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Research on Mental Health Education Models for College Students Based on Expressive Arts Therapy

Yu Zhang[1]&Xinyuan Wang[2,*]

[1]*Guangxi Technology and Business Vocational College ,P.R.China*

[2]*Guangxi University of Chinese Medicine,P.R.China*

Abstract: In the new era, psychological pressure among college students is characterized by diversification, concealment, and normalization. Expressive arts therapy, relying on the intervention logic of artistic creation, sensory experience, and emotional externalization, breaks through the limits of verbal expression and meets the psychological counseling needs of contemporary college students. This paper explains the core connotations of expressive arts therapy, summarizes the core characteristics of mental health education models in colleges and universities, and constructs a complete implementation path from six dimensions: painting, music, dance/movement, drama, group counseling, and dynamic tracking. The aim is to build an art-based psychological education model suited to the realities of higher education, weaken students' psychological defenses, accurately address psychological problems, enhance the effectiveness and inclusiveness of college mental health education, and support the long-term improvement of college students' psychological literacy.

Keywords: expressive arts therapy, college students, mental health education, educational model, psychological intervention

1. Introduction

The college years are a period when college students' personalities mature, psychological patterns take shape, and stress tends to concentrate. Academic competition, interpersonal communication, employment anxiety, and emotional exhaustion continuously affect college students' mental health. Expressive arts therapy is a nonverbal psychological intervention method. With its immersive, diversified, and experiential educational advantages, it enables students to naturally externalize emotions, release pressure, and heal the psyche during artistic creation. In view of this, starting from the current situation of college mental health education, this study explores the characteristics and implementation approaches of expressive arts therapy in education and constructs a systematic, normalized, and precise art-based psychological education model, with the hope of providing practical reference for the reform of college mental health education in China.

2. Overview of Expressive Arts Therapy

Expressive arts therapy differs from traditional verbal psychological counseling. It integrates theories from art, psychology, and education and uses painting, music, dance/movement, and drama for psychological intervention. Taking manual creation and other diversified art forms as carriers, it guides individuals to externalize inner emotions, vent psychological pressure, and repair psychological trauma through nonverbal artistic creation, thereby achieving self-healing and psychological growth (Xu, 2025). The core principle of this therapy is to break through the constraints of verbal expression, avoid the constraints of individuals' psychological defense mechanisms, and allow suppressed, hidden, and difficult-to-express negative emotions to be naturally revealed with the help of artistic symbols, bodily movements, and auditory experiences. Compared with traditional psychological intervention models, expressive arts therapy does not emphasize right-or-wrong standards or limit fixed forms; it has educational advantages such as low pressure, high inclusiveness, and strong experientiality. In mental health education, students do not need to deliberately organize language and can freely, authentically, and relaxedly display their inner states, while teachers judge students' emotional states, psychological concerns, and cognitive biases based on their artworks and creative states. At present, this therapy is widely used in adolescent emotional counseling, stress intervention, and personality shaping. It meets

Corresponding Author: Xinyuan Wang
Guangxi University of Chinese Medicine,P.R.China
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the complex and changeable psychological needs of college students, can effectively make up for the shortcomings of traditional psychological education, and provides new path support for the innovative development of college mental health education.

3. Characteristics of the College Student Mental Health Education Model Based on Expressive Arts Therapy

3.1 Immersive experience reduces psychological defense

Traditional college mental health education mostly relies on theoretical indoctrination, passive listening, and question-and-answer counseling. Its educational forms are dull, rigid, and inflexible, and students easily develop a cognition of being educated and judged, which in turn produces strong psychological defense mechanisms. The mental health education model based on expressive arts therapy focuses on immersive artistic experience, completely transforms the traditional preaching logic of education, and constructs a relaxed, free, comfortable, and secure psychological education scene. During artistic creation, students are liberated from the serious counseling atmosphere and from the psychological constraints of exam-oriented and educational framing; they gain relaxation through free creation, independent experience, and self-perception (Chen, 2025). Artistic creation is a spontaneous expressive behavior without standardized evaluation rules. Students do not need to worry about expressive mistakes or emotional negation. They can naturally remove psychological defenses and actively vent negative emotions such as worry, repression, and confusion. Immersive artistic experience transforms psychological education from "passively receiving counseling" into "actively self-healing," weakens the oppositional educational relationship between teachers and students, and shortens the distance of psychological education.

3.2 Diversity, inclusiveness, and adaptation to individual differences

Expressive arts therapy is highly diverse and inclusive. It involves various educational forms such as painting, music, bodily movement, drama, and group creation, and can adapt to student groups with different personalities, expressive abilities, and psychological states, achieving the effect of tailored psychological education. Diversified artistic expression forms provide students with multiple channels for emotional venting. Students can independently choose healing methods according to their preferences and psychological states and maximize their subjective initiative in self-healing. This highly inclusive and diversified educational model breaks through the single model of traditional psychological education and comprehensively meets the diverse, individualized, and complex needs of higher education students in psychological development.

4. Implementation Methods of the College Student Mental Health Education Model Based on Expressive Arts Therapy

4.1 Painting therapy: channeling negative emotions

As an expressive arts therapy, painting therapy is one of the most basic and easiest-to-implement intervention methods. Through lines, colors, composition, and pattern creation, it intuitively displays students' inner emotions and accurately channels various negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, confusion, and irritability. It is suitable for college students who are not good at verbal expression (Gao, 2025). Compared with other art forms, painting creation has a lower threshold, greater freedom, and stronger operability. It does not require students to have professional artistic skills. Its core is emotional expression and psychological venting; it downplays artistic aesthetics and technical judgment and respects students' authentic inner expression. In college mental health education classes and group counseling activities, teachers can routinely conduct diversified painting healing activities such as free doodling, emotion-color painting, thematic painting, mandala drawing, and landscape creation. They provide students with creative materials such as paper, pens, and paints and create a relaxed and unrestrained creative atmosphere. Teachers guide students to abandon all rule constraints, follow their inner feelings, and freely express themselves, externalizing difficult-to-express emotions such as tension, grievance, and worry accumulated in the heart into picture compositions through light and dark colors and sparse or dense lines. When students concentrate on drawing, they can shift away from negative attention, reduce psychological tension, and gradually calm and release emotions. After creation, teachers organize students to actively share their creative ideas, picture connotations, and inner feelings, and provide targeted psychological guidance and emotional counseling for negative psychological signals such as inhibition, confusion, and gloom manifested in the pictures.

4.2 Music intervention: calming psychological anxiety

College students face long-term pressure from academic assessment, advancement competition, employment pressure, and interpersonal adjustment. They are prone to persistent anxiety, restlessness, mental tension, and insomnia. Soft, soothing music with a suitable rhythm can effectively regulate the nervous system, reduce psychological tension, and calm various anxious emotions. In mental health education, teachers can build a systematic music healing system and match corresponding music

resources to students' different psychological states. For anxious and irritable students, they can provide soft, comforting instrumental music and natural white noise; for students with low mood, they can select warm, healing, rhythmic, and uplifting motivational music; for students under excessive pressure, they can conduct immersive music relaxation meditation (Huang, 2025). At the same time, instead of the simple method of listening to songs, interactive methods such as humming, rhythmic tapping, music-based stress-relief movement, and lyric writing and adaptation are added, enabling students to participate more deeply in the music experience and further improving the emotional healing effect. Immersive music experience can temporarily free students from the pressure of study and life, relax body and mind, empty their thoughts, and alleviate mental internal friction and psychological anxiety. Teachers regularly hold class collective music healing activities, creating a healing atmosphere through collective immersive experience, which helps reduce students' psychological pressure as a group (Jin & Sun, 2025). At the same time, teachers dynamically adjust intervention methods based on students' psychological feedback after the music experience and continuously calm their anxious mood, helping them establish a stable, relaxed, and positive mindset and effectively preventing the emergence and aggravation of anxiety-related psychological problems.

4.3 Dance/movement release: adjusting physical and mental states

Dance/movement release uses bodily movement as the central carrier, breaks through the limitations of static healing, and releases physical and mental repression, relieves emotional tension, and adjusts physical and mental imbalance through stretching, rhythmic movement, and free dancing, achieving bidirectional physical and mental healing. Contemporary college students sit for long periods, lack exercise, and accumulate psychological pressure, making them prone to physical and mental tension, emotional repression, and imbalance. Static psychological counseling can hardly fully release deep-seated psychological pressure, whereas dance/movement healing relies on dynamic bodily expression and can effectively vent accumulated negative emotions and relieve psychological stagnation (Sui & Liu, 2025). In implementation, teachers do not need to set standardized dance movements or difficulty norms. With freedom, relaxation, and naturalness as core principles, they guide students to follow soothing or light music rhythms, freely stretch their limbs, relax body and mind, and release depression, irritability, and fatigue through casual rhythms such as raising hands, stretching, swinging, and stepping. For students who are introverted, physically restrained, and severely psychologically repressed, teachers guide them step by step to open their bodies, loosen themselves, and gradually free themselves from psychological constraints. At the same time, group dance/movement interaction, through collective rhythm, paired cooperation, and group stretching, shortens interpersonal distance and reduces social inferiority and social tension. Through continuous bodily rhythm, students can effectively release physiological and psychological pressure, relieve mental tension, improve passive and sluggish psychology, and achieve synchronous relaxation and bidirectional regulation of body and mind. Regular dance/movement healing helps students form good habits of actively releasing emotions, effectively improve physical and mental imbalance and emotional repression, and cultivate a sunny and relaxed body and mind.

4.4 Drama experience: remodeling self-cognition

Drama experience is supported by scenario performance, role-playing, story reenactment, and emotional performance. It enables students to immerse themselves in different characters, experience different mindsets, review their own experiences, confront their own problems, correct cognitive biases, and rebuild positive self-cognition, thereby effectively addressing college students' psychological problems such as self-denial, inferiority, sensitivity, and cognitive rigidity (Hu, 2025). Many college students have blurred self-cognition, excessive self-denial, and weak stress resistance. They are prone to magnifying their shortcomings, ignoring their strengths, and falling into negative internal friction. Conventional psychological counseling can hardly fundamentally reverse cognitive misconceptions, whereas drama experience has immersive, empathic, and reflective educational advantages and can achieve deep intervention at the cognitive level. In implementation, teachers set life-oriented drama themes such as academic pressure, interpersonal communication, self-growth, and frustration coping based on students' common psychological concerns, and arrange for students to organize and perform independently. In role-playing, students immersively feel mindsets and emotions from different perspectives, step out of their fixed thinking, and objectively examine their cognitive misconceptions, emotional problems, and shortcomings in handling matters. By performing others and reviewing themselves, students can confront their shortcomings, accept their flaws, find their strengths, and gradually move out of inferiority and negative psychological cognition. At the same time, during drama rehearsal and stage presentation, students' self-confidence, expressiveness, and stress resistance can be effectively exercised, and social fear and self-timidity

can be reduced. At the end of the activity, teachers lead students to review the performance process, exchange psychological insights, thoroughly sort out self-cognitive biases, establish objective, proactive, and positive self-cognition, and fundamentally eliminate negative psychological internal friction and achieve self-cognitive remodeling and improvement.

4.5 Group art: building a support system

Group art counseling focuses on group cooperation, collective creation, and interactive experience. Through collective art activities, it builds a peer mutual-aid platform to help students break loneliness and closed-mindedness and construct a warm and tolerant peer psychological support system, effectively addressing college students' loneliness, depression, social anxiety, and interpersonal alienation. Some college students have weak social skills, lack interpersonal trust, feel lonely and sensitive, and are prone to various psychological problems when alone for a long time. Individual psychological intervention alone can hardly improve students' closed psychological state, while group art activities are highly interactive and inclusive, can quickly shorten the distance between students, and build bridges of mutual assistance. In implementation, teachers divide students into small psychological groups for group art activities, such as collective painting, choral arrangement, group drama, collaborative handicraft creation, and art sharing. During collective creation, students need to communicate, cooperate, and help each other, jointly create artworks, and through interactive collaboration break social barriers, ease social tension, and enhance interpersonal trust. At the same time, group art activities create an inclusive and warm collective atmosphere, giving lonely and repressed students a sense of belonging and identification. Students confide in each other, exchange feelings, and encourage each other, thereby generating positive peer psychological support. Teachers observe students' interpersonal status, emotional expression, and participation through group activities and provide targeted guidance for withdrawn, passive, and distant students to integrate into the group. Long-term group art counseling can help students establish good interpersonal relationships and a solid peer support system, enabling them to channel psychological problems and cultivate a positive mindset with mutual assistance and companionship.

4.6 Dynamic archiving: tracking psychological changes

Dynamic psychological archiving, as a key measure to ensure the long-term educational effectiveness of expressive arts therapy, establishes an artistic psychological growth file for each student and records the entire process of their artistic works. In the process of emotional state change and psychological intervention, it enables dynamic monitoring, continuous tracking, and precise intervention of students' psychological states, avoiding mere formality in psychological counseling and repeated problems. College students' psychological problems are recurrent, hidden, and fluctuating. A single art healing session can only achieve short-term emotional counseling and can hardly fundamentally solve deep-seated psychological problems. A long-term tracking mechanism is needed to continuously monitor psychological changes and dynamically adjust intervention plans. In daily teaching management, teachers establish a dedicated artistic psychological file for each student, classify and record their paintings, creative reflections, music experience records, drama reflections, group activity insights, and other art healing materials. These simultaneously record students' emotional states, psychological performance, and problem shortcomings in each activity. By vertically comparing artworks and psychological states at different stages, teachers can accurately judge trends in students' emotional fluctuations, changes in problems, and growth progress, and promptly identify possible psychological risks. For students with long-standing psychological problems and persistently low emotional states, teachers dynamically adjust art healing plans and increase intervention and special counseling; for students whose psychological states are gradually improving, teachers continuously consolidate the healing effect. Supported by dynamic archiving and tracking, a closed-loop educational model of "art intervention—state monitoring—review and adjustment—long-term consolidation" is created, making college students' mental health education normalized, precise, and long-term.

5. Conclusion

In short, expressive arts therapy, with its unique educational advantages of immersion, diversification, and inclusiveness, effectively addresses many unfavorable factors in traditional college mental health education, such as simple forms, superficial intervention, student resistance, and weak effects, and meets the complex and changing psychological development needs of contemporary college students. Through the six-in-one implementation path of painting therapy, music intervention, dance/movement release, drama experience, group counseling, and dynamic tracking, results can be achieved in emotional counseling, physical and mental regulation, cognitive remodeling, interpersonal support, and long-term monitoring, cultivating students' good psychological literacy in an all-round way. In the new era, college psychological education should continuously deepen the practical application of expressive arts therapy,

continue to optimize the educational model, enrich artistic carriers, improve long-term mechanisms, persist in using art to nourish the heart and aesthetic education to nurture the mind, weaken students' psychological defenses, solve various psychological problems, help college students develop a sunny, healthy, positive, and stable psychological state, and improve the overall educational quality of college mental health education.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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