



EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING Among Women in Higher Education: A Conceptual Review

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ABSTRACT

Emotional intelligence and psychological well-being are central to students' capacity to learn, form relationships and respond constructively to stress. Women in higher education often encounter a distinctive combination of academic demands, changing family expectations, identity development, financial pressures, gendered norms and uncertainty about employment. This conceptual review examines how emotional intelligence may contribute to psychological well-being among women college students. It synthesizes ability-based and mixed models of emotional intelligence with hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to well-being. The review proposes that accurate emotional perception, regulation, empathy and adaptive use of emotion can support self-acceptance, autonomy, positive relationships, purpose and environmental mastery. At the same time, emotional competencies do not eliminate structural stressors, and expectations that women should constantly manage the emotions of others may themselves become burdensome. The paper therefore advances a contextual model in which emotional intelligence operates through coping, social support, self-efficacy and help-seeking, while its effects are moderated by socioeconomic conditions, institutional climate, discrimination and access to mental-health services. It concludes that colleges should integrate evidence-based emotional learning with counselling, mentoring and gender-sensitive institutional reform rather than treating well-being as an individual responsibility alone.

KEYWORDS: emotional intelligence; psychological well-being; women students; higher education; coping; resilience

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education is a period of substantial psychological transition. Students negotiate greater independence, new social networks, academic evaluation and decisions about work and intimate relationships. For many women, these developmental tasks occur alongside gendered expectations concerning safety, family duty, achievement

and emotional conduct. Stress is therefore produced not only by individual vulnerability but also by the environments in which students study and live. A psychologically informed account must consider both personal capacities and institutional conditions.

Emotional intelligence (EI) broadly concerns the perception, understanding, use and regulation of emotion. Psychological well-being (PWB) concerns more than the absence of distress; it includes positive functioning, meaningful relationships, autonomy and purpose. Their relationship has attracted attention because emotional information influences appraisal, coping, communication and decision-making. This paper reviews the major concepts, explanatory mechanisms and educational implications of this relationship, with particular attention to women in higher education.

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHOD

The objectives are to clarify the principal models of EI and PWB; explain pathways connecting them; identify contextual influences relevant to women students; and propose institutional applications and research priorities. The paper is a narrative conceptual review. It integrates foundational theories and representative empirical syntheses rather than presenting original participant data. This distinction is important: the conclusions are theoretical and evidence-informed, not claims from a new experiment.

3. UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

3.1 Ability model

Mayer, Salovey and Caruso conceptualize EI as a set of mental abilities involving four related branches: perceiving emotion, using emotion to facilitate thought, understanding emotional meanings and regulating emotion. The ability approach treats emotional problem-solving as a form of intelligence and generally favours performance-based assessment. Its strength lies in distinguishing actual capacity from a person's self-description. Its challenges include measurement complexity and debate about how best to score emotionally adaptive answers.

3.2 Mixed and trait approaches

Mixed models combine emotional abilities with motivation, social skills and personality-related competencies. Goleman's popular formulation emphasizes self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. Trait emotional intelligence, developed within personality psychology, concerns typical emotional self-perceptions and is commonly assessed through self-report. These approaches are useful in educational settings, but they should not be treated as interchangeable. An ability test, a competency inventory and a trait questionnaire may measure overlapping yet distinct constructs.

3.3 Core processes

Four processes are especially relevant to student life. First, emotional awareness helps a learner differentiate anxiety, disappointment, anger and fatigue instead of experiencing undivided distress. Second, emotional understanding supports recognition of causes, likely trajectories and mixed feelings. Third, regulation allows modification of attention, interpretation or behaviour without demanding emotional suppression. Fourth, empathy and communication help students seek support, handle disagreement and participate in groups. Adaptive

regulation is flexible: reappraisal may be useful in one situation, direct problem-solving in another, and acceptance or disengagement in a third.

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Two broad traditions organize well-being research. The hedonic tradition emphasizes life satisfaction and the balance of pleasant and unpleasant affect. The eudaimonic tradition emphasizes positive functioning and realization of human capacities. Ryff's model identifies six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth. These dimensions are particularly useful in higher education because student well-being involves identity and competence as well as momentary happiness.

Well-being and mental disorder are related but not identical. A person may have few clinical symptoms yet feel purposeless or disconnected; conversely, a person managing a psychological disorder may experience meaningful relationships and growth. This two-continuum understanding discourages institutions from defining success only as the absence of crisis. Prevention, treatment and promotion of positive functioning are complementary tasks.

5. THEORETICAL LINK BETWEEN EI AND PWB

Emotions provide information about goals, relationships and perceived threats. Students who can identify and interpret this information may appraise stressful events more accurately. Regulation can reduce rumination, protect concentration and support goal-directed action. Emotional understanding can also strengthen interpersonal communication, increasing the likelihood of receiving appropriate social support. These pathways suggest that EI may influence well-being indirectly through coping quality, relationship security, academic self-efficacy and help-seeking.

6. WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE

Women students are not a uniform group. Experiences vary by caste, class, religion, disability, sexuality, rural or urban origin, language, marital status and institutional setting. An intersectional perspective asks how these positions combine to shape opportunity and stress. For example, a first-generation rural student living away from home may encounter language insecurity and financial strain, while another may face restricted mobility, caregiving obligations or harassment. Emotional competencies may help in navigating such situations, but they cannot substitute for safety, resources and fair treatment.

6.1 Academic and role-related stress

Competitive assessment, high expectations and fear of failure can generate worry and self-criticism. Some women additionally negotiate pressure to excel while remaining compliant with traditional roles. Role overload may arise when study is combined with paid work, household labour or care responsibilities. Emotion differentiation and cognitive reappraisal can reduce unproductive rumination, while planning and assertive communication may improve environmental mastery. However, encouraging adaptation without reducing unreasonable demands risks normalizing inequity.

6.2 Relationships, belonging and social support

Peer belonging and supportive faculty relationships protect well-being. Emotional perception can help students recognize when a friend needs support, while regulation assists conflict resolution. Yet high empathy without boundaries may lead to emotional overextension, particularly where women are expected to perform unpaid emotional labour. Healthy EI therefore includes boundary-setting, the ability to tolerate disapproval and recognition that another person's emotion is not always one's responsibility.

6.3 Safety, discrimination and stigma

Sexual harassment, gender bias and fear for physical safety can undermine trust, attendance and psychological security. Distress in such contexts should not be mislabelled as deficient emotional regulation. Institutional grievance mechanisms, prevention policies and accountable leadership are necessary. Similarly, stigma surrounding counselling may delay help-seeking. Emotionally literate campuses normalize support while maintaining confidentiality and clear referral pathways.

7. MECHANISMS CONNECTING EI WITH WELL-BEING

Coping is a central mediator. Emotionally informed appraisal may distinguish controllable problems from conditions requiring acceptance, advocacy or external help. Reappraisal can alter the meaning assigned to an event, whereas suppression may reduce outward expression without resolving physiological or cognitive strain. Research generally associates flexible, context-sensitive regulation with healthier outcomes than rigid dependence on one strategy.

Self-efficacy and agency provide a second pathway. Understanding a difficult emotional response can prevent students from interpreting distress as evidence of personal incapacity. Small successful actions then restore a sense of control. Social support provides a third pathway: clear expression and empathic listening may improve the quality of assistance received. A fourth pathway is reduced perseverative thinking. Regulation strategies that interrupt rumination can protect sleep, attention and mood.

8. POTENTIAL RISKS IN THE EI DISCOURSE

EI is sometimes presented as a universal solution or a fixed score. Both positions are misleading. Emotional skills are learnable but culturally expressed; a behaviour judged assertive in one setting may be viewed differently in another. Self-report measures can reflect confidence and social desirability as much as skill. Moreover, emotional knowledge can be used manipulatively. Ethical EI education must join competence with respect, consent and responsibility.

9. EDUCATIONAL APPLICATIONS

9.1 Curriculum-integrated learning

Colleges can embed emotional learning within orientation, tutorials and life-skills courses. Useful content includes emotion vocabulary, stress appraisal, evidence-based regulation, assertive communication, conflict management, digital well-being and recognition of warning signs. Learning should be experiential but not

coercively confessional. Case analysis, reflective writing, role play and guided problem-solving permit practice while respecting privacy.

9.2 Counselling and stepped support

Universal well-being education should connect with professional services. A stepped system may include self-help information, peer support, brief consultation, counselling and referral for specialized care. EI workshops are not treatment for severe depression, trauma, self-harm risk or other clinical concerns. Facilitators require clear protocols for confidentiality, safeguarding and urgent referral. Services should be accessible in language, location, timing and cost.

9.3 Mentoring and peer networks

Mentoring can strengthen belonging and translate emotional insight into academic action. Faculty mentors can help students interpret feedback, plan workloads and locate services. Carefully trained peer supporters may reduce isolation and stigma, but they should not be expected to function as therapists. Supervision, role limits and referral procedures protect both helpers and students seeking support.

9.4 Institutional climate

A healthy institution evaluates timetabling, assessment concentration, hostel safety, discrimination, accessibility and the responsiveness of grievance systems. Climate surveys and confidential feedback can reveal patterns not visible through individual counselling data. Faculty development should address supportive communication, reasonable flexibility and recognition of distress without encouraging staff to diagnose students.

10. A CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework begins with emotional competencies: perception, understanding, regulation and communication. These competencies influence coping flexibility, social support, self-efficacy, academic engagement and help-seeking. The resulting outcomes include affect balance, life satisfaction, self-acceptance, positive relations, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose and growth. The pathway is shaped by moderators such as family support, economic security, discrimination, safety, workload, digital environments and service availability.

The model predicts neither a simple nor universal effect. Strong regulation may be most beneficial when students have realistic opportunities to act. In an unsafe or discriminatory setting, the appropriate outcome of emotional awareness may be protest, withdrawal or formal complaint rather than calm accommodation. The model thus integrates individual development with ecological responsibility.

11. ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

Assessment should match the definition adopted. Ability-based EI measures, trait measures and competency scales should not be substituted without justification. Well-being measurement should include positive-functioning indicators and validated distress screening where ethically appropriate. Programme evaluation may combine pre- and post-assessment, attendance, qualitative feedback, service uptake and retention indicators. Researchers must plan referral procedures when assessments reveal serious distress.

Evaluation should also test equity. Average improvement can conceal groups for whom a programme is inaccessible or ineffective. Data should therefore be examined, with adequate safeguards and sample sizes, across relevant social and educational categories. Participation must be voluntary, informed and confidential; scores should not be used to label students or determine academic opportunity.

12. RESEARCH EVIDENCE AND INTERPRETATION

A substantial body of correlational research reports positive associations between emotional intelligence and indicators of well-being, and meta-analytic work links EI with mental and physical health. However, effect sizes vary by model, measure and sample. Self-report EI and self-report well-being may correlate partly because of shared method and overlap with personality. Ability measures often show different patterns. Correlation also does not establish that EI causes well-being; healthier individuals may find emotional regulation easier, and supportive environments may strengthen both.

Intervention research suggests that emotional competencies can be developed, but programme quality and durability differ. Stronger studies use comparison groups, validated measures, follow-up assessment and transparent reporting. Research specifically focused on women in diverse Indian higher-education contexts remains important because findings from one cultural or institutional setting may not transfer directly to another.

13. IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIAN COLLEGES

Indian higher education contains considerable diversity in language, family expectations, residential arrangements and access to professional care. A feasible campus strategy can begin with needs assessment and mapping of existing resources. Colleges may establish a multidisciplinary well-being committee, train designated staff in psychological first response, maintain referral links with qualified professionals and provide multilingual information. Programmes should recognize examination cycles and the concerns of first-generation, rural, economically disadvantaged and marginalized students.

Women's colleges may offer valuable spaces for leadership, peer solidarity and focused discussion of gendered experience. Their programmes should nevertheless avoid assuming that all women have the same needs. Student participation in design improves relevance. Anonymous feedback, accessible grievance systems and visible administrative follow-through build trust more effectively than awareness events alone.

14. RECOMMENDATIONS

Adopt a clearly defined, evidence-based model of emotional intelligence and distinguish education from clinical treatment.

Integrate short, developmentally appropriate emotional-skills modules into orientation and academic support. Strengthen confidential counselling, crisis referral and multilingual access rather than relying solely on workshops.

Train peer mentors and faculty with explicit role boundaries, supervision and safeguarding procedures.

Address structural determinants of well-being, including harassment, discrimination, workload, accessibility and financial stress.

Evaluate outcomes with validated measures, qualitative feedback, follow-up and equity-sensitive analysis.

15. FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should use longitudinal and experimental designs to clarify direction of influence. Multi-method assessment could combine ability tasks, self-report, behavioural observations and qualitative interviews. Research should examine which regulatory strategies work for whom, in which contexts and at what cost. Intersectional samples are necessary to understand variation among women students. Studies should also evaluate institution-level changes, not only individual training, and should report possible harms, non-response and implementation barriers.

16. DISCUSSION

Emotional intelligence offers a useful framework for understanding how students process affective information, cope with demands and build relationships. Its relevance to psychological well-being is theoretically plausible and supported by a broad empirical literature. For women in higher education, emotional awareness and flexible regulation can support autonomy, belonging, academic persistence and purposeful development. Yet the meaning and value of these capacities depend upon context. Emotional adaptation is not an adequate answer to discrimination, insecurity or excessive demands.

The most defensible educational approach is therefore integrative. It treats emotional competence as one resource within a larger ecology that includes supportive relationships, professional care, material security, inclusive teaching and accountable institutions. Such an approach avoids both individual blame and institutional passivity. It also recognizes students as active participants who can shape the environments in which they learn.

17. CONCLUSION

Emotional intelligence can contribute to psychological well-being by improving emotional clarity, coping flexibility, communication, self-efficacy and help-seeking. These pathways may strengthen self-acceptance, positive relations, autonomy, mastery, purpose and growth. Nevertheless, EI should neither be treated as a fixed measure of personal worth nor promoted as a substitute for structural reform and mental-health care. Colleges serving women can achieve the greatest benefit by combining ethical emotional-skills education with mentoring, accessible counselling, safe campuses and responsive grievance systems. Future research should use culturally sensitive, longitudinal and multi-method designs to establish when interventions are effective and how benefits can be sustained equitably.

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