

# Educational Reform Strategy for Improving Mental Health Literacy of Vocational College Students

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**Abstract:** Depression is a prevalent negative emotion in daily lives that threatens individuals' physical and mental well-being. Adult attachment plays a crucial role in interpersonal relationships. In this study, adult attachment and depressive emotion were selected as variables to delve into the factors influencing the mental health status of vocational college students from different angles. Such research holds significant implications for fostering psychological maturity and better personality as well as developing social relations and personal careers among vocational college students. This study investigated 280 vocational college students on their adult attachment styles and depressive emotion and came to the following conclusions: (1) Significant difference was observed in attachment anxiety between genders, with males experiencing lower levels of attachment anxiety compared to females; (2) Students across different academic years showed significant variations in avoidant attachment and depressive emotion, with sophomores and juniors exhibiting lower levels of depressive emotion compared to freshmen; (3) Significant differences were also observed in the levels of depressive emotion between students who are only children and those who have siblings, with the latter group reporting lower levels of depression; (4) Significant positive correlations were found between the level of depressive emotion and both attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety, that is, the lower the degrees of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, the less likely for students to be depressed. In terms of the above, below educational strategies for improving the mental health literacy of vocational college students were proposed: (1) Educational institutions should shift from lecturer-led teaching to practical teaching in mental health education; (2)

**Educational institutions should offer different mental health courses based on the attachment styles of vocational college students.**

**Keywords:** Adult Attachment; Depressive Emotion; Vocational College Students; Mental Health Literacy; Educational Strategies

## 1. Research Background

As science and technology continue to advance, society progresses at an accelerated pace. However, individuals have not fully acclimated to the rapid societal changes and still perceive the emerging society through outdated perspectives, leading to negative emotional experiences. Vocational college students are no exception in this regard. The mental well-being of vocational college students in China has become a significant concern due to the widespread prevalence of anxiety and depression among them.

Depression, also known as 'cold of the soul' in international studies, is a prevalent negative emotion in daily lives that threatens individuals' physical and mental well-being [1]. A survey conducted in China revealed that 29.3% of the depressed population are college students. This statistic implies that college students, being a sensitive and distinct social group, may be overwhelmed by pressures from various aspects such as academic performance, employment prospects, and interpersonal relationships, thereby exacerbating the impact of negative emotions.

Adult attachment plays a crucial role in interpersonal relationships. It refers to the emotional bond of adults with those around them. If individual have developed a secure attachment style during childhood, they are likely to form secure attachment patterns with their partners or close friends in adulthood and exhibit greater trust in interpersonal communication [2]. Conversely, individuals

who have not formed secure attachments during childhood may experience social anxiety and avoidance within intimate relationships while harboring distrust towards others. These manifestations are primarily characterized by timidity, isolation, unsociability, and emotional instability which can lead to stress within interpersonal relationships.

Some vocational college students still hold out-dated perspectives on mental health issues and struggle to address them effectively. Due to their lack of understanding regarding negative emotions such as depression and anxiety disorders, they feel strong stigma when these mental health issues surface.

In this study, adult attachment and depressive emotion were selected as variables to delve into the factors influencing the mental health status of vocational college students from different angles. Such research holds significant implications for fostering psychological maturity and better personality as well as developing social relations and personal careers among vocational college students.

### 1.1 Definition of Adult Attachment

In 1987, Hanzan & Shaver introduced the concept of adult attachment, conceptualizing the affectional bonds in romantic love between adults as a distinct attachment style. Unlike infants, adults shift their attachment figures from parents to friends or partners, and in certain scenarios, even teachers, psychological counselors or superiors can serve as attachment figures. Consequently, attachment has evolved into a hierarchical and dynamic system [3].

In 2006, Li et al proposed that research on attachment should extend to adults and identified two dimensions of adult attachment: anxiety and avoidance [4]. He applied this framework to intimate relationships where individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety exhibit a fear of rejection or abandonment while those with high levels of attachment avoidance experience discomfort when getting close to others and struggle with trust issues [5].

In a study conducted in 2018 by Zhang, adult attachment was considered an extension of the internal working model developed during childhood attachments which also influences

early attachments in children [6]. As time passes by, individuals may not accurately recall their early experiences of attachments; instead their cognition and evaluation of these experiences change as they gain more maturity and experience.

This study defined adult attachment as an enduring emotional bond between individuals within current romantic partnerships encompassing two dimensions: anxiety and avoidance.

### 1.2 Definition of Depressive Emotion

In 2019, Zhu et al proposed a concise definition for depressive emotion as prolonged negative emotions experienced by an individual [7].

Domestic and foreign studies have shown that external factors such as being left behind, excessive control, childhood trauma [8], single parent families, emergency events, alcoholism, interpersonal relationships, employment prospects, economic income, social capital, as well as individual internal factors such as attachment relationships, attribution styles, perceived social support, perfectionism, and life satisfaction, can all have an impact on depression among college students [9].

This study adopted the operational definition of depressive emotion as negative emotions characterized by frustration and low spirit.

## 2. Research Objective

The objective of this study is to examine the correlation between depressive emotion and adult attachment in order to gain insights into the mental health status of contemporary vocational college students. Our aim is to derive effective strategies for addressing mental health issues based on the findings.

**Table 1. Basic Information of the Subjects**

Name of variable	Classification of variable	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	107	47.78%
	Female	117	52.23%
Academic year	Freshman	82	36.61%
	Sophomore	78	34.82%
	Junior	64	28.57%
Only child	Yes	54	24.11%
	No	170	75.89%

## 3. Research Participants

This paper administered questionnaires to 280

vocational college students and collected 224 valid responses with an overall response rate of 96%. Basic information of the subjects was shown in Table 1. The research participants consisted of 107 males and 117 females. Among them, there were 82 freshmen, 78 sophomores, and 64 juniors. Additionally, there were 52 only children and 172 individuals with siblings.

#### 4. Research Tools

##### 4.1 Experience in Close Relationships Inventory (ECR)

ECR was originally developed by Brennan et al. The Chinese adaptation of the ECR scale was co-adapted by Li Tonggui and Kazuo Kato. ECR is a 36-item measure rated on a seven-point Likert scale. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the ECR in this study was 88.

##### 4.2 Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression

Center for epidemiological studies depression (CES-D) was designed to assess the frequency of current depressive symptoms experienced by individuals. It comprises 20 items categorized into four levels based on their manifestation or intensity over the past week; each item is scored from three to zero points accordingly. Higher score indicate more pronounced depressive emotion. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the CES-D in this study was .75.

#### 5. Results

##### 5.1 Variance Analysis of Adult Attachment and Depressive Emotion of College Students based on Academic Year

**Table 2. Variance Analysis of Adult Attachment and Depressive emotion of College Students based on Academic Year**

	Grade			F	LSD
	Freshman (N=82)	Sophomore (N=78)	Junior (N=64)		
Attachment avoidance	3.17 (0.87)	2.99 (0.83)	3.01 (0.78)	2.731 *	
Attachment anxiety	3.71 (1.09)	3.49 (0.99)	3.54 (0.90)	1.106	
Depressive emotion	16.94 (6.17)	14.02 (6.73)	14.42 (11.34)	5.208 ***	Freshmen > Juniors, Sophomores

(Note: \*\*\* $P < 0.005$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \* $P < 0.05$  the same as the following table)

According to the analysis of variance presented in Table 2, differences observed among students of different academic years in terms of attachment avoidance and depressive emotion were significant ( $F=2.731$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ;  $F=5.208$ ,  $P < 0.005$ ). Post hoc tests revealed that sophomores and juniors exhibited significantly lower levels of depressive emotion compared to freshmen.

##### 5.2 Variance Analysis of Adult Attachment and Depressive Emotion Among College Students based on Sibling Status

**Table 3. Variance Analysis of Adult Attachment and Depressive Emotion among College Students based on Sibling Status**

	Only child or not		t
	Only child (N=52)	Non only child (N=236)	
Attachment avoidance	2.79 (0.86)	2.99 (0.73)	-0.711
Attachment anxiety	3.47 (1.13)	3.69 (0.99)	-0.909
Depressive emotion	15.76 (7.66)	15.39 (9.73)	0.869**

**Table 4. Variance Analysis of Adult Attachment and Depressive Emotion of College Students based on Gender**

	Gender		t
	Male (N=127)	Female (N=161)	
Attachment avoidance	2.87 (0.84)	2.85 (0.82)	0.533
Attachment anxiety	3.22 (0.92)	3.69 (0.99)	-3.287***
Depressive emotion	15.78 (9.66)	15.02 (9.17)	1.102

An independent sample t-test was conducted to examine the differences. The results shown in Table 3 indicated that there were no significant difference between individuals who were only children or not in terms of both attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety ( $t=-0.711$ ,  $p>0.05$ ;  $t=-0.909$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). However, a significant difference was found in the dimension of depressive emotion where children with siblings displayed lower levels of depressive emotion than only children ( $t=-0.869$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ).

##### 5.3 Variance Analysis of Adult Attachment and Depressive Emotion of College Students based on Gender

An independent sample t-test was conducted to

examine the differences. The results shown in Table 4 indicated that gender did not show any significant differences regarding both attachment avoidance and depressive emotion ( $t=0.533$ ,  $p>0.05$ ;  $t=1.102$ ,  $p>0.05$ ); However, it revealed significant difference concerning attachment anxiety, with males exhibiting lower levels compared to females ( $t=-3.287$ ,  $P<0.005$ ).

**Table 5. Study on the Correlation between Depressive emotion and Adult Attachment among College Students**

	Attachment avoidance	Attachment anxiety	Depressive emotion
Attachment avoidance	1		
Attachment anxiety	0.20 * *	1	
Depressive emotion	0.33 * *	0.30 * *	1

#### 5.4 Study on the Correlation between Depressive Emotion and Adult Attachment among College Students

As presented in Table 5, there were moderate positive correlations between attachment anxiety and depressive emotion as well as between attachment avoidance and depressive emotion ( $r_1=0.33$ ,  $r_2=0.30$ ), which indicated that individuals with lower levels of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance are less likely to experience depression.

### 6. Discussion and Analysis

#### 6.1 Variance Analysis of Adult Attachment and Depressive Emotion of College Students based on Gender

The findings of the study revealed significant gender differences in aspects such as attachment anxiety. Specifically, males exhibited lower levels of attachment anxiety compared to females, who demonstrated a higher propensity for anxiety in attachment relationships. This discrepancy can be attributed to the divergent thought processes inherent to each gender. Consequently, in the context of interpersonal communication, females are more likely to encounter heightened anxiety when establishing intimate relationships than their male counterparts.

#### 6.2 Variance Analysis of Depressive Emotion of College Students based on

#### Sibling Status

Research has indicated that the presence of siblings significantly impacts depressive emotion. Specifically, individuals who are not only children tend to exhibit lower levels of depressive emotion compared to those who are only children.

Several factors may contribute to the observed differences in depressive emotion between only children and those with siblings. Firstly, single children often receive more focused attention from their parents. They tend to prioritize their own needs above others. This self-centered approach can become problematic when they enter college, as they may struggle to adjust to new environments and integrate into group settings. In contrast, children with siblings are frequently encouraged by their parents to develop empathy and consider others' perspectives, equipping them with the social skills necessary to navigate interpersonal relationships effectively. As a result, they are less likely to experience depression triggered by environmental changes. Secondly, the parents of an only child may have higher expectations for their offspring, imposing pressures that exceed the child's coping capabilities. This heightened expectation can contribute to increased stress levels and, potentially, depressive symptoms. In families with multiple children, while parents may also hold high expectations for their offspring, the pressure is often distributed among the siblings, making it more manageable. Conversely, only children are at a higher risk of social dysfunction and interpersonal difficulties due to growing up in a more isolated environment, lacking regular interaction and playtime with peers. This absence of sibling interaction can hinder the development of their social skills.

#### 6.3 Correlation between Depressive Emotion and Adult Attachment of College Students

Research findings demonstrated a positive correlation between depressive emotion and both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Individuals with an avoidant attachment style tend to be highly self-reliant and hesitant to establish intimate relationships, striving for spiritual and emotional autonomy and preferring to tackle challenges independently. When outcomes do not align

with their expectations, they are prone to self-dissatisfaction and self-criticism. This tendency to distance themselves from others results in a lack of social support, which can lead to depression. Individuals with an anxious attachment style tend to react excessively to the responses of others. Negative feedback can lead them to engage in excessive self-reflection, overanalyze their behaviors, and engage in self-blame. Over time, this pattern can predispose them to depression. Compared to those with an avoidant attachment style, individuals with an anxious attachment style are more susceptible to depressive emotion.

### **7. Educational Reform Strategy for Improving Mental Health Literacy of Vocational College Students**

Drawing from developmental psychology, vocational college students are classified within the early adulthood stage. Observations in classroom settings have revealed distinct behavioral patterns among these students: firstly, they demonstrate a basic capacity for learning yet exhibit minimal enthusiasm towards their studies; secondly, there is a prevalent low sense of self-efficacy; thirdly, a portion of the student body is frequently engulfed in negative emotions in their everyday lives; and fourthly, some students lack hobbies or interests, dedicating the majority of their time to online gaming and watching short videos.

We propose below strategies based on the unique characteristics of vocational college students as well as the results of this study:

#### **7.1 A Shift from Lecturer-Led Teaching to Practical Teaching**

Lecturer-led teaching employs a traditional classroom methodology, wherein instructors utilize resources such as textbooks, chalk, blackboards, and basic models to deliver lessons primarily through verbal instruction, with the primary objective being the transfer of knowledge [10].

Practical teaching integrates theoretical knowledge with hands-on experience, actively involving students in real-world applications. This approach not only enhances students' comprehension of the material but also facilitates the application of learned concepts. Moreover, practical teaching significantly boosts students' practical skills and their

capacity to solve problems.

Under the lecturer-led teaching approach, vocational college students often struggle to recognize and respond to others' emotional shifts, limiting their ability to enhance their personal development. The scenarios presented in such a teaching format may seem more like narratives shared with passive observers, where only those who have personally encountered similar experiences might feel empathetic and engage in private discussions about their emotional responses with instructors, though such instances are rare. Conversely, practical teaching immerses students in direct experiences tailored to their individual traits, leading to significantly more impactful outcomes.

#### **7.2 Different Practice Mental Health Courses shall be tailored to Accommodate the Varying Attachment styles of Vocational College Students**

The curriculum of practical courses should be tailored to accommodate the varying attachment styles of students. For students with an avoidant attachment style, characterized by a strong reliance on self, a reluctance to form close relationships, a pursuit of spiritual and emotional independence, and a tendency to address challenges independently, the course design needs to be particularly mindful. Such students may experience dissatisfaction and self-criticism when outcomes do not meet their expectations, largely due to their self-imposed isolation, which impedes their ability to garner social support, potentially leading to depression. Therefore, practical teaching should aim to facilitate opportunities for students with an avoidant attachment style to engage in social interactions, thereby enhancing their social support network and contributing to improved mental health.

Individuals with an anxious attachment style tend to react excessively to the responses of others. Negative feedback can lead them to engage in excessive self-reflection, overanalyze their behaviors, and engage in self-blame. Over time, this pattern can predispose them to depression. Practical teaching should aim to equip students with an anxious attachment style with the skills to solve problems independently, thereby diminishing their anxiety regarding feedback from others and contributing to better mental

health.

### 8. Conclusion

This study was to find out that:

1. In the student population of vocational colleges, females are more likely to have attachment anxiety.
2. Freshman students are more likely to experience depression after enrollment than other grades.
3. Only children are more likely to experience depression than who have siblings.
4. the lower the degrees of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, the less likely for students to be depressed.

Based on the above results of this study, it is recommended that educational institutions should shift from lecturer-led teaching to practical teaching in mental health education. When the students enroll, they should be evaluated for attachment types and divided into classes according to the evaluation results. Then, educational institutions should offer different mental health courses based on the attachment styles of vocational college students.

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