

Teaching Coping: Life Skills as a Catalyst for Youth Mental Health Resilience

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Abstract

In today's world, mental health challenges among youth have become increasingly common due to academic pressure, social expectations, and emotional upheavals. Young individuals often struggle with stress, anxiety, and depression, which can hinder their overall development and performance. While schools and colleges primarily focus on academic achievements, the necessity of equipping students with essential life skills is becoming evident. This research explores how structured group discussions, when focused on key life skills, can act as powerful tools to foster emotional resilience and mental well-being among college students. Drawing from the World Health Organization's (WHO) framework on life skills, the study implements a group discussion model that addresses competencies like emotional regulation, problem-solving, self-awareness, and effective communication. The findings reveal that students participating in these discussions not only develop stronger interpersonal relationships but also gain better control over their emotions and actions. By integrating such discussions into mainstream education, institutions can help students manage daily stressors and prepare for life beyond academics.

Key Words: Life Skills Education, Youth Mental Health, Emotional Resilience, Adolescent Development, Resilience Training.

Introduction

Mental health has emerged as one of the most pressing issues affecting today's youth. With increasing academic burdens, changing social dynamics, and post-pandemic isolation, students face challenges that affect both their academic performance and emotional balance. Colleges and universities, though primarily academic in orientation, are in a unique position to influence the emotional and social development of young adults. Life Skills Education (LSE) bridges this gap by promoting competencies that help individuals manage emotions, build relationships, and make informed decisions. Structured group discussions offer an interactive platform to deliver these skills in a relatable and practical manner. They encourage expression, listening, empathy, and reflective thinking, all of which are crucial for mental health. This paper investigates how such discussions can be effectively incorporated into college systems to enhance student resilience and foster a culture of mental wellness.

Literature Review

Over the years, numerous studies have documented the positive impact of life skills education on youth development. According to Barry et al. (2013), interactive programs focusing on life skills in schools resulted in better behavior, enhanced self-esteem, and lower levels of anxiety. Nasheeda et al. (2019) highlighted that experiential learning, including peer-to-peer methods like group discussions, leads to a deeper understanding and internalization of life skills. Furthermore, India's Adolescence Education Programme (AEP) adopted group-based formats to tackle sensitive subjects, reinforcing the value of collective learning. Despite this evidence, actual implementation remains inconsistent, with educators lacking the tools or training to effectively conduct such sessions. Nonetheless, the consensus across global and national literature supports the integration of life skills education in youth development initiatives.

Objectives and Research Questions

The primary aim of this study is to analyze the effectiveness of using group discussions as a method for delivering life skills education to improve mental resilience among college students. The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To evaluate the impact of group discussion-based life skills sessions on emotional regulation and coping mechanisms.
2. To identify perceived benefits and barriers experienced by students in such group settings.
3. To understand the perspectives of educators and facilitators regarding the integration of group discussions in college curricula.

Key research questions include: In what ways do group discussions support the development of life skills? How do students respond emotionally and socially to these interventions? What are the challenges faced by educators in implementing this model?

Methodology

A convergent mixed-methods research design was adopted for this study. The sample consisted of 300 undergraduate students aged between 17 and 21, from five different colleges in Tamil Nadu. These institutions were chosen based on their willingness to incorporate life skills activities within their curriculum. Over a period of 12 weeks, the students attended weekly group discussion sessions, each focusing on a specific life skill like empathy, decision-making, stress management, or assertiveness. The discussions were led by trained facilitators and included role-plays, storytelling, and guided questions to stimulate reflection.

Quantitative data was collected using standardized tools like the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) and a custom life skills inventory to measure student growth. Qualitative insights were gathered through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 40 students and semi-structured interviews with 10 faculty members and 5

counselors. Data analysis involved statistical tools for quantitative results and thematic coding for qualitative narratives.

Results

The findings revealed significant improvement in student resilience, with CD-RISC scores showing a mean increase of 13.2% after the intervention. Students demonstrated notable growth in areas like emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, and assertive behavior. Qualitative feedback highlighted three major themes:

1. Increased Confidence and Engagement: Many students reported feeling more comfortable expressing their opinions and managing peer interactions.
2. Strengthened Peer Support: Students appreciated the safe space to share personal experiences, which helped reduce the stigma around mental health.
3. Real-Life Application: Skills discussed during the sessions were actively applied by students in everyday situations, such as resolving conflicts or making decisions.

Educators also noted improved classroom behavior and a more collaborative learning environment.

Discussion

This study validates the effectiveness of group discussions as a method for delivering life skills education. Their participatory nature allows for peer learning, empathy-building, and critical thinking. Students not only gain knowledge but also develop practical tools to manage daily stressors. The improvement in resilience scores and the behavioral changes observed confirm that discussions centered around life skills topics can bring about measurable improvements in student mental health. However, the success of such interventions depends on trained facilitators who can manage discussions sensitively and maintain an inclusive environment. It also requires institutional commitment to schedule and prioritize these sessions regularly.

Implementation Challenges

While the benefits are clear, several barriers to effective implementation were identified:

- Lack of Trained Facilitators: Many faculty members lacked the necessary training to guide life skills-based discussions constructively.
- Academic Overload: Colleges found it difficult to allocate regular time slots for these sessions.
- Student Reluctance: Initial sessions saw low participation as students were hesitant to discuss emotional issues in a group setting.

To overcome these, institutions should invest in faculty development, encourage student peer leaders, and introduce life skills education gradually as part of a broader wellness initiative.

Policy Implications

The outcomes of this study align with the goals of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes holistic and student-centered learning. To institutionalize life skills education, the following steps are recommended:

- Include weekly group discussions as part of the formal academic timetable.
- Develop teacher training modules that equip educators with facilitation and emotional support skills.
- Create culturally and regionally relevant discussion themes that students can relate to.
- Use life skills portfolios to monitor student progress and mental wellness over time.

Conclusion

Group discussions provide a dynamic, engaging, and impactful way to teach life skills. When used effectively, they help students become more resilient, socially aware, and emotionally balanced. Such formats promote self-expression, peer support, and practical problem-solving. As mental health challenges among youth continue to rise, integrating life skills education through group discussions can serve as a critical strategy for preparing students not just for exams, but for life. Educational institutions, policymakers, and educators must work collaboratively to embed these practices into mainstream education.

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