Original Paper

Promoting and Intervening in University Staff Mental Health from a Positive Psychology Perspective

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Abstract

Amidst the rapid advancement of higher education, university faculty members serve as the core force in knowledge transmission and innovation. Their mental well-being not only concerns individual professional fulfilment but directly impacts teaching quality and student development. However, amidst multiple intertwined stressors, university staff commonly face challenges such as weakened professional psychological foundations, intensified work-family conflicts, and fractured social support networks. These factors lead to diminished self-efficacy, accumulated negative emotions, and pervasive feelings of isolation. This paper adopts a positive psychology perspective to systematically explore intervention strategies. These include cultivating positive personality traits, establishing social support networks, refining comprehensive psychological service systems, and promoting work-family coordination and balance. The aim is to provide theoretical underpinnings and practical pathways for enhancing university faculty mental health, thereby supporting the harmonious coexistence of professional fulfilment and personal well-being.

Keywords

Occupational mental health, Positive psychology, University faculty

1. Introduction

Positive psychology emerged as a significant intellectual movement within Western psychology at the close of the 20th century. Its core focus lies in exploring human developmental potential, virtues, and positive qualities. It advocates deconstructing psychological issues through a positive lens, deeply tapping into individuals' inherent positive forces to stimulate subjective initiative, creativity, and a sense of life's meaning, ultimately fostering harmonious coexistence among individuals, groups, and society. As a pivotal branch of contemporary psychology, it particularly focuses on humanity's pursuit of an "enhanced state of well-being"—specifically, achieving greater positive and pleasurable

emotional experiences while reducing the burden of negative emotions.

Martin Seligman, often termed the "father of positive psychology", introduced the seminal PERMA model of well-being in 2012. This framework encompasses five dimensions: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. These five elements do not exist in isolation but are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, collectively forming an organic, holistic framework: only when these elements are fully activated and satisfied can individuals attain enduring and authentic happiness. From an affective theory perspective, positive emotions such as joy, acceptance, and anticipation not only regulate physiological states and maintain social bonds, but also facilitate emotional attachment, consideration for others' needs, and goal attainment. Consequently, they are regarded as core pillars of positive psychological states.

For specific groups such as university faculty, the theoretical value and practical guidance of positive psychology are particularly significant. Maintaining a positive psychological state not only provides the mental resilience required for efficiently fulfilling professional duties like teaching and research, but also facilitates dual enhancement of inner growth and psychological well-being, ultimately achieving more comprehensive and sustainable self-development.

University lecturers bear the vital mission of cultivating innovative talent for society. However, they commonly endure multidimensional pressures stemming from societal expectations, institutional evaluations, daily teaching responsibilities, and career advancement. Consequently, physical and mental health issues are increasingly prominent – suboptimal health states are widespread, and psychological disturbances such as depression frequently occur. The repercussions of this issue are profoundly cascading: it impedes both the shaping of teachers' professional identities and the enhancement of their expertise, indirectly affects the cultivation of healthy personalities among university students, and poses challenges to the stable development of the teaching workforce and the long-term sustainability of the societal talent cultivation system. It has thus become a critical issue demanding urgent resolution within educational management.

Within the human service profession, teachers are inherently a high-risk group for occupational burnout, with university lecturers being particularly affected. Subjected to the dual pressures of teaching duties and research targets, higher education institutions are even widely regarded within academia as "hotspots" for occupational burnout. As societal development and evolving demands reshape higher education, institutions face new challenges and expectations. Rising societal and institutional demands on faculty members intensify their pressures, directly contributing to declining overall mental health and diminishing positive psychological traits among university teachers. This, in turn, adversely affects both work efficiency and educational quality. Against this backdrop, universities' heightened attention to and proactive intervention in faculty mental well-being have become an urgent practical necessity.

In recent years, the rise and deepening research of positive psychology have led academia to increasingly emphasise positive psychological factors in individual development. Intervention strategies centred on positive psychology have consequently become a focal point in the field of

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occupational mental health. Therefore, developing a systematic intervention programme for university faculty members' occupational mental health from a positive psychology perspective holds significant practical value. It can enhance faculty mental well-being, alleviate work-related stress and occupational burnout, and strengthen their professional fulfilment. Moreover, it provides robust support for improving educational quality and ensuring the sustainable development of the teaching workforce.

2. Current State of University Faculty Mental Health

2.1 Weakening of Professional Psychological Core: Dual Decline in Self-Efficacy and Conviction

This dimension focuses on the psychological state formed by university teachers in their professional cognition and practice, primarily manifested as wavering professional conviction and insufficient self-efficacy. In essence, professional conviction represents the unity of cognition, emotion, and will formed by teachers based on professional judgement, specifically reflected in their affinity for the profession, work satisfaction, sense of achievement, and professional steadfastness. However, contemporary university lecturers face multiple professional pressures: on the one hand, society places excessive expectations upon them. Beyond core responsibilities such as teaching, student development, research, and academic promotion assessments, they must shoulder substantial additional duties, readily inducing occupational stress and burnout that directly erodes professional conviction; On the other hand, the significant variation in student quality, coupled with the gradual erosion of the traditional respect for teachers and education, means that educators struggle to experience student respect. They must also expend considerable extra effort addressing issues of poor classroom engagement, diminishing their sense of the noble calling of "teaching and nurturing". The convergence of these dual factors not only causes educators to question their professional worth but also leads to a persistent decline in their self-efficacy, creating a negative cycle of "occupational stress → weakened conviction → diminished efficacy".

2.2 Intensified Work-Family Conflict, with Heightened Negative Emotions such as Anxiety and Depression

This dimension centres on university lecturers' life role balance and emotional well-being, with the core conflict being the impact of dual work and family pressures on emotional states. Data-wise, You's research indicates that the pressure experienced by university teachers has been increasing year by year, with psychological issues such as anxiety and depression becoming relatively common. Sun's group, in their study of university teachers in Shandong Province, further pointed out that marital status has a significant impact on mental health, with married teachers exhibiting more prominent issues such as depression, anxiety, paranoia, and hostility. The specific causes can be categorised into two types: Firstly, the "hidden pressures" from the workplace. Teachers face demanding daily schedules and numerous non-explicit tasks (such as post-class consultations, teaching plan optimisation, and research material organisation), requiring sustained effort to meet various performance metrics; Secondly, "responsibility pressure" from the family sphere, where married teachers must manage elderly care,

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child-rearing and education, and marital relationship maintenance. Female teachers bear a heavier burden of household responsibilities and child-rearing duties. This dual workload creates significant conflict, leading to irritability and anxiety that, when accumulated over time, can trigger depression, forming a major emotional risk to mental health.

2.3 Societal Cognitive Biases and Insufficient Interpersonal Support Exacerbate Self-Doubt and Isolation

This dimension encompasses the dual impact of external societal evaluations and internal interpersonal networks on teachers' mental well-being. The core issues are self-doubt stemming from misguided societal perceptions and support deficits arising from limited social circles. Societal biases, influenced by market economics and materialism, have led some to view teaching as a profession that "doesn't earn substantial income" and is "unambitious". Simultaneously, there exists an unreasonable expectation that highly educated university lecturers should "achieve prosperity through teaching and nurturing". This contradictory cognitive distortion particularly affects young academics—who face the dual pressure of meeting institutional demands while navigating societal expectations. have no future, while simultaneously holding unreasonable expectations that highly educated university lecturers should become wealthy through teaching and nurturing students." This contradictory cognitive bias particularly affects young teachers—constrained by government policies, university management models, and personal capabilities, they readily perceive the gap between professional reality and expectations, leading to intense self-denial and doubt. From an interpersonal support perspective, the nature of the teaching profession means social interactions are largely confined to the school environment and one's own discipline. The pressure of balancing work and family responsibilities, coupled with a non-desk-based working pattern, further reduces opportunities for communication among colleagues. This ultimately leads to widespread issues of weak interpersonal skills and self-isolation among teachers. They struggle to gain emotional and resource support from relationships while becoming prone to loneliness, helplessness, and hypersensitivity in social interactions, creating a vicious cycle of "cognitive bias → self-denial → social withdrawal".

3. The Significance of Implementing Mental Health Interventions for University Faculty from a Positive Psychology Perspective

Within the core framework of positive psychology – which emphasises strengths, cultivates virtues, and unleashes potential – systematically implementing mental health interventions for university faculty serves not only as a crucial measure for maintaining individual psychological equilibrium, but also holds profound implications for the healthy functioning of the educational ecosystem and the calibre of talent cultivated for society. A teacher's professional well-being is not merely a personal emotional experience, but a core link connecting their work state, quality of life, and educational effectiveness. When teachers possess stable professional well-being, they can devote themselves to teaching innovation and research exploration with greater enthusiasm, while also positively influencing students

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through their emotional state, becoming "unspoken role model" in shaping students' healthy personalities. Conversely, a persistent decline in professional well-being triggers a cascade of detrimental effects, escalating in severity: at the foundational level, it leads to diminished focus and reduced task efficiency, creating a vicious cycle of 'low productivity → lack of achievement → declining self-efficacy'; At the interpersonal level, negative emotions may permeate colleague and teacher-student relationships, causing interpersonal tensions. Some educators may even exhibit irritability or apathy due to impaired emotional regulation, undermining the campus atmosphere; Regarding mental well-being, prolonged deprivation of happiness gradually accumulates into self-denial and existential doubt. In severe cases, it may precipitate psychological disorders such as anxiety or depression, potentially progressing to organic mental illnesses that inflict irreversible harm upon both the individual educator and their family.

Implementing targeted interventions through a positive psychology lens holds paramount value in helping university staff reconstruct their professional identity and revitalise occupational fulfilment, thereby fortifying an "inner defence" for mental well-being. As a discipline centred on 'unearthing human strengths and fostering individual flourishing,' positive psychology transcends traditional psychology's singular focus on "problem-solving and defect-repair". Instead, it activates teachers' psychological resilience through three pathways: Firstly, employing positive affirmations and strengths identification techniques to guide educators in recognising their unique advantages in teaching, mentoring, and research (such as classroom interaction design capabilities, academic innovation thinking, or student communication skills). This reinforces the self-affirmation "I can do this well", gradually enhancing professional confidence. Secondly, through potential-unlocking training and personalised psychological counselling, it assists educators in clarifying career objectives and developing scientifically grounded career plans aligned with their strengths, thereby reducing anxiety and internal friction stemming from "clear direction" or "overly ambitious goals"; Thirdly, grounded in the PERMA model of well-being (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment), it cultivates positive teaching experiences, deepens recognition of educational value, and establishes mechanisms for career achievement feedback. This ensures educators continually receive positive emotional nourishment and fulfilment in their daily work. Extensive empirical research (such as Seligman's team's intervention studies with educators) demonstrates that such approaches significantly enhance teachers' psychological well-being, professional competence, and educational effectiveness. deepening recognition of educational value, "and" establishing professional achievement feedback mechanisms." Extensive empirical research (such as Seligman's team's intervention studies with educators) demonstrates that such positive-oriented interventions can elevate teachers' occupational well-being by over 30% while significantly reducing burnout rates, providing enduring intrinsic motivation for mental health.

Secondly, this intervention pathway more effectively propels university faculty towards synergistic enhancement of "psychological resilience and comprehensive competence", thereby injecting

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"high-quality momentum" into educational development. Positive psychology emphasises "growing through challenges and refining oneself by overcoming difficulties." Its intervention logic does not involve enabling teachers to evade pressures in work and life, but rather empowering them psychologically to cultivate the capacity to "transform stress through a positive mindset": On one hand, through emotional regulation training (such as mindfulness meditation and positive emotion journaling) and stress reframing techniques (interpreting "teaching pressure" as "opportunities to enhance pedagogical competence"), it helps educators improve psychological resilience. This enables them to maintain emotional stability and rational decision-making capacity when confronting challenges like student diversity, research bottlenecks, or family responsibilities, thereby enhancing personal social adaptability; On the other hand, through a "Virtue Cultivation Programme" (e.g., fostering responsibility in teamwork, courage and perseverance in academic exploration), it guides teachers to transform positive psychological qualities into drivers of professional growth. When teachers engage in teaching with a positive mindset, they become more proactive in exploring innovative models such as blended learning and project-based learning. When teachers pursue research with vigour, they become bolder in tackling academic challenges and driving interdisciplinary innovation. As demonstrated by positive psychology research, this creates a virtuous cycle between psychological state and capability development: mentally resilient educators can more efficiently allocate time and energy, balancing multiple roles in teaching, research, and student development to achieve dual accomplishments in "personal growth" and "educational contribution"; Consequently, the sustained advancement of educators will in turn enhance the quality of higher education, cultivating more innovative talents who possess both professional competence and positive character traits. This ultimately forms a virtuous cycle: "Teacher mental well-being → Enhanced educational quality → Empowered societal development."

4. Key Strategies for Promoting and Intervening in University Faculty Mental Health

4.1 Cultivating Positive Personality Traits to Fortify Professional Convictions

Enhancing university faculty mental well-being requires prioritising inner psychological development, focusing on positive character formation and strengthening professional conviction. On one hand, institutions may establish a multi-dimensional cultivation system combining "training + advocacy + incentives": specialised training on professional mission, coupled with case studies of exemplary educators, helps faculty deeply recognize the profound societal and developmental value of teaching and nurturing talent, thereby awakening professional identity. Simultaneously, incentive mechanisms should be refined to incorporate teaching innovation and educational outcomes into evaluation and reward frameworks, enabling sustained feelings of accomplishment and value within professional practice. Concurrently, institutions must implement people-centred management principles, fully respecting faculty members" professional autonomy in daily operations while addressing their

emotional needs and career development aspirations. Personalised growth platforms (e.g., academic exchanges, promotion support schemes) should be established to foster an inclusive and supportive organisational climate. Through these dual approaches, teachers' self-worth recognition can be progressively enhanced, fostering optimistic and resilient personality traits that fortify their psychological defences against occupational pressures and mental challenges.

4.2 Strengthening Social Support Networks and Optimising Interpersonal Dynamics

Quality interpersonal relationships and diverse social support systems are crucial pillars for alleviating teachers' psychological burdens and bolstering mental resilience. Higher education institutions may adopt a dual-pronged approach of "platform building" and "capacity guidance": at the organisational level, regularly hosting interdisciplinary team-building activities, mental health-themed salons, and teaching experience-sharing sessions to break down professional and workplace barriers, creating relaxed communication settings that foster emotional connections and mutual support among colleagues; Simultaneously, introduce professional interpersonal communication training courses to enhance teachers' skills in listening, expression, and other social interactions, thereby reducing sensitivity and feelings of alienation in relationships. At the individual level, encourage teachers to proactively expand their support networks—actively seeking emotional resonance within the family (e.g., jointly planning family activities) while also participating in professional communities and interest groups to build a multi-tiered social support network encompassing "colleagues + family + external communities." This comprehensive support system not only strengthens teachers' sense of belonging and security but also provides diverse emotional solace and practical assistance during stressful periods, thereby helping maintain positive psychological states.

4.3 Establishing a Full-Cycle Psychological Support System to Enhance Guidance and Crisis Intervention

Higher education institutions must establish a full-chain teacher mental health service mechanism encompassing "prevention-guidance-intervention" to achieve early identification, early intervention, and early resolution of psychological issues. In the prevention phase, regular mental health screenings should be conducted to establish faculty psychological profiles and dynamically monitor mental state changes. Concurrently, thematic workshops on stress management, emotional regulation, and mindfulness meditation should be offered, imparting practical psychological adjustment techniques (such as breathing relaxation methods and exercise-based stress reduction programmes) to enhance teachers' self-regulation capabilities. For counselling, dedicated teacher counselling centres staffed by professional counsellors should provide confidential one-to-one support. A 24-hour psychological assistance hotline and online consultation channels must be operational to ensure timely access to expert support when required. For crisis intervention, a three-tiered early warning system (classroom-department-university) is implemented. This enables rapid activation of targeted intervention plans (such as dedicated support teams or referrals to specialist medical institutions) for teachers experiencing collective psychological fluctuations (e.g., high incidence of professional

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burnout) or individual psychological crises, safeguarding the stability of the teaching staff's mental health.

4.4 Promoting Work-Family Synergy and Optimising Organisational Support

Fostering constructive work-family interaction is pivotal to alleviating teachers' psychological attrition and enhancing well-being. Higher education institutions may advance this through "individual guidance" and "organisational safeguards": At the individual level, through time management training and role awareness lectures, guide staff to define clear boundaries between work and family life, mastering techniques for balancing "efficient work with quality companionship" (e.g., creating daily task lists, reserving dedicated family time) to prevent occupational stress spilling into domestic life. At the organisational level, implement family-friendly policies: introduce flexible working arrangements (such as remote working and staggered working hours) to accommodate staff caring for elderly relatives or children; establish supporting services like childcare provision and educational counselling; and organise "Family Open Days" to enhance family understanding and support for staff work commitments. Simultaneously, continuously optimise organisational infrastructure and culture—upgrade teaching and administrative facilities to reduce physical burdens; refine remuneration and promotion systems to move beyond narrow "research-centric" or "publication-centric" metrics; foster an equitable, inclusive, and respectful organisational ethos to fundamentally enhance professional satisfaction and mental well-being.

5. Discussion

Positive psychology offers novel perspectives and effective pathways for promoting and intervening in university faculty mental health. By cultivating positive personality traits, educators can fortify their professional convictions, maintaining optimism and resilience amid multifaceted occupational pressures. Weaving denser social support networks and optimising interpersonal dynamics enables faculty to access diverse emotional solace and practical assistance, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging and security. Establishing a comprehensive psychological support system with strengthened counselling and crisis intervention enables early identification, intervention, and resolution of psychological issues, safeguarding the stability of the teaching workforce's mental health. Promoting work-family coordination and optimising organisational support environments helps alleviate psychological attrition among teachers, thereby enhancing their well-being. These interconnected and synergistic strategies collectively empower university faculty to achieve dual enhancement in intrinsic growth and psychological well-being, fostering more comprehensive and sustainable self-development. This, in turn, provides robust support for elevating educational quality and ensuring the sustainable development of the teaching profession, propelling the education sector towards a healthier and more positive trajectory.

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