

Pathways to **PRACTICE**

— A PRACTITIONER'S TOOLKIT —

FOSTERING POSITIVE COPING
AND RESILIENCE AMONG
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

By Jessica Price



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CONTENTS

- 03** Topic in context
- 05** What problem does it solve?
- 06** Who should be involved?
- 07** Terminology
- 08** Key steps in the process
- 11** Don't forget
- 12** Take-aways
- 13** Further reading
- 14** About the author



TOPIC IN CONTEXT

International students are broadly considered a vulnerable group when it comes to mental health, with a higher risk of demonstrating signs of depression, anxiety or culture shock. It is also well-documented that international students tend to avoid psychological services on campus for a variety of reasons, such as fear of stigmatisation due to language and cultural barriers. Mental health struggles can interfere with students' capacity to successfully integrate into their host university and achieve academic success.

Even before COVID-19, many practitioners spoke of a mental health epidemic among university students, which has clearly been exacerbated by this pandemic. A study conducted among student populations of 100+ countries found that during the lockdown, most students struggled with concerns about their studies and their professional future, in addition to feeling bored, anxious and frustrated. The same study pointed out that students engaged more frequently in negative coping (eg sleeping longer, drinking or smoking, seeking distraction, denial and disengagement) than positive coping (eg meditation, breathing exercises, spirituality, sports, hobbies), with detrimental outcomes to their mental health.

Negative effects of the pandemic on international students' well-being have also been recognised by university staff, who frequently



encounter distraught students before counsellors or therapists do. Regrettably, it is usually the case that academic and student support personnel end up reaching out and responding to seriously troubled students without having the professional background or training to do so.

In this context, higher education institutions and student support professionals should consider the body of work provided by positive psychology, which offers a useful framework for the development of strategies that can help students draw upon their internal and external resources in seeking to better cope with mental health challenges. In order to promote a culture of resilience and mental strength, university staff can design and deliver supportive strategies focused on helping international students develop resilient responses grounded in positive coping. A fundamental skill when building these interventions includes the capacity to have in-depth exploratory conversations with distressed students, where these positive coping responses can be properly introduced and grounded in narratives of personal growth.

WHAT PROBLEM DOES IT SOLVE?

Building interventions that support positive coping and resilience among international students can help institutions to recognise and effectively intervene in the face of the following challenges:

- Lack of understanding of how to talk and engage with psychologically overwhelmed international students, when university staff lacks counselling training.
- A reactive (as opposed to a proactive) systemic approach to international students' mental health issues.
- Having limited responses for international students who are reluctant to seek counselling support, due to fear of stigmatisation or distrust.
- Absence or limited awareness among international students of the damaging impact of negative coping tendencies when facing challenging situations (such as the COVID-19 pandemic).
- Lack of psychological resources that build proactivity, positive self-management and resilience among international students.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

Depending on the particular institutional context, different staff or faculty members may take the lead on identifying situations where 'resilience-building' student support measures are needed. During the conceptualisation and development of such interventions, the following stakeholders should be engaged:

- Counsellors and other clinical staff
- International officers or international student affairs offices
- Other student support staff who have engagement with international students

During the delivery, the following stakeholders play a crucial role:

- Student support staff
- International officers
- International student groups on campus
- Academic staff

TERMINOLOGY

Resilience:

The quality of adapting well in the face of adversity, 'bouncing back' from difficult experiences; can also involve profound personal growth

Mental strength:

Also referred to as 'mental toughness'; refers to resistance to psychological disintegration under stress

Positive/adaptive coping:

Cognitive and behavioural efforts that effectively manage stressful conditions or associated emotional distress. People who rely more on active coping strategies such as problem-solving and information-seeking tend to adapt better to life stressors

Negative/maladaptive coping:

Strategies that negatively impact mental well-being, preventing one mentally, physically or emotionally from engaging in stressful situations, often leading to social isolation

Problem-solving coping:

Efforts to directly affect and modify the source of the stress; a good example of an adaptive coping strategy

Cultural repertoire:

Set of knowledge, skills and symbols particular to specific ethno-cultural groups, from which individuals construct strategies of action

KEY STEPS IN THE PROCESS



This publication provides a step-by-step guide to engaging international students experiencing psychological distress from a **resilience-informed** perspective in a **one-on-one situation**.

Recognise psychological distress among international students and provide referrals as appropriate

1. Establish contact with student(s) of concern
2. Recognise need for urgent psychological intervention
3. Orient student to available mental health services

Outline the connection between positive coping and resilience and why it matters in times of crisis

4. Introduce the concepts of resilience and mental strength
5. Explain the connection between positive coping and resilience
6. Highlight psychological risks of negative coping
7. Explore the student's cultural repertoire as a source for positive coping and provide resources
8. Connect with international student groups

Follow up with student

9. Reach an agreement with the student
10. Develop a short-term follow-up plan.

RECOGNISE PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND REFER AS APPROPRIATE

1. Establish contact with international students of concern:

Reach out proactively to an international student demonstrating warning signs, such as withdrawal from others/loneliness; sudden uncharacteristic behaviour, eg anger or aggression; deterioration of academic performance; use of drugs, alcohol or addictive behaviours; continual seeking of special provisions; severe financial problems; or concerns by their peers or teaching staff. This contact can be framed as part of the 'student support' mechanisms available on campus. When there is a referral by a concerned friend/colleague, make the student aware of the fact that others are also worried about them. Invite the student of concern for a private conversation.

2. Recognise whether the student requires urgent psychological intervention:

Generate a low-threshold conversation with the student, expressing your concern and care by asking: "How are things for you?" Be alert to signs that the student may require urgent psychological intervention, such as verbal indications of hopelessness ("Nobody cares about me..."; "Everything is going wrong..."; "It's never going to change...") or potential suicidal ideation ("People are better off without me..."; "Life isn't worthwhile..."); intense mood swings; paranoid or delusional thinking ("They are after me.", "All professors hate me..."), or physical evidence of self-harm (injuries that have no reasonable explanation).

3. Orient the student and provide referral to mental health services on/off campus as appropriate:

In a sensitive and caring tone, inquire with the student: "What do you need to get back on a healthy path?" and suggest resources and referral to mental health services, providing concrete information (name, phone number, office location) and informing the student how these services can be particularly helpful for them. Be aware of your university protocol when dealing with suicidal or highly-distressed students and follow the institutional path with these cases.

OUTLINE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN POSITIVE COPING AND RESILIENCE AND WHY IT MATTERS IN TIMES OF CRISIS

4. Introduce the concepts of resilience and mental strength and why they matter in times of crisis or distress:

If the student is indeed distressed but does not represent a harm to themselves or others, and are keen on exploring 'self-management' tools, introduce the concept of resilience, assuring them that most humans experience distress during difficult times, but are able to bounce back from difficulties and gain mental strength. Highlight the fact that building resilience can buffer the negative emotions of stress and is also connected with academic success and a sense of well-being.



5. Explain to students the connection between positive coping and resilience:

Explain to the student how problem-solving and active coping (*ie* engaging in tasks that deal directly with the cause of situations that create stress and relying on health-promoting activities) instead of falling back on negative coping, though difficult at the very beginning, will help them overcome the emotional suffering that they experience at the moment, bounce back and adapt better to life stressors.

6. Highlight the psychological risks of negative coping:

Make clear to the student how avoidant coping (procrastination, substance consumption, seeking distraction from problems) provides a false sense of relief on the short term, but actually increases anxiety and stress in the long term, becoming another problem in addition to their current challenges.

7. Explore with the student whether they have a 'cultural repertoire' for positive coping and expand on relevant resources:

Explore with the student if they can identify healthy or positive actions that are grounded in their culture of origin that they could draw from (*ie* what is their current cultural repertoire?) and support the usefulness and value of these strategies. Additionally, provide information concerning resources available on campus and online (see 'Useful resources' at the end of this publication) to strengthen existing strategies.

8. Connect with international student groups on campus to facilitate positive social coping:

Social connection is fundamental in order to activate resilient responses among youth. Try to facilitate connections between the student of concern and other international students on campus when the student is open for these connections.

FOLLOW UP WITH STUDENT**9. Try to reach an agreement with the student:**




Make an effort to reach an agreement concerning next steps that the student is willing to take regarding their process of implementing resilient responses to life challenges. A critical question here is: "What do you imagine doing differently in the next two weeks in order to increase positive coping, after our conversation today?"

10. Develop a short-term plan to remain in contact with the student and follow up:

End the conversation in a way that will allow you or the student to come back to the subject at another time. Invite the student back to follow up in the following two weeks, if possible.



DON'T FORGET

-  Remember to always include psychological counsellors and clinical experts in your design of interventions aimed at promoting resilient responses, refining the outline provided here to reflect the unique realities of your institution.
-  Pay attention to the geographical/national differences and special needs of international students.
-  Resilience discourses may not be well-received by all students. Be sensitive to these preferences and recognise that, while extremely helpful, some students may not find this model useful.

TAKE- AWAYS



- Higher psychological resilience is strongly associated with positive coping styles among international students, a necessary capacity to thrive academically in times of crisis and difficulty.
- Recognising the psychological potential of our universal capacity to bounce back from challenges can shift our understanding from 'deficit-based narratives' concerning international students, to a focus on empowerment and acknowledgement of students' capacities to draw from their personal strengths and cultural backgrounds to face life challenges.
- Promoting resilient responses among international students matters to a university because it supports adaptation to host cultures and better academic performance among students.
- Help international students to reframe the behaviour of seeking support as a resilient response, as opposed to a sign of weakness.

FURTHER READING



[American Psychological Association: Building your resilience](#)



[Dana Foundation: Pandemic brain – parsing the mental health toll](#)



[Positive Psychology: Coping skills and positive psychology](#)



[Positive Psychology: How to become mentally strong](#)



[ResearchGate: Resilience, optimism and social support among international students](#)



[VIA Character strengths survey](#)



[World Health Organization: Doing what matters in times of stress](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica Price is a psychological therapist in private practice, lecturer at Jacobs University Bremen and HSB Hochschule Bremen in Germany, and consultant for higher education institutions with a focus on mental health, diversity and inclusion. She has worked as a psychological counsellor, coordinator of the 'Student Support Network' and chaired the Equal Opportunity Committee at Jacobs University Bremen, designing measures and supporting international students dealing with psychological crises. She is a Steering group member of the EAIE Expert Community *Guidance and Counselling*, and holds two Master's degrees in Counselling and Guidance and Integrated Social Sciences, as well as a Doctoral degree in Psychology.

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