

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Among College Students: A Critical Review

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ABSTRACT

College students face academic pressure, changing relationships, career uncertainty, financial concerns, and the developmental task of becoming autonomous adults. Emotional intelligence has therefore attracted attention as a psychological resource that may help students recognize emotions, regulate distress, use feelings constructively, and maintain supportive relationships. This review examines the conceptual and empirical relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being among college students. It distinguishes ability, trait, and mixed models of emotional intelligence; explains major approaches to psychological well-being; and integrates research on emotion regulation, coping, social support, resilience, academic adjustment, and cultural context. The literature generally indicates a positive association between emotional intelligence and well-being, although causal interpretation is limited by self-report measures, cross-sectional designs, conceptual overlap, and cultural variation. The paper argues that emotional intelligence should not be treated as a universal remedy or as a substitute for structural and clinical support. Carefully designed, culturally responsive interventions may nevertheless strengthen students' emotional awareness and regulation when embedded within broader campus mental-health systems.

KEYWORDS: *emotional intelligence; psychological well-being; college students; emotion regulation; resilience; mental health*

1. INTRODUCTION

The transition to college is a period of opportunity as well as vulnerability. Students encounter new academic expectations, social networks, living arrangements, and decisions about identity and vocation. These demands do not automatically produce psychological difficulty, but they can intensify stress when personal resources and institutional support are insufficient. Psychological well-being in this context is more than the absence of

disorder. It includes positive functioning, purposeful engagement, self-acceptance, constructive relationships, and the ability to respond flexibly to changing circumstances.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been proposed as one resource relevant to such adaptation. In its broadest sense, EI concerns how people perceive, understand, use, and manage emotion in themselves and others. Students who can identify anxiety accurately may select more effective coping strategies; those who understand interpersonal signals may seek or provide support more successfully; and those who regulate frustration may persist in demanding academic tasks. These possibilities have encouraged research and campus programmes focused on emotional skills.

However, the literature also contains important conceptual and methodological disagreements. EI is variously defined as a cognitive ability, a collection of personality-linked self-perceptions, or a broad mixture of social and motivational competencies. Psychological well-being is likewise measured through life satisfaction, positive affect, flourishing, or multidimensional functioning. This review addresses three questions: How are EI and well-being conceptualized? Through which psychological processes might they be connected? What limits current evidence and what should guide responsible application in higher education? The central argument is that EI is a meaningful but context-dependent correlate of student well-being, best understood within an ecological framework that includes personality, relationships, culture, resources, and institutional conditions.

2. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The modern scientific discussion of EI was advanced by Salovey and Mayer (1990), who described it as the capacity to monitor and discriminate emotions and to use emotional information in thought and action. Their later ability model organizes EI into four related branches: perceiving emotion, using emotion to facilitate thinking, understanding emotional meanings and transitions, and regulating emotion to promote growth (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). In this approach, EI is treated as a form of intelligence and is ideally assessed through performance tasks with answers evaluated by consensus or expert criteria.

Trait models define EI differently. Trait emotional intelligence refers to emotion-related self-perceptions located within personality hierarchies (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). Measures typically ask individuals to report how well they believe they understand or regulate emotions. Such scores can predict important outcomes, but they reflect perceived dispositions rather than maximum emotional performance. Mixed models, popularized in professional and educational settings, combine emotional abilities with motivation, empathy, optimism, social skills, and other competencies. Their practical appeal is considerable, yet broad definitions may overlap with established personality traits and make it difficult to identify what is uniquely emotional intelligence.

The distinction among models matters because measures carrying the same label may assess different constructs. Ability tests, self-report trait scales, and competency inventories should not be treated as interchangeable. A student may possess knowledge about effective regulation but underestimate that ability, while another may express high confidence without applying effective strategies under pressure. Sound research must therefore align its definition, instrument, and conclusions.

3. UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Psychological well-being can be approached through hedonic and eudaimonic traditions. Hedonic well-being emphasizes positive affect, reduced negative affect, and satisfaction with life. Diener and colleagues' work on subjective well-being illustrates this perspective. The eudaimonic tradition asks whether a person is functioning well and living in accordance with valued purposes. Ryff's model identifies self-acceptance, positive relations, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth as central dimensions (Ryff, 1989).

These perspectives overlap but are not identical. A student may experience temporary stress while pursuing a meaningful goal and still display strong purpose and growth. Conversely, pleasant emotion alone does not establish autonomy or effective functioning. Contemporary positive psychology also uses the concept of flourishing to integrate emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. For student research, the choice of measure should follow the question. Studies of daily mood may require affect measures, whereas evaluations of developmental adjustment may benefit from multidimensional well-being scales.

Well-being is also socially situated. Financial strain, discrimination, unsafe environments, family obligations, disability, and limited access to services can affect mental health regardless of individual skill. An exclusive focus on personal emotional competence risks implying that distressed students are deficient. A balanced account treats EI as one possible protective resource operating within environmental opportunities and constraints.

4. PATHWAYS CONNECTING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND WELL-BEING

Emotion regulation is the most direct pathway. Gross (1998) distinguishes strategies used before an emotional response is fully generated from those applied after it develops. Reappraisal—changing the interpretation of a situation—often has more adaptive consequences than habitual suppression, although the usefulness of any strategy depends on context. Students with better emotional knowledge may identify the source and intensity of feelings, select a strategy suited to the situation, and revise it when it is ineffective. Regulation is therefore not the elimination of unpleasant emotion; it is flexible management in the service of goals and values.

Coping provides a second pathway. Academic setbacks can be appraised as threats, losses, or manageable challenges. Emotionally intelligent students may distinguish controllable from uncontrollable aspects of a stressor and combine problem-focused action with acceptance or support seeking. This can reduce rumination and helpless avoidance. EI may also contribute to resilience—not as invulnerability, but as the capacity to recover or adapt through dynamic interaction among individual, relational, and contextual resources.

A third pathway is interpersonal functioning. Accurate perception of emotion can support empathy, conflict resolution, and sensitive communication. Supportive relationships, in turn, provide belonging and practical assistance and can buffer stress. Nevertheless, emotional accuracy does not guarantee prosocial behaviour. Knowledge of another person's emotions may be used manipulatively, and excessive attention to emotional cues may burden individuals in high-conflict settings. Ethical orientation and relationship quality remain essential.

Academic self-regulation offers a fourth pathway. Anxiety, boredom, hope, pride, and frustration influence attention, motivation, and persistence. Students who tolerate short-term discomfort and regulate performance anxiety may engage more consistently with learning. Yet academic success should not be used as a complete proxy for well-being. High achievement can coexist with exhaustion, perfectionism, or loneliness; healthy educational practice must protect both learning and humane functioning.

5. EVIDENCE FROM RESEARCH WITH STUDENTS

Across student samples, EI is commonly associated with life satisfaction, positive affect, social adjustment, resilience, and lower perceived stress. Meta-analytic work has also connected EI with mental and physical health outcomes, although effect sizes vary according to model and measurement method (Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010). Self-report EI measures often show stronger relationships with self-reported well-being than ability measures do. Part of this difference may reflect shared method variance and conceptual overlap with personality and affective self-evaluation.

Research on academic adjustment suggests that EI may predict performance or retention indirectly through coping, conscientious behaviour, and relationship management. The effects are generally not large enough to justify replacing cognitive ability, prior attainment, socioeconomic conditions, or quality of teaching. EI is better viewed as a complementary factor. Students with similar academic skills may respond differently to feedback, conflict, or uncertainty because they vary in emotional awareness and regulation, but opportunities and constraints still matter.

Longitudinal and intervention studies provide stronger evidence than one-time correlations, yet they remain fewer in number. Some programmes report gains in emotional skills, social functioning, or well-being, particularly when instruction includes practice, reflection, feedback, and application to real situations. Results are less persuasive when interventions rely on inspirational lectures, use poorly validated scales, or assess outcomes immediately after training. Durable change requires repeated practice and supportive environments.

6. GENDER, CULTURE, AND THE INDIAN COLLEGE CONTEXT

Gender differences in EI and well-being are frequently reported but should be interpreted cautiously. Women may score higher on some emotion-perception or empathy measures, while men may report greater confidence on selected self-report dimensions. Such patterns can reflect socialization, norms governing emotional expression, measurement bias, and differences within gender groups. Gender should not be treated as a fixed psychological explanation. For women students, safety, mobility, family expectations, caregiving responsibilities, and unequal freedom can shape well-being in ways that individual EI cannot neutralize.

Culture influences how emotion is valued, communicated, and regulated. Models developed in individualistic settings may emphasize autonomy and direct expression, whereas relational obligations and interdependence can be central in many Indian contexts. Silence, restraint, or family consultation may be adaptive in one situation and harmful in another. Instruments therefore require linguistic and cultural validation rather than simple administration in English. Researchers should examine measurement equivalence and include students from diverse regions, languages, castes, classes, religions, and institutional types.

Indian colleges also differ greatly in counselling resources, student-teacher ratios, residential arrangements, and digital access. A campus programme that succeeds in a well-resourced urban institution may not transfer unchanged to a rural or first-generation student population. Locally grounded needs assessment, confidential referral pathways, and participation by students are necessary for meaningful intervention.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

EI-oriented education can be useful when it is developmental rather than judgmental. Students may benefit from learning a vocabulary for emotion, recognizing bodily and cognitive signals, distinguishing thoughts from feelings, practising reappraisal and problem solving, communicating boundaries, and seeking help appropriately. Experiential methods—guided reflection, role play, case discussion, peer activities, and feedback—are more suitable than presenting EI as a list of slogans.

Such programmes should form one layer of a broader mental-health strategy. Faculty and staff need clear procedures for responding to distress; counselling services require privacy and adequate staffing; and students must know how to access urgent support. EI workshops are not treatment for depression, trauma, severe anxiety, self-harm risk, or other clinical concerns. Screening and referral should be conducted by qualified professionals with informed consent and careful data protection.

Evaluation should use validated measures, pre-specified outcomes, follow-up assessment, and where feasible comparison groups. Researchers should report attrition and adverse outcomes, not only statistically significant improvements. Multiple indicators—including well-being, coping, belonging, help-seeking, and qualitative feedback—can reveal whether an intervention is genuinely useful and acceptable.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The existing literature is limited by heavy reliance on cross-sectional self-report designs. Correlation does not show whether EI produces well-being, whether psychologically healthy students evaluate their emotional capacities more positively, or whether both are influenced by personality and supportive environments. Future studies should use longitudinal, experimental, behavioural, and multi-informant methods. They should distinguish ability EI from trait EI and test mechanisms such as regulation flexibility, coping, and social support rather than assuming a direct effect.

More evidence is needed from culturally diverse Indian samples and from government, rural, vocational, and women's colleges. Researchers should investigate how language, caste, disability, economic insecurity, and first-generation status shape emotional experience. Future work should also examine digital stress, online relationships, climate anxiety, and the transition from college to employment. Open materials, transparent analyses, replication, and culturally validated instruments would strengthen confidence in findings.

9. CONCLUSION

Emotional intelligence offers a useful framework for understanding how college students process emotional information and navigate academic and interpersonal demands. The literature generally supports a positive association between EI and psychological well-being through emotion regulation, coping, resilience, social support, and academic adjustment. However, the strength and meaning of this association depend on definitions, measures, culture, personality, and social conditions.

Responsible application requires modest claims. EI is neither a fixed gift nor a cure for distress, and emotional training cannot compensate for unsafe, discriminatory, or under-resourced institutions. When programmes are evidence-informed, culturally responsive, carefully evaluated, and connected to professional mental-health

services, they can contribute to healthier learning environments. The most productive goal is not constant positivity, but greater emotional clarity, flexibility, ethical relationships, and access to support.

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