques of Current Mindfulness Training***

Mindfulness training techniques can be roughly divided into three types: one is the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) group training program, the second is the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) group training program, and the third is researchers' customized mindfulness training program based on commonly used mindfulness meditation methods, although the design basis may not be explicitly specified. There is a greater focus on research related to MBSR. If we were to compare the specific differences between MBSR and MBCT training techniques, the distinction lies in MBCT incorporating cognitive educational components on the basis of MBSR training. MBCT not only teaches mindfulness meditation but also imparts psychological adaptation skills from cognitive behavioral therapy, making it more suitable for the university student population.

#### ***3.3 Research on the Application of MBCT to University Students***

Literature indicates that there is still relatively limited comprehensive research on the application of MBCT to university students. Su Kewei et al. conducted an 8-week complete MBCT group training and found a significant improvement in academic fatigue among university students, with the positive effects lasting for at least five months<sup>[11]</sup>. Researchers like Zhong Jiahan et al<sup>[12]</sup>, discovered that group mindfulness cognitive training had a significant positive impact on anxiety levels and overall mental and physical health among university students. Further efforts are needed to fill the gaps in research on the effectiveness of applying MBCT to university students.

### **4. Issues to be Addressed in Implementing MBCT Training Model on Campus**

Although numerous research results have shown that Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) has positive effects on individuals' positive psychological states, psychological resilience, and the level of psychological flexibility among college students, there are still some obstacles in implementing the MBCT training model on university campuses. For instance, the current curriculum system places a heavy emphasis on theoretical teaching, and MBCT, as a behavioral training, only receives a few class hours of support. Students do not have sufficient training time, making it difficult for them to fully benefit from the potential effects of MBCT.

#### ***4.1 Implementation of College Student Psychological Education in China***

In July 2018, the Communist Party Committee of the Ministry of Education issued the "Guidelines for College Student Mental Health Education," which led to an emphasis on strengthening the role of mental health education courses in the existing semester curriculum system. The theoretical teaching hours of mental health education courses are around 32 hours, and practical training courses are around 4 hours. Teachers adjust and optimize the content of mental health education courses based on actual

needs, incorporating major events and related elements, analyzing potential impacts and consequences, and providing appropriate coping strategies, enabling college students to grasp essential knowledge and effective methods to deal with stressful events.

#### ***4.2 Current Status of College Student Psychological Education Capacity Enhancement***

With the increasing demand for pursuing a happy life, while universities are strengthening college students' mental health guidance, they are also actively conducting relevant psychological education and services. Many universities offer elective course systems, group counseling courses, and various group activities that play a role in enhancing college students' pursuit of happiness. Moreover, most universities have established scientific service systems. In addition to the existing mental health service centers, they have set up psychological assistance hotlines. Many universities have also established corresponding psychological monitoring mechanisms, making full use of internet technology to dynamically monitor students' psychological changes, construct dynamic databases, and provide targeted psychological counseling. In general, universities focus on educating students about knowledge, crisis prevention, and individual health behavior improvement, which has basically formed a prevention-oriented approach supplemented by treatment and the establishment of a complete crisis management mechanism. However, the support for behavior training for college students appears to be relatively weak.

### **5. Research on the Application of MBCT in Enhancing College Student Psychological Health Capacity**

#### ***5.1 Advantages of Providing MBCT Training for College Students***

Currently, there is abundant research on the MBCT training method for improving individual mental health levels abroad. However, research in China applying this method to college students is still relatively limited, and the research is not in-depth enough. The scope of the research indicators is also relatively narrow, lacking specific research data for college students in different majors. Nowadays, regardless of the type of university, talent training programs for different majors include varying degrees of requirements for applying psychology knowledge. For example, business students require a higher level of psychology knowledge application in their talent training programs, which include courses such as "Consumer Psychology," "Organizational Behavior," "Tourism Psychology," and "Interpersonal Psychology," covering theoretical knowledge and practical training. Therefore, conducting MBCT training for college students with a foundation in psychological theory should be more readily accepted in theory. This is also a research direction worth exploring. For example, studying the relationship between the psychological health and mindfulness levels of business students, or further exploring how to effectively integrate MBCT into the education process of economics students, in order to improve the psychological health levels of business students and the effectiveness of psychological health education in economics schools.

#### ***5.2 Integrate MBCT into the Psychological Health Curriculum System***

The cultivation of college students' psychological health capacity is a comprehensive, multi-angle, and all-around systematic project, which requires a combination of knowledge imparting, psychological experience, and behavioral training. In the current college student psychological health education curriculum system, many universities offer courses with a duration of 32-36 class hours, with most courses having a duration of 36 class hours. To enhance college students' psychological health capacity, attention should be paid to psychological experiences and behavioral training based on a foundation of psychological knowledge. In terms of the arrangement of duration for psychological experiences and behavioral training, it should be integrated with knowledge imparting. Alternatively, knowledge imparting courses could be transformed into online courses, and more behavioral training could be conducted in the classroom. In this way, the duration of MBCT implementation can be guaranteed, and its effectiveness can be fully realized.

Furthermore, in the psychological experience part, MBCT provides a good entry point. It not only pays attention to individual differences, helping students return their focus and awareness to the present environment, reducing judgmental behaviors towards events, but also emphasizes innovative methods and approaches. As such, it can achieve the goal of conducting behavior capacity training with different levels of intensity.

In addition, in the curriculum system, group counseling courses, group activities, and other courses could be offered alongside traditional theoretical courses. MBCT could be integrated at different levels into knowledge imparting, psychological experiences, self-awareness, and other aspects. This approach would better meet the psychological health service needs of different student groups.

### **5.3 Ideas for Campus MBCT Training Model**

From the existing research on mindfulness training, it is known that different scholars have different views on the effectiveness and training duration of mindfulness training. However, through scholars' practical demonstrations, the MBCT training course generally lasts for 8 weeks, helping trainees gradually overcome distressing emotions through the imparting of skills and concepts. In the current university teaching period, it is relatively convenient to conduct an 8-week MBCT course through face-to-face instruction. Additionally, in the context of the frequent use of digital information technology, traditional courses are gradually advocating the integration of flipped classroom settings and continuously exploring the integration of internet technology into teaching methods. This allows students not only to obtain basic knowledge through traditional classroom teaching but also to engage in personalized learning through MOOCs and micro-courses. In the era of technological advancements, teachers must continuously improve and innovate existing educational models. Whether MBCT is used as a knowledge teaching method in exploring online courses or as a practical teaching method for behavior training, it is a subject worthy of in-depth research. Hopefully, one day MBCT can become an effective supplementary force for traditional psychological health capacity cultivation.

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