

CHAPTER SEVEN

Emotional Intelligence and Mental Health of Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Emotional intelligence (EI) has attracted the attention of many researchers from various disciplines, from past to present. It refers to one's ability to understand and manage their emotions favourably to cope with challenges and regulate thinking and behaviours and has frequently been found to be a significant determinant of mental health and well-being. This chapter seeks to present the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of emotional intelligence with respect to the mental health of college students and review the evidence for this link. The chapter also discusses measures of EI that have led to complexity and debate in the literature. Implementing EI-based intervention programs to improve mental health and well-being could prove useful through the promotion of positive affective states and diminishment of negative ones. Cultivating EI in school could also be fruitful for building the adaptive coping strategies necessary for positive mental health while avoiding maladaptive ones.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, Mental Health, Post-Secondary Education.

Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is critical for promotion and supporting positive mental health and well-being. Broadly speaking, It refers to one's ability to understand, regulate, manage, control, and cope with emotions in decision-making (Mayer et al., 2000). Individuals with high levels of EI are able to acknowledge the utility of their own emotions and those of others. It enables people to regulate their thinking and behaviour, distinguish and identify emotions experienced in different situations, and effectively adapt to new environments (Colman, 2008). People with high EI are also better in navigating their social environment (Kunannatt, 2004). Emotional intelligence thereby provides a pathway to positive mental health and well-being, because awareness and comprehension of one's own emotional states is necessary for positive mental health functioning.

Models of EI

Many empirical studies have been done on EI, applying a wide range of models. In an integrative meta-analysis and cascading model, Joseph and Newman (2010) presented three different EI models that are different from each other in terms of assessment tools that have been used in the empirical research.

The *ability-based* model assumes that EI is a form of intelligence (in the conventional sense) that is used to understand verbal and non-verbal signals of emotion in others, contributes to cognitive activities, and regulates emotions to respond appropriately to situations (Mayer et al., 2016; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

The *trait-based* model views EI as “a constellation of emotional self-perceptions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies [that] integrates the affective aspects of personality” (Petrides et al., 2007). In this model, personality characteristics are used to examine trait EI for understanding and perceiving one's emotions (Petrides & Furnham, 2001).

The *mixed* model (Goleman, 1995) describes EI in terms of five essential components: self-awareness (recognition of emotions), self-regulation (self-control of emotions), motivation (drive to achieve goals), empathy (understanding other's emotions), and social skills (ability to manage social relationships with others).

Although there are significant variations in these models of EI based on its conceptualization and measurement, the core idea is similar in each. They all attempt to best understand EI and its promotion to individuals' psychosocial functioning, consider it to comprise the ability to recognize and maintain emotions in oneself and in others, and consider it to be important for positive functioning and success in life.

Measurement of EI

There is ongoing debate in the literature as to whether EI should be considered an emotional personality trait (Petrides et al., 2007) or an ability to regulate emotions (Salovey & Grewal, 2005). The different conceptualizations of EI have accordingly led researchers to develop different measures for it. In general, EI is assessed using self-report measures that reflect core elements such as regulating emotions, perceiving emotions, and using emotions (O'Connor et al., 2019). Some of the most commonly used self-report measures of EI include:

- The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT; Schutte et al., 1998)
- The Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer et al., 2002)
- The Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue; Petrides & Furnham, 2001)
- The Emotional and Social Competence Inventory (ESCI; Boyatzis & Goleman, 2007)
- The Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-I; Bar-On, 1997)
- The Situational Test of Emotional Management (STEM; MacCann & Roberts, 2008)
- The Situational Test of Emotional Understanding (STEU; MacCann & Roberts, 2008)

These self-assessment measures are advantageous due to their efficiency. Because they are relatively short, multiple scales can be included in a survey without making it too long, and research data can be collected quickly. They can also be very practical for use in therapy by and minimizing the time and resources clients and practitioners must invest in sessions. However, some criticisms have been raised about using self-report measures for assessing EI, because they are inherently vulnerable to influence from a wide range of factors including social desirability, self-deception, and inaccurate memory. They may answer questions in favour of others and overestimating/underestimating the responses.

EI and Mental Health

Many studies have demonstrated the value of EI for promoting mental health and well-being. For example, higher levels of EI have been found to be related to better emotional well-being (Schutte et al., 2002), subjective well-being (Zeidner & Olnick-Shemesh, 2010), and psychological well-being (Guerra-Bustamante et al., 2019). Lower levels of EI have also been found to be associated with poor mental health, including depression and stress symptoms (Gohm et al., 2005; Salguero et al., 2012). And a study of university students reported that those with low EI tend to experience more challenges, depression, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation (Ciarrochi et al., 2002).

Individuals with higher levels of EI tend to experience better mental health, physical health, happiness, well-being, and prosocial behaviours. They can also be protected against stressors and have better adaptation skills.

The world has witnessed a rapid technological change over the past two decades, particularly in Western countries. For example, the use of social media and smartphones has become ubiquitous among young adults, which has dramatically affected their behaviours, attitudes, and social interactions (Khan et al., 2021). This suggests that EI could also have been

affected over this time period. A large meta-analysis of 70 studies carried out among 16,917 Western college students between 2003 and 2018 looked into this question, and while no significant difference was observed in the overall EI trait, a significant reduction in the EI domains of emotionality, self-control, and well-being were observed over and above the effects of gender and cultural background (Khan et al., 2021).

Improving EI to Promote Mental Health

Higher education institutions across the globe typically prioritize their students' mental health due to the unique mental health challenges they often experience while transitioning into higher education and early adulthood. This phase of life can be stressful for students and cause mental health problems, and this is why universities must and do attempt to combat this problem in order to promote positive functioning.

Mental health issues are commonly characterised by somatic symptoms, depression, anxiety, and social dysfunction (Goldberg & Hillier, 1979). That is, physical symptoms or complaints, individuals' experience of tension or panic, dysfunctionality in interpersonal relationships, and experience of feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness are important determinants of mental health problems. In recent decades, these have become increasingly widespread among young adults globally, most commonly in the form of depression, anxiety, and/or stress. According to the World Health Organization (2021), depression is the most debilitating of these. It is not just psychological wellbeing at stake here, because severe but preventable mental health problems can lead to early mortality by as much as two decades. Accordingly, there has been increasing acknowledgement in recent years of the value of human character strengths for promoting well-being and mental health (Yıldırım, 2019). Greater efforts should therefore be made to identify and improve psychological resources for quality well-being and mental health with effective treatment programs.

Emotional intelligence is one such resource that is important for healthy and adaptive psychological functioning in young adults. A recent systematic review by Kotsou et al. (2019) showed that higher levels of EI lead to positive outcomes such as greater well-being, satisfaction with life, happiness, positive affect, relationship quality, social functioning, quality of life, and academic performance. Conversely, lower levels of EI lead to negative outcomes such as anxiety, depression, stress, distress, burnout, and other mental disorders (Kotsou et al., 2019). Therefore, we argue that strategies for enhancing EI should be taught and supported by mental health professionals to promote mental health in young adults and strengthen abilities that protect negative psychosocial effects.

Given that EI can be enhanced, EI-based interventions can be designed for the prevention of mental health problems. For example, health educators could develop training programs for enhancing EI and applying it to daily life. Students' counselling and psychological services in universities can tailor and implement effective school-based psychological and counselling interventions related to EI to prevent or reduce mental health challenges among university students—particularly first-year students—to help them successfully navigate university life.

In conclusion, young adults with a greater level of EI tend to experience better well-being and mental health, and EI is therefore an important mental health resource. Mental health professionals can tailor and implement training and interventions programs focusing on improving the EI of young adults for positive functioning in various domains of life. Such programs could be very beneficial for students' mental health, and ultimately lead to better academic achievement and success.

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