

University Students' Response to Supporting Mental Health During Covid-19 Pandemic from Positive Psychology Approach: A Literature Review

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Abstract: The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic is prevailing across many countries where millions of people are affected. In response to the current situation, many countries launch prevention measures, such as quarantine or social distancing, that aim to curb the COVID-19 spread. However, physical isolation can lead to serious mental health problems for many people, especially children who are still learning how to recognize and control emotions. Therefore, it is vital to provide productive psychological interventions for these individuals who are in demand of psychological aids. After searching and analysing past papers, positive psychology, a perspective emerging from 21st century, is worth academic attention when tackling mental health problems induced by acute stress. This literature review will thus mainly talk about the theory of positive psychology along with its application in clinical fields and suggest that it can be adopted as a promising intervention for helping university students with respect of improving well-being in the face of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, positive psychology, university students, mental distress

1. Introduction

Due to the recent lockdown policies released in major countries aiming to curb human-to-human transmissions, a large number of schools decided to suspend classroom teaching in order to physically remove students from perils of contracting this fatal disease [1]. This action has made millions of students receive remote teaching via online courses. However, the state of being self-isolated and facing school closure may result in severe psychological consequences. Students, for instance, are often prone to gaining compounded negative emotions amid the period when their schools are closed [2]. Undoubtedly, if schools or governmental departments are not capable of providing these students with effective psychological intervention, the stress induced by COVID-19 will deteriorate their mental health conditions, which will lead to unpredictable loss both at individual and social level. Considering features of mental distress brought out by the ongoing coronavirus crisis, positive psychology, which is a new subcategory of psychological science, concentrating on eliciting positive emotions, could be recommended as a valid approach for treating collegiate mental health problems. In respect of compatibility and efficacy of coping with persisting stress, positive psychology has

proven its advantages by encouraging self-awareness and eliciting positive empathy, whereas the traditional talk psychotherapy rests heavily on drawing attention to negative emotions and being led by therapists under an in-person meeting basis [3]. Complying with the aforementioned merits of this contemporary psychological theory, it is a necessity that adopting the perspective from positive psychology must be brought to public attention as a valid option to fight against malevolent mental consequences delivered by COVID-19 in population with tertiary education. Therefore, by synthesizing past and latest-updated literatures, the following review will aim to unveil the benevolence of positive psychology in terms of its clinical outcome and address the urgency that it is a pivotal moment that positive psychology should be taken into account when developing research on discovering valid and feasible intervention for improving mental health among people studying at university in response to COVID-19.

2. Broaden-and-build Theory of Positive Emotions

In psychological terminology, emotions are defined as complicated psychological states that result in physical and physiological changes which influence our behaviours [4]. Positive emotions, according to various theorists, lead to facilitating approach behaviors that reward individuals to enjoy engaging in the surrounding environment and partake in activities [5]. Fredrickson also recognized that these emotions can facilitate creativity, openness to change, and development of resources [6]. Although she pointed out that the feeling of positivity caused by positive emotions are always experienced briefly, they can always create beneficial effects with longevity. This implicates that momentary openness is created to new thoughts and behaviors that can become long-term resources.

Consistent with the features and status of positive emotions in positive psychology, scholars who are proponents of Seligman, further proposed the Broaden-and-build theory. This theory is predicated on the proposition that positive emotions are capable of broadening cognition and attention. Empirical evidence affirming this statement obtains from studies that recruit the paradigm of global-local visual processing to evaluate biases in attentional focus. It was found that positive states, including optimism and subjective well-being, instigate global biases keeping abreast with broadened attention, whereas negative states such as depression and agitation, predict global biases conforming to narrowed attention [7-8]. Other experiments have also reported that positive emotions generate flexible and creative thinking pattern [9]. In other words, these researches concerning the specific functions attributed to positive emotions implicates that despite creating momentary openness to new thoughts and behaviours, positive emotions can become long-term resources, which in turn create more positive emotions, and thereby expedite an escalating growth cycle.

Therefore, compared to conventional thoughts on positive emotions that only indicates feeling good in the present, the upward-spiral effect from the broaden-and-build theory indicates that one positive emotion will initiate more positive emotions in other subsequent events, and thereby propagate these positive meanings across his or her whole life.

2.1. PERMA-model

According to this theory, PERMA model represents the acronym of five elements (PERMA) which is capable of determining the notion of “Eudaimonia” (a good life). These elements are: Positive emotions (P), Engagement and Flow (E), Positive relationships (R), Meaning (M), and Accomplishment (A). Central to this theory is based on the assumption that the authentic Eudaimonia supersedes the traditional belief of mere pleasure by involving more values such as meaningfulness and accomplishment.

To distinguish PERMA model from traditional view of measuring well-being, Seligman alleged that eudemonic well-being portrays an individual’s optimal functioning from multiple domains,

whereas previous scales on assessing well-being only emphasize the moment of feeling hedonically good [10]. Therefore, an imperative implication of this model is that well-being should be measured along multiple dimensions, since the authenticity of having well-being relies on the satisfaction with variant requirements.

Given that these findings from previous studies indicated a promising positive psychology approach as a valid treatment for psychological problems, we can thus suggest that positive psychology be applied to other severe mental health conditions, including the current acute mental distress prevailing amongst University students in response to COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the following section will majorly address how positive psychology approach is applied into daily and clinical practice.

3. Applications and Clinical Implications from Positive Psychology Approach

Based on the empirical evidence from these previous studies, we will majorly address applications and clinical implications from positive psychology in terms of two respects, namely, applications of positive psychology in counselling psychology and the effect of positive psychology on mental health care.

3.1. Applications of Positive Psychology in Counselling Psychology

Counselling psychology service to enhance clients' mental strengths and optimize their healthy functioning in educational and vocational settings [11]. To fulfill this purpose, it integrated the disciplines of vocational guidance, advances in psychometrics and psychological testing and the growth of psychotherapy, meanwhile transiting them into the content of today's counselling psychology [12]. For now, improving strengths, assets, and potentialities for clients regardless of the degree of psychopathology has thus gradually become a distinctive attribute and unifying theme for counselling psychologists [13-14]. Since the "mission statement" of counselling psychology accentuates human strengths and optimal functioning, this may be consistent with the underpinnings of positive psychology. However, given that positive psychology was not characterised as an academic branch under the category of psychological science until the year 2000, counselling psychology profession only started to recognize the fact of adopting positive psychology construct or models in their intervention at the beginning of 21st century [15]. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that past scholarship of counselling psychology saw a significant relationship with positive psychology due to both sharing common goals of achieving to live a better life [16]. A content analysis conducted by Lopez et al [17], concluded that 29% of studies in the theme of counselling psychology journals were positive focused, because they are closely associated with at least one construct of positive psychology over the course of past five decades. Besides, Magyar-Moe et al also weighed the role of positive psychology in the field of counselling psychology by issuing a survey to 480 qualified counselling psychologists [18]. The results indicated that 77% participants reported embedding positive psychology models into vocational assessment, along with 72% participants who endorsed the applications of positive psychology concepts into mental health counselling.

In addition to this general acceptance to positive psychology seen in the working basis amongst counselling psychologists, previous literatures have provided productive findings regarding the application of positive psychology at both individual and social levels. A number of studies have proven the effectiveness of collaboration of positive psychology and counselling psychology on individuals' career development [19-20]. When offering advice on vocational development, the counselling psychologists mainly discuss how people could flourish themselves through pursuing the meaning and purpose in the workplace, which can be identified as intertwined values between positive psychology and counselling psychology. Furthermore, positive psychology also plays a vital

role in sustainable population promotion at a societal level. Previous research indicated that a society where replacement levels substantially outnumber its birth rates, will be under the risk of critical economic and social consequences [21]. Counselling services offered by bureaus in many countries, however, has successfully promoted their population policy such as encouraging two-child families, to many married couples, by adopting the conceptualization of positive psychology's approach [22]. Basic constructs of positive psychology's perspective like strengthening positive thinking and stressing focus on the future, have been proved to significantly boost young people's awareness regarding fertility decisions.

3.2. The Effect of Positive Psychology on Mental Health Care

Positive emotions were proven to be a facilitator of coping with stressful events. Previous study has revealed that people who develop positive emotions during bereavement, were better at tackling their mental distress while focusing on long-term plans and goals, whereas people with negative emotions were inclined to obtain depressive symptoms in the face of their family member's death [23]. Besides, aligned with the aforementioned Fredrickson's broaden-build theory, the utilization of positive emotions into the process of psychotherapy is suggested to create long-term beneficial changes to people's well-being in terms of strengths and optimal-functioning [24].

As such, considering that positive emotions served as an imperative domain in positive psychology, founders of this scientific subject, Seligman along with his colleagues developed a specific intervention for treating patients with mental difficulties, namely, positive psychotherapy (PPT) [25]. In contrast to traditional psychotherapy for mental health issues, Seligman et al argued that PPT provides resilience by encouraging people to increase positive emotions, alongside the discovery of engagement and meaning in life rather than solely targeting at symptoms. Aligned with this proposal, preliminary experiments on PPT soon proved that PPT has shown its significant impacts on mitigating patients' depressive symptoms [25]. Later studies also reported that acute stress response, which cause subsequent psychological distress, was significantly relieved among participants receiving PPT in comparison with the control group without intervention [3].

In summary, positive psychology has shown a great compliance with other psychological interventions in terms of treating people with mental health issues in both daily and clinical milieus. In addition to this, the application of both theories and models of positive psychology are evidently proven to be valid for assessing mental health status. As a consequence, we can be cautiously optimistic about the proposal of adopting and integrating positive psychology into helping university students against their stress response caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Positive Psychology Interventions for Supporting University Students in Respect of Combating Covid-19 Pandemic

As in-class teaching is suspended in most places where the COVID-19 pandemic is pervasive, university scholars Zhai and Du have made concrete suggestions regarding contingent communication strategies between the school and students [26]. These strategies consist of switching student advising service to virtual meeting, seeking alternative assignments or tasks for students that is compatible with work-from-home basis, and giving career development suggestions through the form of booked online meeting. The suggestions delivered by Zhai and Du, although productive and meaningful, however, neglect the point of how to carry out online psychological intervention for students who are being disconnected from social life [26]. It is not uncommon that many tertiary institutions have established identical policies that is consistent with Zhai and Du's suggestions, but meanwhile showing ignorance for psychological well-being among university students who are in desperate need for mental health aid.

While it is almost impossible to find empirical evidence on deciding which psychotherapy is a best fit for combating psychological issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, World health organization (WHO) offered a valid model namely Psychological First Aid (PFA). PFA refers to a “humane, supportive response to a fellow human being who is suffering and who may need support” [27]. Aligned with the official guidance of PFA, almost everyone can implement this model simply by communicating with the person amid a time of fear or uncertainly to a ruthless disease. Retrospective data collections concerning the effectiveness of PFA model has shown a good prognosis on preventing young adults who were experiencing mental distress, from severer mental diseases, such as depression and anxiety, amid SARS and H1N1 pandemics. Therefore, it can be suggested that PFA should be prioritized as the front-line psychological intervention for treating mental distress elicited by the COVID19-Pandemic.

However, there are some limitations within PFA model, as it is a temporary solution during an emergent event. The model is not a professional enough to be adopted into clinical settings, indicating that health professions should be aware of providing additional psychotherapy to guarantee long-term outcome. Positive psychology, the psychological approach focusing on improving general well-being, should thus be taken into consideration. In line with the aforementioned merits and clinical applications of positive psychology from above sections, it is blatant that psychotherapies originated from positive psychology approach such as PPT, could be served as an alternative or at least an additional component within the process of psychological intervention.

With reference to the unique advances of positive psychology approach, “broaden-and-build” theory of positive emotions describes that gaining emotions with positive valence boosts the likelihood of inducing more positive emotions in the future which generally resembles upward spiral towards well-being [28]. In this regard, this offers a clinical implication which could result in a long-lasting outcome to reduce the enduring stress caused by COVID-19 pandemic if combined with PFA. Previous studies have shown that PPT diminishes stress meanwhile leading to promoted positive affect, vitality and self-esteem among office staff in the face of working pressure [29-30]. Hence, due to the long-term effectiveness of positive psychological interventions and the convenience of PFA, it is of great expectation to discover the capacity of the combination between PPT and PFA in respect to countering mental distress arisen from COVID-19. Furthermore, considering that all forms of interventions must be carried out via online meeting during this special time, another superiority of positive psychology over traditional psychological treatments is unearthed. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), for example, a traditional approach merely focuses on eliminating the symptoms by systematically exposed to negative stimulus, thereby breaking the vicious cycle of avoidant behavior [31]. However, during the pandemic, as it is impossible to implement face-to-face CBT sessions, the effectiveness of online counselling is not guaranteed. According to treatment process of CBT, students may feel more stressed out when being guided to the desensitization phase by making them exposed to negative event without promptly presenting aids in a professional environment. In contrast, positive psychotherapy has shown its outstanding performance when it is delivered online. A study revealed that positive psychotherapy exercise administrated on a web significantly relieved depressive symptoms among university students for at least 6 months, compared with the control group which receive placebo interventions [25]. In general, in comparison with CBT, positive psychology may be more realistic and suitable to be delivered as an alternative via online meeting. In addition, positive psychotherapy can be carried out in a self-help basis, whereas there are no sufficient medical resources to organize series of traditional psychotherapy sessions for university students with a huge population, because major healthcare resources has been diverted to front-line treatment for saving lives of people who contract COVID-19. In this respect, if one follow-up treatment session after the session of exposure, is not adequately applied to students in time, students might get confusion with regards to eliminating residual negative thoughts. Positive psychology

interventions, instead, attempt to teach people the methods of instigating positive emotions that lead to eudemonic life in a lifetime scale [10]. This model not only changes focal points from the negative experience to pleasant moments, but it also promotes people to engage in meaningful activities that is beneficial to developing the individuals' potential by providing them with self-help guidance [32]. Therefore, it can be inferred that positive psychology approach strengthens university students' autonomy of generating positive emotions to increase well-being, whereas traditional therapy, such as CBT, may weaken their willingness of by simply letting them run into negative memories. Finally, incorporating PPT into CBT could be another choice of maximizing the competency for treating mental distress among university students. A study of which the sample was recruited from students among 48 universities, has proven that CBT combined with positive psychology intervention significantly augmented students' subjective and eudemonic well-being that is assessed by PERMA model [33]. Based on this evidence, it implies that positive psychology can also be served as a valid complementary component within the process of other conventional treatment. In sum, although conventional intervention models such as CBT or PFA can be recruited to support teenagers, the innate drawbacks within these interventions like overly exposed to negative experience and lack of professionalism that could lead to a long-term outcome, are inevitable. Positive psychology model, nevertheless, has benefits of offsetting these flaws. This model produces the long-term outcome of improving strengths and optimal functioning, as increasing positive emotions will in turn reinforce the cognition with positive valence into prospective events.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review has mainly discussed previous articles on the subject of positive psychology along with its efficacy for treating psychological problems. Moreover, this review has made a general evaluation on how university students respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is based on previous studies that were carried out in diverse cultural backgrounds. Finally, this review also sheds a light on the possibility of adopting such approach as a promising intervention or complementary methods for treating mental health problems in University population in the face of current COVID-19 pandemic.

To summarise implications of this review for future research, it is conspicuous that myriad number of university students will be susceptible to psychological problems when confronted with COVID-19 pandemic, and the aftermath of these issues might be draconian. To support mental health for these students, espousing interventions from the perspective of positive psychology can be considered as an effective option. However, since we have scant research examining the efficacy of positive psychology intervention on mitigating the mental health problems due to COVID-19 pandemic, there must be sufficient prospective studies addressing the feasibility of accepting positive psychology as an effective treatment for students receiving tertiary education. Not only will this facilitate the understanding for supporting mental health in clinical milieus, but it will also provide significant implications with regard to building up strength and optimal functioning in the general population of university students.

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