

Exploring the significance of literary works in improving the mental health of college students

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Abstract: To improve the mental health level of college students, the method of reading literary works is introduced. Starting from the role of literary works in the mental health of college students, this article explores the matching degree, application techniques, and detection methods between literary works and college students' mental health. At the same time, it points out the aspects that need attention and hopes to play a certain role in improving college students' mental health.

Keywords: Literary works; college student; mental health

1 Introduction

The World Health Organization's "World Health Statistics (2023)" clearly states that "depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders are among the leading causes of adolescent diseases and disabilities. The Survey Report on Mental Health of College Students in 2022 jointly released by the Institute of Psychology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Social Sciences Academic Press pointed out that "14.8% of college students have different levels of depression risk. In general, the scores of depression, loneliness, and cell phone addiction tend to rise with grade. Among them, a low sense of meaning of life and a high sense of emptiness are associated with a high level of depression, loneliness, and cell phone addiction among adolescents." The National Blue Book of Depression in 2022 jointly released by the Institute of Depression and People's Daily, Good Mood, and Lingbei China concluded that the lifetime prevalence of depression among Chinese adults is 6.8%, of which depression accounts for 3.4%. At present, there are 95 million people with depression in China, and about 280000 people commit suicide every year, of which 40% suffer from depression. The age group of 18-24 years old accounts for 35.32% of the incidence of depression, ranking first.

2 Methodology

With the increasing pressure of employment and academic competition, as well as the rapidly changing technological and social environment, the past years of exam oriented education have neglected setback education and quality education, as well as the emergence of new ideas and values, which have posed new psychological challenges for modern college students. They need to increase professional psychological counseling and guidance in dealing with mental health issues such as academic self-efficacy, interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, and sense of meaning in life.

Can literature, as a literature that expounds and studies human nature, help college students learn to guide personal emotions, change subjective perception dynamics, and enrich self-awareness based on a better understanding of "human nature, human emotions, and human hearts"?

2.1 The correlation between literary works and the mental health of college students

College students are exposed to and read literary works everywhere in their learning and life. Although most college students nowadays prefer reading through videos and pictures, classic literary works are still their first choice, and many classic texts and sentences are also embedded in videos or pictures for indirect reading by college students. And these literary works, whether they are e-books or paper books, are all outputting knowledge in various aspects such as cognition, emotion, thinking, and psychology to college students.

2.1.1 Cognitive Inspiration and Thinking Expansion

In literary works, comprehensive and detailed exhibitions are presented on aspects such as human and self, human and others, human and nature, and human and society, which can help college students correctly recognize themselves, understand others, and provide necessary guidance for understanding society. For example, modern college students, influenced by the internet, may believe that evaluating a person's success should be based on money and status. Therefore, in the learning tasks assigned to them, they will pay special attention to knowledge, skills, and methods that can make them earn money, and are willing to spend more time. However, once their material goals are inconsistent with their actual pursuits, they are prone to psychological collapse and even depression. However, as an art form, literature not only provides guidance on knowledge and skills, but more importantly, it can give readers an artistic enjoyment and help them find a spiritual home outside the material world. After reading literary works about people and events, it is easy for people to develop a single material pursuit that may be hollow. A complete life also requires the pursuit of spiritual enjoyment, learning to enjoy the entire process of life. Simply put, the immersion of literature will enable readers to perceive themselves and the world in an artistic way. And this literary and artistic approach is more humane, able to tolerate and understand the strengths and weaknesses of humanity itself.

2.1.2 Promotion of mental health education

Literary works can serve as auxiliary materials for mental health education. By selecting representative literary works for interpretation and analysis, it can help college students understand different aspects of mental health issues, such as psychological

disorders, emotional management, interpersonal relationships, etc. This helps to increase college students' awareness and attention to mental health issues. Some literary works also provide methods and suggestions for psychological self-help. By reading these works, college students can learn how to face and deal with their psychological problems, such as anxiety, depression, etc. The improvement of this self-help ability helps them to recover and adjust more quickly when they encounter psychological distress.

2.2 The matching degree between literary works and the mental health of college students

Literary works are diverse, and the psychological problems of college students are also varied. How to select suitable literary works for college students to read in a targeted manner, and even specifically which fragments or words are suitable, may also be an area that needs further exploration. According to relevant surveys, some college students have psychological problems such as emotional instability, negative intentions, tense interpersonal relationships, a certain tendency towards neurosis, and poor adaptation. Strategies and suggestions have also been proposed to improve college students' interpersonal communication skills, adaptability, and self-awareness. In response to these issues, works on themes such as "love and friendship", "growth and self-awareness", "family and affection", "dreams and pursuits", "confusion and rebellion during adolescence", and "social reality and criticism" in youth literature are worth recommending. Through delicate emotional depictions and profound interpersonal interactions, such as "The Little Prince" and "The Convenience Store," college students are helped to understand the complexity of interpersonal relationships and learn effective communication.

The "reading therapy" proposed by American scholar Samuel McCord Crothers in 1916 is very representative. Reading therapy refers to establishing a certain "resonance" with characters and events in classic literary works, thereby achieving psychological "identification and projection", obtaining emotional or emotional support, regulating emotions, stabilizing interpersonal relationships, and enhancing personal cognition. With the help of reading therapy, through the dialogue between readers and literary works, a spiritual connection and communication are established in the mind, and emotions are regulated and comforted, entering a state of soothing, correcting, and sublimating emotions, playing a role in purifying the reader's mind; Zhao Shuang further elaborated in his 2014 article "The Supporting Role of Promoting Reading Therapy in College Libraries for College Students' Mental Health Education: Based on the Perspective of Conducting Reading Therapy" that reading literary works can help regulate the gap and contradictions between reality and dreams, success and failure, and individuals and society, playing a role in balancing mentality, with tragic works playing a particularly significant role. Lu Xun once said, "Tragedy is the destruction of valuable things for people to see, while comedy is the tearing of worthless things for people to see." When a person reads a tragic work, compared to the death, despair, pain, and sadness in the work, they are more likely to develop positive and optimistic thoughts about cherishing current life, health, time, emotions, love, etc. Therefore, they will automatically regulate the vulgar negative emotions such as greed, indulgence, and ignorance in current life and learning, helping people move from meaningless life to pursuing a meaningful life. The article also summarizes

the enlightening and comprehension effects of literary works on readers' psychology. The traditional reading therapy was later improved to promote literary works through librarians targeting the needs and characteristics of readers, cleverly solving the problem of individuals blindly reading literary works due to a lack of understanding.

2.3 The impact of literary works on the mental health of college students

There are many measurement scales in psychology that can help detect whether there is a difference in the effectiveness of college students before and after reading literary works. By using SCL-90, MLQ, and the Academic Self Efficacy Scale developed by Liang Yusong and Zhou Zongkui (2000) from Central China Normal University, data on emotional states, interpersonal relationships, sense of meaning in life, and academic self-efficacy can be reflected. Of course, there are also various types of psychological scales, whether it is borrowing authoritative scales or editing questionnaires by oneself, it is necessary to establish a collection method that fully respects the personal wishes of the test subjects and provides a stable ratio of 1. To determine whether literary works have an impact on the health of college students, comparative data before and after the test can be used. The specific operation can refer to the following three steps.

Step 1: First, distribute a psychological test questionnaire to identify potential psychological issues that college students may have.

Step 2: Have the participants read their selected literary works and complete the reading within the specified time frame. Then, use the same questionnaire as the first step. You can compare the data from the first and second steps to see if there are any differences in the detection before and after reading literary works.

Step 3: Based on the data from the first step, select literary works related to the psychological problems of the test subjects for them to read. For example, using inspirational literature such as "How Steel is Tempered" to help college students manage emotions such as anxiety and stress; Using male literature such as "The Sorrows of Young Werther" to help college students express depression and self acceptance; Using youth literature such as 'Alice, the Transfer Student' and other works to help college students regulate interpersonal relationships and social anxiety; Using philosophical literature such as "The Pursuit of Meaning by Humans" to help college students learn how to engage in self-awareness and growth; Using science fiction literature such as "The Three Body Problem" to help college students set goals and motivate themselves; Using love literature to explore how college students handle love issues, etc. After targeted reading, the subjects filled out the previously tested psychological questionnaire again and compared the data before and after the test to observe if there were any differences. Afterwards, the content and testing duration of literary works can be adjusted based on the results of data analysis.

In fact, in the process of reading literary works, it is not enough to achieve a qualitative leap with just a few weeks of experimentation. To have long-term effects, it is still necessary to persist in reading for a long time. At the same time, simple reading does not necessarily have obvious effects. Reading all literary works is just the first step. During the reading process, copying

and reciting, thinking after reading, and even learning the ancient thinking of “investigating things to gain knowledge” can be applied to one’s own real life and learning problems, that is, learning to apply. Only after completing the four stages of selecting works, specialized reading, in-depth thinking, and applying what has been learned, can it truly have a certain impact on one’s mental health.

3 Attention section

Firstly, it is important to note that literary works have their own strengths and weaknesses. While being good at selecting and adhering to basic principles, attention should also be paid to female literature such as black humor, stream of consciousness, postmodernism, or body writing. Sometimes, due to excessive criticism of reality or emphasis on existentialism, readers may become biased and emotionally unstable, or due to excessive

immersion in the situation, they may even fall into a psychological dilemma of depression, which still needs to be filtered out;

Secondly, it is important to pay attention to active guidance. As the saying goes, “A thousand readers, a thousand Hamlets.” This means that each reader will have different understandings after reading the same literary theme, which will be based on their own educational level, social experience, and analytical ability. If college students experience negative psychological reactions during the reading process, it is necessary to make timely changes to avoid unnecessary negative consequences.

Finally, to improve the mental health level of college students, various effective methods should be used, such as music therapy, sandplay therapy, conversation therapy, and even medical assistance, in order to achieve the desired results.

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