

# Psychological Issues and Interventions for Orphans in the Perspective of Positive Psychology

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## Abstract

Orphans have long been a key concern for the development of education in China. This paper analyzes the current state of research on the psychological problems of orphan groups from the perspective of positive psychology and actively discusses the strategies for carrying out mental health interventions for orphan students.

**Keywords:** positive psychology, orphans, mental health

## 1. Introduction

Orphans are minors who cannot be raised by their parents due to death or loss of contact, and are vulnerable and fragile (Ling et al., 2020). This special group of orphans has frequent mental health problems due to the lack of family support and care from both parents (Mao et al., 2020). Paying attention to vulnerable children and adolescents in distress and to the psychological problems of orphans is an inevitable requirement to put the people first and build a harmonious socialist society in the new era.

Positive psychology is an important psychological movement started by Seligman in the late 20th century. Positive psychology focuses on the normal life of ordinary people, explores the strengths and virtues of people's character, and believes in their own developmental potential. Unlike traditional psychology, positive psychology is more concerned with the enhancement of an

individual's subjective well-being rather than the assessment and correction of mental illness. If traditional psychology is the process of -1 to 0, positive psychology is the process of 0 to 1 (Zeng Guang & Zhao Yukun, 2018).

In recent years, with the popularity of positive psychology, scholars in China have applied it to mental health research and intervention for orphaned groups, and have achieved promising results.

## 2. Common Psychological Problems of Orphans

### 2.1 Self-Stigmatization

Orphan self-stigma is a psychological phenomenon in which orphans internalize negative public stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination against themselves (Wang, Jiang-Yang, et al., 2017). Due to the lack of normal family system support, orphaned children are characterized by the stigma of "orphan" status and often receive stigmatizing messages from outside groups such as "orphans

lack family upbringing” and “orphans are pathetic”. “When orphans internalize these messages, they develop self-stigma (Wang, Jiang-Yang et al., 2017). Self-stigma causes individuals to perceive discrimination and hostility from the outside world, which in turn causes great stress to orphans. Studies in China have shown that orphans with high self-stigma are more likely to perceive rejection messages in social interactions and develop identity rejection-sensitive personalities, which can lead to psychological problems such as anxiety, hostility, terror, and paranoia (Lai-Yuan, 2012). Self-stigma is a significant predictor of depressive mood and negative mood symptoms in orphans (Wang, J.Y., Li, A.Y., & Nie, J.X., 2020; Wang, J.Y., Yu, Z.Y., & Nie, J.X., 2020). It is evident that self-stigma is an important risk factor threatening the mental health of orphans.

### *2.2 Identity Denial Sensitivity*

Rejection sensitivity is the cognitive-emotional interaction of anxiety, anger, and anticipation that individuals exhibit when they are rejected by others (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Identity rejection sensitivity in orphans is the tendency of orphans as a stigmatized group to attribute the cause of rejection to their own identity when rejected during social interactions, resulting in anxious anticipation, preparatory awareness, and overreaction to rejection (Wang, Jiang-Yang, Li, Zhangshi, Gao, Ya-Hua, Wen, 2018). Through a subthreshold initiation study with 60 orphans, Wang, Jiang-Yang (2018) et al. found that orphans also have identity rejection sensitivity at the subthreshold level and show different characteristics from the suprathreshold. By measuring 261 orphans aged 13-19 years, Lai-Yuan (2012) found that identity rejection sensitivity positively predicted orphans’ psychological problems such as loneliness, social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, social avoidance and distress, somatization, compulsivity, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, terror, paranoia, and psychoticism.

### *2.3 Learning Disabilities*

Orphans face severe learning disabilities and live and study in orphanages or orphanages. Despite the physical and educational conditions supported by the government, orphans generally score higher on learning disabilities than students from normal families due to the lack of a normal family environment (Guan, J.,

Wang, 2011). “Spelling difficulties” is one of the learning disabilities of orphans, who are deprived of parent-child communication during the critical language acquisition period due to the loss of both parents, thus missing the best opportunity and environment for language learning. At the same time, in orphan schools, each teacher is responsible for the learning and living of several orphans at the same time, and inevitably fails to provide timely reinforcement and feedback on each orphan’s performance, thus showing a clear lack of motivation and even boredom.

### *2.4 Suicidal Self-Harming Behavior*

A study by Ling et al. (2020) found that the prevalence of suicidal self-harm behaviors among orphans was higher than that of the general population of the same age. Due to the lack of intact family support and the scarcity of positive social resources, orphans are more likely to be exposed to risks and harm in their environment. However, due to the lack of nurturing tasks, orphans do not receive timely care and protection from their parents and are more likely to develop psychological problems than children in the general population. Some orphans, when they perceive great stress, choose self-harm or even suicidal behavior due to the lack of protective factors from their families, which leads to the tragedy of life.

## **3. Positive Psychology Intervention Strategies**

### *3.1 Establish a Strong Social Support System*

Humans are herd animals, and people cannot live without socialization, so good interpersonal relationships are crucial for people. The main effect model of social support suggests that social support, as a protective factor with a general gainful effect on individuals, can reduce negative emotions such as depression in individuals (Linshang Deng et al., 2012). Because orphans lack parental support from their families, it is crucial to help orphans form good peer relationships. When providing mental health education interventions for orphans, orphanages or orphan schools can guide orphans to establish good peer relationships through class construction and club activities. At the same time, establishing cross-group friendships is also beneficial to orphans’ psychological well-being. Cross-group friendships are friendships established by interactions between members of different groups. Cross-group friendships have been

shown to contribute to the reduction of identity rejection sensitivity among orphan school students (Wang, Jiang-Yang, Yin, Lili, Zhou, Tie-Min, Gao, Ya-Hua, Wen, 2016). Therefore, the community should create more opportunities for orphan students to establish friendships with members of cross-group, such as college students and graduate students, as a way to reduce orphans' identity rejection sensitivity and improve their social quality.

### 3.2 Gratitude Education

As a traditional Chinese virtue and one of the key concepts of positive psychology, Fredrickson's (2001) expanded construct theory of positive emotions states that gratitude as a positive emotion has its own unique evolutionary function and adaptive meaning. When individuals experience gratitude as a positive emotion, it can help them build positive psychological resources, which in turn promotes subjective well-being. A study by Zhang (2020) et al. on rural middle school students found a significant positive correlation between gratitude and appreciative social support. Individuals who experienced more gratitude had higher levels of appreciative social support. Appreciative social support has been shown to be significantly and negatively related to negative affect in orphaned middle school students (Wang, Jiang-Yang, Yu, Z-Yang, Nie, J-X, 2020). In mental health education interventions for orphans, positive psychology methods such as good love meditation, gratitude journals, and gratitude visits can be used to improve orphan students' gratitude levels, which in turn can help orphans construct positive personal resources and improve their mental health.

### 3.3 Develop an Optimistic Interpretation Style

Positive psychology researchers introduced the concept of explanatory style based on attribution theory, initially to explain phenomena in learned helplessness research that could not be explained by learned helplessness theory (Peterson, Semmel, Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky, & Seligman, 1982). Seligman (2010) argued that since people can acquire helplessness, they can also acquire optimism, i.e., learned optimism, which can also be referred to as an optimistic explanatory style. When faced with a setback, an individual's interpretation of the event will influence the individual's emotions and the subsequent behavior taken. During school and interpersonal interactions, orphans are more

likely to suffer from frustration due to the lack of parental support in the home. For example, academic problems cannot be discussed with parents, and fear of discrimination or sympathy from children from ordinary families in peer interactions. It has been shown that optimistic explanatory style can significantly and negatively predict orphans' negative emotions (Wang, J. Yang, Yu, Z. Yang, and Nie, J. Xin, 2020). Based on this, orphan schools and orphanages can help orphans develop an optimistic explanatory style through psychological counseling to help orphans develop positive perceptions of life events and face setbacks optimistically, thereby improving their psychological well-being.

### 3.4 Enhance Mental Resilience

Mental resilience is a developmental phenomenon in which individuals who have suffered severe stressful events, adversities, or major traumas do not suffer damaging effects on their bodies and minds, and even become more resilient (Xi, J.Z., 2012). Individuals with higher psychological resilience have higher resilience to stress and the ability to cope with adversity. Mental toughness has been shown to positively predict the mental health of orphans (Wang, J.Y., Li, A.Y., Nie, J.X., 2020). It can be seen that improving mental toughness is important to improve the mental health of orphans. Orphanages and orphan schools can improve orphans' mental toughness through mental health education programs that help orphan students practice positive thinking, learn positive emotion regulation strategies, develop perseverance, and physical exercise, thus promoting the improvement of orphans' mental health.

In summary, the exploration and cultivation of positive psychological qualities in orphans are of great significance for orphans to face setbacks positively and move toward a bright future. Examining the differences between orphan groups under the perspective of positive psychology and developing appropriate psychological intervention strategies for cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of orphan groups provides a new research direction for the current mental health education of orphan students. Adopting various theories and research methods of positive psychology has an important role in predicting the mental health level of orphan groups. With the emergence and development of positive

psychology in China and the increasing concern of the society for orphan groups, the mental health of orphan groups will be more strongly guaranteed.

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