

Analysis of the Psychological State of College Students in the Post-pandemic Period and Adjustment Strategies

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted higher education in many ways: organization and management, teaching methods, research collaboration, etc. College students have been greatly affected by the pandemic environment as it relates to higher education subjects. The mental health standards of college students have been a critical concern in academia. In the post-pandemic era, college students have some new psychological characteristics: depression and anxiety, awakening and confusion, fragmented learning, networked socialization, and some of them have negative emotions and psychological problems such as panic, anger, and rebellion. Along with the resumption of university lectures, higher education has entered the post-pandemic period, but the impact of COVID-19 on college students is irreversible. From the perspective of students, the challenges faced by higher education in the post-pandemic period are analyzed and summarized from the perspective of students, and finally, it is concluded that: the socio-economic impact brought by the pandemic has caused psychological fluctuations and induced negative emotions among college students, which has challenged the ideological and political education work of colleges and universities; the outbreak of the epidemic has caused some college students who originally planned to study abroad to cancel their plans or change their study destination countries, which has affected the internationalization of higher education. From the theoretical perspective of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), the author analyzes the causes of the irrational psychology of college students and proposes three psychological adjustment strategies based on theoretical guidance: problem-solving techniques, cognitive restructuring techniques, and coping techniques, to solve the mental health problems of college students caused by the epidemic. For this, the paper proposed new criteria for college students' mental health in the post-pandemic era — positive and controllable emotions, appropriate moral values, actively coping with academics, and healthy social interaction — and proposed corresponding educational strategies from the perspective of educational administrators.

Keyword: COVID 19, mental health for college students, post pandemic, negative emotions

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on social and economic development in a short time and has also brought irreversible transformations to higher education. With the end of the first wave of the pandemic, universities in various countries resumed regular in-person classes, and society entered the post-pandemic period. However, with the second wave of the worldwide pandemic and the worsening situation in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, the "post-pandemic period" will not come relatively anytime soon [3]. Marek Tester (2020) notes in his paper that "the coronavirus will likely coexist with us

for a long time, and not necessarily in a linear fashion." Pandemic prevention and control have accelerated the profound changes in the nature of higher education and caused changes in the standards and value judgments of talent cultivation in universities. As the main subject of higher education, the analysis and summary of the pandemic's impact on students' academic and daily lives can help better define the objectives and training directions for higher education in the context of the "new standards."

The COVID 19 outbreak has spread nationwide and globally, with a high transmission rate and a high death rate, posing a significant threat to human life and health. Local governments have adopted "city closure"

management in order to effectively curb the development of the pandemic and ensure the safety of citizens' lives. The prolonged stay at home and the uncertainty of the pandemic's development have brought a certain degree of negative emotions and psychological issues to college students, such as panic, anger, rebellion, and other emotions and behaviors. These negative emotions and psychological issues are mostly related to personal cognition. If they are not adjusted and resolved in time, they may lead to more profound psychological stress and traumatic experiences, which are extremely detrimental to their later healthy development. The REBT emphasizes the influence of cognition on emotions and behaviors. It believes that changes in cognition of events can adjust people's emotions and behaviors, thus promoting physical and mental health. This has a solid guiding value for the psychological adjustment of college students under the pandemic.

Other studies that focus on similar areas mainly discuss the psychological traits of college students during the pandemic era or a cross-examination of the mental state of college students before and during the pandemic. This paper analyzes the challenges faced by higher education in the post-pandemic period from the perspective of students. From the theoretical perspective of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), the author analyzes the causes of the irrational psychology of college students and proposes three psychological adjustment strategies based on theoretical guidance to solve the mental health problems of college students caused by the epidemic.

This paper contributes to the field of work by suggesting an adjustment strategy that can help mitigate or solve the psychological issues of college students. Currently, there are insufficient studies or research articles that focus on this field of work since the COVID-19 pandemic is relatively new to the world. However, there should be growing attention to this issue since more and more college students are suffering from the psychological problems raised by COVID 19. This paper can serve as an assistance to the current research area when examining the mental problems of college students and their corresponding solutions.

2. ANALYSIS OF COMMON IRRATIONAL MENTAL STATES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS DURING THE PANDEMIC

The persistent pandemic not only threatens the physical health of college students but also invariably erodes their psychological health. A typical irrational mental state includes panic, anger, rebellion, and blindness.

2.1 Panic/Fear

Panic arises when people are uncertain about the development of an event or when they do not have sufficient coping capacity, and their safety needs cannot be met. The highly contagious and lethal nature of the coronavirus made people anxious to see the increasing number of confirmed cases on their cell phone news every day. The growing number of suspected cases rattled the public's sensitivities and the expanding hot spot map of the pandemic, which intensified the public's inner panic. The shortage of various pandemic prevention materials in the market during the shutdown period leads to the supply of masks and disinfectant solutions being significantly lower than people's demands, which eventually causes mass panic. This kind of panic is indeed related to the pandemic itself, but it is, in fact, caused by the perception and evaluation of the threat to life and health [5]. Faced with the same reality, some students responded to the pandemic rationally and frankly: they believed that the government could effectively resolve the crisis by actively learning pandemic prevention skills, insisting on staying at home and not going out, completing self-protection, studying hard, and self-enrichment (a reasonable belief), while others were overly concerned about the changes in the number of confirmed cases and death tolls every day, especially for those in the hot spot areas, where they were so afraid of being infected with the virus that it affected their daily and academic lives.

2.2 Anger/Indignation

When the words and actions of others do not meet their own expectations and judgment standards, or when the external environment affects their own personal interests, people often tend to be angry. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, there were rumors on the internet that the emergence of the new coronavirus might be caused by the following: There were a small number of people eating bats; a large number of people flowed out of Wuhan before the city was closed, which led to the spread of the epidemic nationwide; some local governments took ineffective measures to prevent the pandemic or even made false statements; and foreigners returned to their home countries to seek refuge when the global pandemic was spreading. All these are important factors that trigger the angry mental state of college students. As a result, there are voices on the internet that despise people who eat wild food, despise compatriots in hotspot areas, and resent compatriots from abroad who have returned to their home countries to seek refuge, believing that they have introduced the virus into society and pose a risk to the public [7]. When faced with a threat to life, this anger is a form of emotional self-protection, reducing one's public responsibility in the pandemic through dissatisfaction with others (irrational beliefs). Take the example of the resentment statements from the

internet towards those who eat wild animals; they verbally abuse people who eat bats as cruel and selfish, saying how to feel at ease when the whole country is paying the price for a small group of people who satisfy their own selfishness, etc. (irrational beliefs). These people have no malicious intent and no prophetic ability, not to mention that they themselves are suffering from the virus, and the pandemic is an accidental outbreak (reasonable belief). Whether they are bat-eaters or compatriots in the hot spot areas domestically and abroad, they are all from the same country and should be in the same boat and overcome the difficulties together. Under the pandemic situation, it is important for college students to remain rational and empathetic, do their best to ease the emotions of those around them, and unite to overcome the virus (reasonable belief).

2.3 Rebellion/Resist

Resist psychology is a strong rebellious state of mind that arises when objective environmental requirements do not match people's needs. During the COVID-19 period, students are asked to stay home and not go out, which gradually increases conflicts with parents. They are not allowed to return to school without permission, and classes are taught through online platforms. These prevention and management regulations and the derived online teaching method can cause some cognitively immature students to become rebellious and even act rebelliously [10]. The reality is that there are individual students who return to school without permission, students who do not want to take online classes at home, and students who have conflicts with their parents. Take the most common scenario at home as an example: some students are constantly monitored and pushed by their parents to study. Parents are annoyed with their kids for playing video games and sometimes even admonish and scold them, which makes students think their parents always control them. Students think they are not understood and trusted by their parents, and their parents do not understand their kids' minds (unreasonable beliefs); thus, they are not satisfied and do not want to communicate with each other, which leads to the inevitably parent-child conflicts. Under the pandemic, students' rebellious mental states and behaviors in their daily family life are mainly due to their narrow and egoistic perspective, lack of ability to think differently, and inability to understand and identify with their parents' way of expressing love [2]. In contrast, students can learn and adapt more than their parents and absorb new things more easily. Due to parent-child conflict during the pandemic, if students can recognize that parents have different ways of expressing love and different abilities due to their own upbringing and educational experiences and try to learn and use correct communication methods to alleviate parent-child conflict, rebelliousness will be significantly reduced.

2.4 Blindness/Mindless

Blindness arises when people do not understand a matter or social phenomenon, lack their own thoughts and opinions, or arbitrarily follow the steps of others with unreasonable actions just to seek agreement with the public. During the pandemic, it was not uncommon for people to hold a blind mentality, mainly in the form of blind confidence in their own safety, blind optimism about the development of the pandemic, and blind faith in Internet news. Some college students took a chance in the face of the pandemic, thinking that they would not be infected with the virus and that the control requirements of the local government and school were too harsh (an unreasonable belief), and they risked returning to school from home despite the official requirements, which brought challenges to the school's pandemic prevention and control work [4]. Also, some students are blindly optimistic about the development of the pandemic and still insist on going out for reasons such as research internships. Especially when the situation is slightly improved and the weather is pleasant, a large number of people tend to gather outside [14]. During the pandemic, the internet was full of news, and some college students were not mature enough to pay too much attention to pandemic-related news but could not distinguish whether it was true or false. This may cause them to take the wrong measures to prevent the pandemic, such as creating safety hazards by disinfecting with alcohol, listening to and spreading false statements, questioning the government's pandemic prevention policy, and discrediting and distorting the image of front-line medical workers (unreasonable beliefs and behaviors). The cause of some college students' blindness during the pandemic is closely related to a lack of awareness of the gravity of the situation. They must improve their sense of social responsibility and their perception of themselves as outsiders in pandemic prevention. The pandemic affects everyone's life and health, so we need to be extra cautious and highly responsible for ourselves, others, and society.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAITS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA

The pandemic brings with it not only the risk of death from infection with the virus but also unbearable psychological stress. The highly contagious nature of COVID-19 has forced countries to close schools to stop the spread of the pandemic, which has had an enormous impact and effect on the mental health of college students, causing them to feel panic, anxiety, depression, etc. Attending school is the best public policy tool to improve skills and can help students improve their social skills and social awareness. School closures, travel restrictions, and various isolation measures make college students change their everyday lifestyles and affect their academic plans, thus predisposing them to interpersonal

dysfunction and leading to feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and depression [16]. Through an online questionnaire, researchers have found that college students have different degrees of anxiety and depression psychological problems, and the incidence of anxiety is 26.6%, and the incidence of depression is 21.16%. Stress and anxiety are the main factors affecting the mental health of college students. Arnliu and Brxulli measured the degree of psychological distress among students from the University of Prishtin/Pritina in the early stages of the pandemic. The results showed that 11.4% of students suffered from severe psychological distress, 13.3% suffered from moderate psychological distress, 24.7% had mild psychological distress, and 50.6% had no psychological distress. The psychological problems of college students show socio-demographic differentiation depending on the region, gender, and stage of study they are in. The most severe level of anxiety was found in South America (65.7%), followed by Oceania (64.4%) and North America (55.8%); in contrast, the lowest level of anxiety was found in Asia (32.7%) and Africa (38.1%). Male students tend to have more hope for the current situation than female students, and students in the arts and humanities are more likely to feel anxious and depressed than STEM major students. The pandemic itself, as well as the attitudes (the trade-off between economic development and life safety) and measures (disruption of daily life, travel bans, etc.) adopted by governments in response to the pandemic, can have both short- and long-term effects on college students' mental health. For recent graduates, the pandemic outbreak season is critical for participating in recruitment and interviews. Upon entering the labor market, the influenced market conditions can cause job seekers to lower their expectations and accept job offers that are lower than their regular expected earnings, an impact that can be long-term or even permanent for job seekers. The temporary economic shutdown triggered by the pandemic and the layoffs or closures in some industries reduces the number of jobs in demand and blocks the normal employment process, which inevitably affects the entire process of graduate employment [7]. The dual pressure of academic and employment creates psychological anxiety and aggravates the psychological burden of recent graduates. The COVID-19 pandemic will not disappear in a short time, and pandemic prevention has become a new norm in global society. Under the new norm of prevention and control, college students are bound to suffer from long-term and far-reaching psychological effects under the new norm of prevention and control. Although the lack of individual students' psychological capacity is the primary cause of psychological fluctuations, the insufficient extent of mental and political education in colleges and universities and the relative lag of educational content and methods are the fundamental causes of the psychological fluctuations of college students in the pandemic. Mental and political education in colleges and universities should resonate

with society, paying attention to the disadvantaged groups of college students under the influence of the pandemic and the students' actual needs [8]. Colleges and universities should innovate in mental and political education under the pandemic and carry out integrated education with professional courses.

4. OVERVIEW OF RATIONAL EMOTIVE BEHAVIOR THERAPY

4.1 Theoretical basis of REBT

In short, REBT aims to improve one's mental health by changing individuals' cognition, controlling irrationality with rationality, replacing irrational beliefs with rational beliefs, and reducing emotional distress and behavioral abnormalities caused by irrational beliefs. Albert Ellis proposed the REBT, and its core concept is the ABC theory: In this case, the letter A represents the activating event or situation that triggers a negative reaction or response; the letter B represents the individual's beliefs about the triggering event; and the letter C represents the consequences, often the distressing emotions, that result from the irrational thoughts or beliefs [9]. Typically, people believe that emotions and behaviors (C) are caused by the actual event (A). However, Ellis argues that people's irrational emotions and behaviors (C) are caused by their beliefs (B) about the event (A). That is, people's perceptions and evaluations of the event lead to their corresponding emotions and behaviors rather than the event itself. So Ellis believes that the key to solving the problem lies in changing people's irrational beliefs: people's irrational perceptions and evaluations of things themselves.

For example, both A and B are bored because they are confined to their homes and are unable to leave due to the city lockdown (a negative emotion). A thinks that his boredom is caused by the lockdown (an unreasonable belief) and complains about it, while B thinks that his boredom is due to his lack of goals (a reasonable belief), so he tries to set goals to enrich his daily life to eliminate the boredom. It can be seen that both A and B have different emotional and behavioral outcomes in the face of the same event because they have different perceptions and opinions about it. The cognition of B, in this case, is consistent with the core view of REBT.

4.2 REBT's Fundamental Principles

In general, rational emotion therapy includes the following six basic principles: (1) beliefs are determinative of emotions and behavior; (2) dysfunctional thoughts about the precipitating event itself are the primary source of people's sadness; (3) the best way to change emotions and behavior is to change the beliefs about the precipitating event; (4) irrational thoughts arise for a variety of complex reasons; (5) REBT

places more emphasis on current factors rather than the historical factors that influence behavior; and (6) beliefs can be changed. In the context of the COVID 19 pandemic, the negative emotions and psychological problems of college students, such as panic, are mainly due to several factors: insufficient scientific information about the prevention and control of the pandemic; insufficient confidence in winning the battle against the pandemic, lack of empathy for the patients who first became contact with the virus and caused the spread, unscientific time management of staying at home, and lack of understanding and support for the government's pandemic prevention measures. All of these factors are directly related to the students' own irrational perceptions of the epidemic and related issues.

4.3 REBT's Therapeutic Process

The process of REBT can be basically divided into three stages: problem solving, cognitive restructuring, and coping. First, it starts with diagnosing irrational beliefs so that the person recognizes that it is his or her irrational beliefs about the precipitating event that are causing the current emotions and behaviors, not the event itself. Then the person uses counseling to change the irrational beliefs and form correct perceptions through counseling. Finally, he or she is encouraged to reinforce the use and feel of rational beliefs, as well as to continuously consolidate correct perceptions, resulting in the formation of new and stable values [11]. The core of the whole process is to change cognition, focusing on helping college students debate and refute inherently unreasonable beliefs, break the old and establish the new, and construct reasonable beliefs. After forming the correct beliefs, their application and practice will be reinforced. If the results are good, students will gradually eliminate the negative psychology and behavior.

5. SUGGESTED STRATEGIES FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT OF COLLEGE STUDENTS DURING THE PANDEMIC

In the face of significant disasters, moderate psychological stress is conducive to active defense against the pandemic. However, excessive, irrational psychological reactions can not only affect the battle against the pandemic but may also cause post-traumatic stress disorder. Therefore, it is important to pay great attention to the adverse psychological effects generated by college students during the pandemic and take timely measures to adjust them and promote healthy physical and mental development. REBT is based on the core therapeutic viewpoint of changing the irrational cognition of the person concerned [6]. The treatment process is based on several stages of diagnosing the problem: changing the cognition and consolidating the cognition, which provides methodological guidance for the

adjustment of the emotional and psychological problems caused by many irrational cognitions and evaluations of college students during the pandemic.

5.1 Problem Solving

Appropriate venting of emotions and acceptance of adverse reactions in the face of the pandemic may be appropriate when lives may be threatened at any time. However, if the problem is not faced squarely and timely adjusted, it is easy to cause different degrees of psychological problems, which will produce secondary crises under the pandemic and affect social stability and personal health. When panic, anxiety, anger, blindness, and other psychological or behavioral changes occur, college students should first learn to be aware of their own physical and psychological changes and compare them to how they are different from the past [15]. Through the following three questions, students should diagnose the direct logical correlation between their irrational psychology and their irrational cognition, which allows them to reverse their irrational psychology by changing their cognition and eliminating emotional distress and psychological barriers: What kind of mental state do I have at this moment? Does it have anything to do with my perception? Is my perception correct? Once you know where irrational psychology comes from, you will have a strategy to deal with it. It is recommended that through exercising within the house, writing a diary, talking to a friend, seeing a movie, and other ways to vent negative emotions in a timely manner, they adjust their bad psychology, keep their own energy conversion smooth, and free themselves from the thought of accepting their bad reactions and behavior. If you feel that these are not enough, you can seek professional help through the psychological counseling hotline. Only genuine acceptance results in genuine change.

5.2 Cognition restructuring

Scientific screening of information and improvement of cognitive bias, recognizing that many irrational psychological theories under the pandemic are generated by students' own irrational cognition and beliefs. When irrational mental states such as panic, anger, rebellion, and blindness arise, college students are advised to distinguish truth from falsehood among the detailed and complex information on the internet, pay attention to the pandemic information and related policies disclosed by various official media, and avoid being held hostage by rumors fabricated by various hostile forces and being confused by people with ulterior motives to distort their values [1]. Furthermore, we should pay attention to the development of the pandemic at home and abroad, constantly improve our physical fitness and immunity, cooperate with local and school policies on pandemic prevention and control, constantly learn about scientific prevention methods, expand our knowledge

accumulation and self-regulation methods, and fill in cognitive gaps. From the perspective of "no one is left behind," we should especially care for and accept our compatriots in hot spot areas and those who have returned from abroad, thus stimulating a sense of social responsibility and mission as young students to do their best to fight the pandemic. The only way to reduce rebelliousness, mental state, and behavior is to clearly judge the state of oneself in the pandemic, understand the different expressions of love from parents, and learn the correct communication skills to reduce conflicts with parents at home.

5.3 Coping

Using reasonable beliefs and consolidating valid cognition through all the adaptations for changing cognition mentioned above, college students should debate and refute unreasonable beliefs on the one hand and try to shape correct cognition and beliefs on the other. However, in the stage of changing cognition, college students have only formed the correct cognition initially but have not yet fully internalized and absorbed it, thereby achieving the organic integration of inner stability and other values [7]. For this reason, it is necessary to continue to strengthen the practice and application of reasonable beliefs in life and gradually consolidate correct cognition. For example, the following reasonable beliefs can be used more often in the face of panic: the pandemic prevention supplies are gradually increasing and can supply the basic prevention needs; the vaccine is being developed intensively and can significantly prevent and reduce the risk after testing positive; the pandemic prevention measures are gradually maturing, and the government's ability to respond is increasing; as a university student, you are capable of maintaining your studies and channeling your emotions [2]. For example, the following reasonable beliefs can be applied in the face of anger: no one intentionally wants to cause the pandemic; when life is threatened, everyone has the instinct to seek help, which is the most basic human need; people of the same nationality need to unite and help each other in times of crisis; the country has never shied away from its own problems, and is brave enough to heal itself and make progress. In conclusion, the pandemic is still going on, and the irrational psychology of college students will be gradually eliminated by consciously paying attention to the conversion of thinking and the adjustment of cognition in daily and academic life.

6. CONCLUSION

From the perspective of students, it is concluded that: the socio-economic impact brought by the pandemic has caused psychological fluctuations and induced negative emotions among college students, which has challenged the ideological and political education work of colleges

and universities; the outbreak of the epidemic has caused some college students who originally planned to study abroad to cancel their plans or change their study destination countries, which has affected the internationalization of higher education. From the perspective of students, there is still an unknown timeline for the development of COVID 19. A growing number of college students are suffering from mental issues such as panic, anger, rebellion, and blindness. With the appearance of the REBT, students can gradually recover from the mental issues and move on to a normal academic and daily life.

Although this paper proposes new criteria to solve the mental issues of college students caused by the pandemic, there are several limitations that need to be noted. First, the psychological traits of college students are not gained through an experiment or a questionnaire, so there may be other traits that this paper did not include. Second, this paper does not target a specific area such as a city or a state when discussing mental issues. As a result, those issues that are being proposed above might not be represented or applied when referenced. For future studies, if there are participants that can join the experiment, both the psychological traits and the suggested adjustment strategy can be further verified as effective on the issue.

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