

On adolescent lifestyle and mental health

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Abstract: A healthy lifestyle provides adolescents with physiological support for mental health, helps maintain stable mindsets and positive psychological functioning, and facilitates the building of sound interpersonal environments as well as the development of a well-integrated personality. Therefore, society, schools, and families should guide adolescents toward positive and healthy living habits, create an enabling atmosphere for cultivating healthy lifestyles, promote the formation of sound behavioral norms, and strengthen psychological counseling and individualized guidance, so as to foster adolescent mental health.

Keywords: adolescents, lifestyle, mental health

1. Introduction

Lifestyle refers to the patterns of activity and behavioral habits adopted by people under given real-life conditions to satisfy their own needs, manifesting in such domains as basic subsistence, work and study, material consumption, spiritual and cultural engagement, interpersonal interaction, religious belief, political participation, and leisure and recreation. In modern society, the proliferation of household appliances, convenient communication platforms such as telephones and the internet, advanced transportation systems, and rapid, massive flows of information have brought dual-edged changes to people's lifestyles. While online shopping and digital communication offer unprecedented convenience, they also contribute to physical inactivity and diminished face-to-face social interaction. Even as high technology accelerates the pace of life, individuals face intensifying social competition and life pressures. Indiscriminate consumption of rich foods, coupled with low energy expenditure, leads to the accumulation of excess nutrients in the body, increasing the risk of obesity, hypertension, and hyperlipidemia. These trends are equally prevalent among adolescents. Unhealthy lifestyle patterns—including unbalanced diets, high-salt and high-fat food consumption, skipping breakfast, physical inactivity, internet addiction, television dependence, irregular sleep schedules, imbalance between work and rest, social withdrawal, extreme behaviors, smoking, alcohol abuse, and substance dependence—undermine adolescents' physical and mental well-being and impede their healthy development. It is therefore imperative to guide and cultivate healthy lifestyles among adolescents so as to promote their psychological health.

2. The role of healthy lifestyles in adolescent mental health

2.1. The association between lifestyle and adolescent mental health

In modern society, common adolescent lifestyles encompass dietary patterns, physical activity, sleep habits, leisure and recreation, interpersonal interaction, and learning approaches. Lifestyle exerts a significant influence on adolescent mental health. Jiang Liping and Wu Yin conducted a questionnaire survey involving 1,306 college students in Shanghai and found a significant correlation between lifestyle and mental health: the healthier the lifestyle, the better the mental health status.[1] Qiu Yuan's investigation revealed a correlation coefficient of 0.6608 between lifestyle and mental health, indicating a significant positive correlation. Various lifestyle dimensions—including dietary habits, physical exercise, stress control, alcohol and substance use, safety awareness, and smoking—all significantly affected mental health. Notably, physical exercise, dietary habits, and alcohol/substance use emerged as key predictors of college students' mental health status.[2] Gu Da Cheng's findings further demonstrate that lifestyle positively promotes mental health. In the process of improving mental health, a one-unit increase in overall lifestyle

score corresponds to a 1.789-fold increase in mental health level. Lifestyle not only directly affects mental health but also indirectly influences it through physical health as a mediating variable.[3] Zhang Haifang et al. surveyed 320 high school students in Xi'an and found multiple significant correlations across six lifestyle dimensions—diet, exercise, leisure, social interaction, substance use, and self-care—and various dimensions of mental health. Diet, social interaction, and self-care emerged as significant predictors of mental health, indicating that healthier lifestyles are associated with fewer psychological problems.[4] In summary, lifestyle constitutes a critical determinant of adolescent mental health, and healthy living patterns play a vital role in promoting psychological well-being.

2.2. Providing physiological support for mental health

First, a healthy lifestyle provides physiological support for adolescent mental health. Physical exercise constitutes a salient component of healthy living. Long-term engagement in sports not only strengthens physical fitness but also improves reaction speed, rendering individuals more alert and agile, thereby laying a physiological foundation for psychological well-being. Chinese scholar Qiu Yuan conducted a cluster-randomized study involving 358 college students and found that physical exercise accounted for 52.5% of the variance in adolescent mental health outcomes.[5] Sustained physical activity reduces anxiety levels among adolescents and enhances their sense of self-efficacy. Three dimensions—attitude toward exercise, duration per session, and exercise adherence—exert primary effects and serve as significant contributors to adolescent mental health. However, the current status of physical exercise participation among Chinese college students remains suboptimal. Scholar Zhuang Zhibin randomly sampled 1,000 college students in Fujian Province and found that only 42% exercised more than twice a week, while approximately 19% scarcely engaged in any physical exercise at all.[6] Scientific sleep represents another essential healthy lifestyle behavior. Sleep serves as a critical process for physical restoration and memory consolidation, occupying roughly one-third of the human lifespan. Sleep deprivation gives rise to a cascade of somatic and psychiatric disturbances.[7] Adhering to scientifically sound sleep practices in daily life not only alleviates fatigue and regulates bodily functions but also sustains an optimistic and proactive mindset while enhancing learning and work efficiency. The Shandong Mental Health Center surveyed 560 college students and found that 13.93% reported poor sleep quality. Subsequent SCL-90 factor analysis revealed that among these students, 7.0% to 27.9% exhibited varying degrees of psychological problems. This indicates a significant positive correlation between sleep quality and mental health.[8]

2.3. Maintaining stable mindsets and positive psychological functioning

2.3.1. Healthy learning approaches and positive academic emotions

Second, a healthy lifestyle contributes to adolescents' maintenance of stable mindsets and positive psychological functioning. The soundness of one's learning approach directly affects psychological states. Chinese scholar Sang Qingsong demonstrated that students adopting different learning approaches differ significantly in academic efficiency. Adolescents who employ a deep learning approach—characterized by strong curiosity, an intrinsic desire for knowledge, and active efforts to construct meaning—not only achieve superior academic performance but also experience more frequent positive emotions such as joy, satisfaction, and pride throughout the learning process. Their perceptions of the classroom environment are also notably more positive, vibrant, and harmonious compared to peers adopting a surface learning approach.[9]

2.3.2. Aesthetic and leisure activities: emotion regulation and mental equilibrium

Music listening constitutes an important aesthetic lifestyle practice. For adolescents, engaging with music during leisure time after studying or working effectively relaxes the body and alleviates negative emotions. When agitated, listening to slow-tempo, contemplative music can help restore emotional equilibrium; when in low spirits, exposure to beautiful light music or serious classical compositions can facilitate mood transformation. Scholars have investigated the effects of music listening on patients' psycho physiological responses and found that regularly listening to self-selected preferred music not only effectively ameliorates emotional reactions but also activates positive endogenous factors, enhances the body's self-regulatory capacity, alleviates somatic symptoms, and strengthens immune function.[10]

Extracurricular engagement—such as reading books and newspapers and participating in various cultural and sports activities—enables adolescents to cultivate healthy lifestyle patterns including reading, painting appreciation, swimming, basketball, and physical fitness training. Such activities serve a dual purpose: they purify the mind and foster moral sensibility on one hand, while providing an outlet for negative emotions such as anxiety, tension, sorrow, and depression on the other. This facilitates the re-balancing of disrupted psychological states and sustains healthy, stable mindsets alongside positive psychological activity levels. As Mr. Hu Shi once observed, "If we wish to live free from suffering or degradation, we must develop diverse amateur interests so that our spirit finds sustenance and our surplus energy finds expression. With such gratifying pursuits, life becomes neither barren nor spiritually stifling." [11]

2.4. Building a sound interpersonal environment

2.4.1. Healthy lifestyles and interpersonal environment

Third, a healthy lifestyle facilitates the building of a sound interpersonal environment among adolescents. Interpersonal interaction constitutes a fundamental pathway and primary modality through which individuals come to know themselves, others, and society. Healthy interpersonal relationships enhance adolescents' self-awareness and foster friendship and cooperative ties with others. Healthy lifestyle patterns—such as being artistically accomplished, physically active, disciplined and punctual, amiable and outgoing, honest and fair—contribute to improved interpersonal relations. Zhu Jinwei, in a study on the role of sports in college students' interpersonal interactions, found that physical activity provides more suitable venues and opportunities for social engagement, deepens emotional bonds among students, cultivates positive personal qualities conducive to interpersonal relations, and promotes the development of both competitive awareness and cooperative competence within peer relationships. Sports thus contribute to the construction of a favorable interpersonal environment for adolescents. [12]

Healthy learning approaches also encourage adolescents to actively participate in meaningful interpersonal activities, such as subject-based interest groups, volunteer services, extracurricular hobby clubs, and recreational and sporting events. These activities help adolescents move beyond egocentrism and develop egalitarian, respectful, understanding, mutually supportive, and affectionate interpersonal relationships, thereby fostering an interpersonal environment characterized by trust, sincerity, tolerance, solidarity, and harmony. Healthy hygiene practices—such as regular handwashing, frequent clothing changes, maintaining early sleep and wake routines, and abstaining from tobacco and alcohol—render adolescents vibrant and healthy. These habits not only create a pleasant impression on others in social interactions but also bolster adolescents' self-confidence and capacity to form friendships, contributing to a sound interpersonal environment.

2.4.2. Unhealthy lifestyles, interpersonal environment, and interventions

However, contemporary adolescents increasingly devote substantial time to unhealthy lifestyle patterns—including online gaming, smartphone dependence, television addiction, and other passive or maladaptive habits—which obstruct the development of healthy interpersonal environments. Relevant correlational research indicates that higher levels of internet dependence correspond to greater difficulty in engaging with real-life social counterparts, elevating the risk of social withdrawal and avoidant participation tendencies, thereby undermining the quality of face-to-face interpersonal interactions. [13] How educators can guide adolescents in transforming and correcting these lifestyle patterns that impede interpersonal functioning warrants serious attention.

2.5. Promoting personality development and refinement

Fourth, a healthy lifestyle promotes the development and refinement of adolescent personality. Adolescence is a period marked by pronounced physiological and psychological transformations and constitutes a critical window for the formation of personality traits. The cultivation of positive qualities during this stage engenders a clear self-concept and a well-defined sense of life direction; conversely, their absence renders life aimless and precipitates psychological crisis. Open, exploratory, and enterprising lifestyle patterns encourage adolescents to engage in diverse practical activities such as social observation,

community surveys, voluntary service, and public welfare labor. These experiences expand adolescents' living space and increase their exposure to society, enhancing both their capacity for interpersonal interaction and their conscious cultivation of moral character, etiquette, manners, and individuality. Through practice, such cultivated dispositions become internalized into adolescent personality, fostering a deep-seated understanding of how to respect, empathize with, and serve others.

Rich and varied leisure activities—such as volleyball, football, dance, choral singing, sketching, and web design—cater to adolescents' diverse interests, broaden their intellectual horizons, expand their living space, improve psychological attributes, and enhance multiple competencies, thereby facilitating the holistic development of personality. Chinese scholar Wei Shumin has demonstrated that leisure activities constitute an indispensable component of adolescent life and are essential to their harmonious, balanced, and healthy development. With their extensive scope, rich content, and flexible formats, leisure activities hold positive value for the development of healthy personality, contributing to enhanced social adaptability, desirable affective qualities, and clear self-evaluation—key dimensions of sound personality development and refinement.[14]

3. Strategies for promoting adolescent mental health

Given the significant positive impact of healthy lifestyles on adolescent mental health, society, schools, and families should prioritize attention to adolescents' lifestyle patterns and adopt effective measures to guide them toward wholesome, healthy living, thereby fostering their psychological well-being.

3.1. Lifestyle education and healthy living orientation

First, emphasis should be placed on lifestyle education to guide adolescents in developing healthy living concepts. Lifestyle represents behavioral patterns shaped by underlying living philosophies. Healthy living concepts exert a guiding influence on adolescents' adoption of healthy lifestyles. To this end, schools should attach great importance to and strengthen lifestyle education, providing comprehensive instruction and guidance across multiple dimensions—including life philosophy, life attitudes, behavioral norms, and daily habits. Particular attention should be paid to instilling the concept of healthy living and fostering corresponding behaviors, which ought to be integrated into all aspects of school education—moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education. Through diverse curricular domains, schools can guide adolescents toward gradually establishing healthy living norms and cultivating positive behavioral habits, thereby promoting the formation of healthy living concepts such as outlooks on happiness, learning, success, consumption, leisure, career, and love. Equipped with healthy living concepts, adolescents will proactively embrace healthy lifestyles, engage more thoughtfully with the meaning and value of life, and approach learning, daily living, and social participation with an enterprising mindset and abundant enthusiasm, ultimately achieving sound growth and holistic development.

3.2. Guidance and training for healthy habit formation

3.2.1. Strengthening guidance and training on healthy lifestyles

Second, guidance and training on healthy lifestyles should be strengthened to promote the formation of positive and healthy living habits among adolescents. Owing to limited life experience and knowledge, adolescents often lack adequate understanding of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle and possess insufficient capacity to distinguish healthy from unhealthy behavioral patterns. Some have already developed numerous unhealthy habits—such as imbalanced diets, excessive consumption of high-salt and high-fat foods, physical inactivity, internet addiction, smoking, alcohol abuse, and substance dependence. To address this, it is imperative to intensify guidance and training on healthy lifestyles, helping adolescents acquire knowledge of the characteristics, norms, and practical skills associated with various healthy living patterns.

To promote healthy eating, adolescents should be educated about the nutritional functions of daily foods and the hazards of picky eating and junk food consumption. They should be assisted in formulating scientific dietary plans, encouraged to eat three meals at regular intervals with appropriate portions, chew food thoroughly, attend to nutritional balance, and increase fruit and vegetable intake. To encourage

physical exercise, adolescents should be instructed in the basic principles, guidelines, and methods of scientific physical activity, supported in developing structured exercise plans, and supervised in adhering to those plans over time. To foster healthy hygiene practices, adolescents should be made aware of common unhygienic habits and their associated risks, guided away from undesirable behaviors such as spitting in public and littering, and directed toward positive practices including regular bathing, frequent clothing changes, nail trimming, tooth brushing twice daily, hand washing before meals and after using the toilet, and maintaining tidy appearance.

3.2.2. Correcting detrimental habits and cultivating healthy ones

To help adolescents overcome detrimental habits such as smoking, alcohol abuse, internet addiction, and aggressive behavior, they must be made fully aware of the serious consequences of such behaviors and provided with concrete steps and methods for overcoming them. Those struggling with severe addictive patterns warrant particular attention, and gradual desensitization strategies should be employed to help them progressively disengage from these harmful habits. Through sustained guidance and training, efforts should focus on facilitating adolescents' internalization of healthy lifestyles into stable, routinized living habits. Once established, healthy living habits function as an "auto-pilot system" within adolescents' psychological lives, enabling them to approach learning, daily living, and work automatically and consistently in accordance with healthy living norms and practical skills.

3.3. Optimizing campus culture and creating a healthy living environment

Third, the campus environment and living culture should be optimized to foster an atmosphere conducive to adolescents' adoption of healthy and wholesome lifestyles. Aesthetically pleasing campus surroundings and rich, diverse cultural life cultivate students' dispositions, purify their spirits, guide them toward an appreciation of life's beauty, and encourage the development of positive lifestyle patterns—including affinity with nature, pursuit of virtue, and refined civility. Accordingly, schools should make concerted efforts to strengthen the development of both campus environment culture and living culture. On one hand, well-designed environmental cultural facilities should be established, with increased investment in campus greening and landscape development, so that every tree, blade of grass, scenic spot, and architectural detail embodies cultural elements—such as tree culture, bamboo culture, lawn culture, wall culture, path culture, stone inscription culture, and sculpture culture. On the other hand, vigorous efforts should be devoted to developing campus living culture—including sports culture, music culture, dance culture, arts and crafts culture, poetry and calligraphy culture, and broadcast media culture—complemented by systematically organized, multi-tiered, cross-disciplinary cultural activities such as sports meets, debates, oratorical contests, performance competitions, interest groups, student club activities, and social gatherings. These rich and varied environmental and living cultural offerings not only expand students' intellectual horizons, improve their knowledge structures, and broaden their life interests, but also refine their living patterns, enabling them to optimize and improve their lifestyles more effectively through immersion, reflection, and lived experience.

3.4. Coordinated efforts to foster healthy living norms

3.4.1. The normative function of school institutions

Fourth, schools, families, and society should work in concert to promote the formation of sound living norms among adolescents. Well-established living norms constitute a crucial safeguard for adolescents' adoption of healthy and civilized lifestyles. Schools, families, and society must align their efforts and provide consistent, science-based guidance on adolescents' living habits and codes of conduct, thereby facilitating the development of positive living norms.

First, schools should formulate a set of accessible and practical daily living management systems tailored to adolescents' actual lives and aligned with relevant documents issued by educational authorities. These include classroom discipline, extracurricular conduct norms, dormitory management regulations, off-campus behavioral rules, morning exercise routines, and evening self-study requirements. Such systems ensure that all adolescent activities are governed by clear rules, encouraging self-regulated adherence to school regulations and the cultivation of healthy living patterns and habits.

3.4.2. *Parental modeling and collaborative support*

Second, parents should recognize the influential role of their own modeling and the home environment in shaping children's living norms. They must exercise self-discipline, maintain exemplary behavioral standards, and abide by laws and ethics, allowing their own healthy lifestyles and habits to positively influence and inspire their children. Parents should refrain from introducing detrimental social attitudes and behaviors into the household. Simultaneously, they should actively cooperate with schools, maintain open communication with their children, monitor their evolving thoughts and attitudes in a timely manner, and take preventive measures against the formation of undesirable living norms.

3.4.3. *Environmental cultivation and comprehensive governance of society*

Third, fostering a healthy broader social environment is equally critical. Social and community governance authorities should assume their responsibilities by collaborating with schools to resolutely shut down unlicensed or illegally operated entertainment venues near schools—including internet cafés, video game arcades, karaoke bars, and gambling parlors. Effective measures should be taken to vigorously promote positive living culture while eliminating decadent and backward cultural influences, thereby creating a healthy and harmonious learning and living environment for adolescents. When schools, families, and society operate in organic coordination, they provide a robust, positively oriented social support environment for adolescents' cultivation of healthy lifestyles and living norms.

3.5. **Counseling and individual guidance for lifestyle modification**

Fifth, psychological counseling and individualized guidance should be strengthened. Adolescents have developed numerous unhealthy lifestyles in their daily lives yet often lack the knowledge of how to make improvements. While a small proportion may proactively seek help, most tend to suppress these troubles and confusions without resolving them. Psychological counseling and guidance represent a vital means of assisting adolescents in improving their lifestyles. Schools should intensify lifestyle-related counseling efforts by incorporating the resolution of adolescents' difficulties and confusions regarding lifestyle issues into the core agenda of psychological counseling services. This includes staffing full-time psychological counselors and regularly organizing lectures on lifestyle-related topics. Targeted counseling and intervention should be provided based on individual adolescents' specific lifestyle problems. For instance, adolescents exhibiting withdrawal tendencies in interpersonal interactions should be encouraged to open up, build trust, and initiate communication with others. Those experiencing diminished motivation for learning, low energy, or emotional instability due to staying up late, malnutrition, or physical inactivity should be urged to adhere strictly to regular schedules, engage actively in exercise, and receive appropriate guidance on healthy eating. Adolescents struggling with internet addiction warrant collaborative intervention involving the student, parents, and counselors in joint deliberation to formulate targeted remediation measures and implement a step-by-step approach to overcoming the addiction. Where narrow or meaningless leisure activities contribute to poor social adaptation or unhealthy interests, schools should organize a richer array of extracurricular and out-of-school activities and guide adolescents to participate actively in them.

4. **Conclusion**

There exists a close and profound intrinsic link between adolescent lifestyles and mental health. A healthy lifestyle serves not only as a vital physiological foundation for adolescent mental health but also as a key pathway to maintaining a positive mindset, fostering a harmonious interpersonal environment, and promoting sound personality development. Against the backdrop of rapid modern social development and increasingly diversified and complex lifestyle options, adolescents face unprecedented opportunities and challenges, with unhealthy lifestyles emerging as a significant hidden threat to their psychological well-being.

Therefore, guiding adolescents toward healthy living requires more than isolated efforts by any single party. It calls for coordinated collaboration among society, schools, and families to construct a systematic support framework spanning multiple dimensions—conceptual guidance, behavioral training, environmental cultivation, norm establishment, and targeted intervention. Only by integrating healthy

lifestyle education into every facet of adolescent development can we truly achieve the goal of "fostering sound mental health through optimal living," laying a solid foundation for adolescents' holistic development and lifelong well-being, while providing robust human capital and social underpinnings for the deeper advancement of the "Healthy China" strategy.

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