

Application of the Four-stage Model of "Preparation, Writing, Adjustment, and Conclusion" in Mindfulness Calligraphy

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary college students face increasing academic pressure and interpersonal challenges, with anxiety, depression, and other emotional issues significantly impacting their mental health and academic performance. Calligraphy is an art form that fully embodies the characteristics of Chinese culture. Calligraphy practice combines movement and stillness and has long been regarded by the Chinese people as an essential activity for "cultivating the mind and nurturing the spirit," playing a positive role in promoting physical and mental health. This paper primarily explores the practical efficacy and value of the four-stage model ("Preparation-Writing-Adjustment-Conclusion") in mindfulness calligraphy, to provide replicable solutions for mental health education in higher education institutions.

KEYWORDS

Mindfulness calligraphy; Four-stage model; Mental health education; Psychological adjustment

1 Introduction

In recent years, mental health issues among college students have quickly become a key focus for universities, and most schools have incorporated mental health education into their core educational systems. However, as things stand, mental health education has exposed a series of issues, including the limited variety of group counseling formats, a lack of interaction, and students' confusion regarding Western-developed counseling techniques. Therefore, the urgent task for universities is to select a mental health therapy method that is both scientifically sound and culturally appropriate to improve the quality of mental health education. "Mindfulness Calligraphy" perfectly meets these requirements. It combines Chinese calligraphy art with mindfulness theory, emphasizing the focus on the writing process to achieve unity of body and mind. Compared to standard mindfulness training exercises, this approach uses the concrete act of individual stroke writing as a medium of connection, aligning with the behavioral habits of young people. According to early research from the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, students are more likely to become engrossed when holding a brush pen to write. At this time, they possess stronger emotional regulation abilities and a more concrete understanding of their self-concept. Given this, this paper will focus on analyzing and discussing the application of the "Preparation-Writing-Adjustment-Conclusion" four-stage model in mindfulness calligraphy, aiming to promote innovative development in university mental health education and help students establish a positive mindset through gradual practice.

2 The theoretical foundation of mindfulness calligraphy and mental health

2.1 The concept and psychological mechanisms of mindfulness

The term "mindfulness" originates from Buddhist meditation practice theory. Since the 1970s, Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of contemporary mindfulness research and an American scholar, has gradually refined and integrated mindfulness into one of the most essential concepts and techniques in modern psychotherapy. Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as "a special way of paying attention: consciously and non-judgmentally focusing on the present moment. This focus enables us to be more aware, clear, and accepting of the present reality."^[1] He believes that, at its core, mindfulness is a particular method of paying attention and the resulting awareness. It is a method of deeply observing oneself with a spirit of self-exploration and self-understanding^[2]. We can enhance mindfulness through meditation, breathing exercises, and other methods. One important principle is to maintain an objective, non-judgmental stance toward what we feel internally, recognizing that our emotional expressions are merely part of our reflective thinking and do not constitute the final evaluation of our self-worth. Through mindfulness, we create a mental space that allows us to be no longer exhausted by internal anxiety^[3]. Mindfulness also advocates a calm mindset. Our lives are filled with diverse emotional experiences, including joy, sadness, and pain. However, negative emotions arising from joyful or sorrowful events can intensify the duration and intensity of the pain caused by negative experiences. Based on this, a "calm mindset" means treating everything in our lives equally, accepting it, and not being swayed by it. Such an attitude of acceptance is more conducive to psychological adaptation to setbacks, reducing the stress and inner turmoil caused by

psychological frustration, and thereby minimizing the pain resulting from resistance.

2.2 The essence and practical value of mindfulness calligraphy

Mindfulness calligraphy can be understood as a Chinese calligraphy practice process aimed at achieving a mindfulness state. During this process, practitioners need to relax their bodies, regulate their breathing, concentrate their attention, feel the subtle movements of their hands and wrists while writing, and observe the trajectories formed by the ink flowing on the paper. Throughout the writing process, the individual must continuously maintain their attention on the present moment of the writing experience. When distractions or wandering thoughts naturally arise during practice, the practitioner should acknowledge their presence without judgment, then redirect their attention back to the current writing action. In modern life, with its fast pace and high stress levels, individuals are prone to excessive worry about the future, leading to anxiety and depressive emotions. The practice of mindfulness calligraphy can help individuals temporarily detach from their chaotic thoughts and focus their minds on a single, manageable writing task. The state of concentration itself brings a sense of calm, and long-term practice can help reduce stress levels and improve emotional regulation abilities ^[4]. Mindfulness calligraphy also enhances cognitive function. The writing process requires individuals to sustain their attention on a series of precise movements for an extended period. This sustained attention training effectively improves an individual's ability to maintain focus and resist distractions.

3 The construction and practice of the four-stage model of "preparation-writing-adjustment-conclusion"

3.1 The "preparation" stage: clear the mind and sit still, calm and enter a state of tranquility

The "preparation" stage emphasizes "sitting still with a clear mind, calming the mind to achieve tranquility." Practitioners must consciously set aside all thoughts, tasks, and distractions in their minds, shifting their attention away from internal thoughts and toward the concrete existence of the external environment. Practitioners should observe changes in lighting in their surroundings, the shapes and contours of nearby objects, and subtle sounds in the space. This conscious perception of the environment effectively interrupts the flow of habitual thoughts, allowing the mind to settle initially, thereby laying the foundation for more profound meditation. "Sitting upright" requires practitioners to find a stable yet relaxed posture, such as keeping the spine naturally straight but not stiff, and relaxing the shoulders downward; "Calmness and stillness" guides practitioners to focus on the rhythm of their breathing, feeling the natural flow of breath. As the breath becomes steady and deep, the practitioner's mind gradually withdraws from external distractions, directing full attention toward the upcoming writing activity and preparing both body and mind thoroughly.

3.2 The "writing" stage: observing characters and copying calligraphy, focusing on brushwork

In the "writing" stage, practitioners must make the necessary preparations. First, they need to select the calligraphy model and specific writing content to be copied. For most participants with relatively weak calligraphy foundations, copying calligraphy provides clear and specific character shape templates for reference. After selecting the content, they begin "observing characters." Practitioners should calm their minds and carefully observe the starting strokes, stroke direction, connections between strokes, and the overall structure of the characters in the model text ^[5]. The process of observation itself is an opportunity to train concentration, enabling practitioners to focus their minds from a wandering state onto the object before them. After completing the observation and gaining an initial understanding of the character's form, practitioners should once again confirm that their posture remains comfortable and stable, and their breathing smooth, before formally entering the writing state. During the writing process, the practitioner must meticulously observe how the brush hairs touch the paper when the brush begins to write, how the ink spreads, and how the ink traces exhibit rich variations in thickness and density as these actions unfold; when the brush is withdrawn, how the brush tip is smoothly retracted. In addition to visual perception, practitioners should also feel the tactile sensations of the brush handle between their fingers, the elasticity of the brush hairs, and the texture of the paper. They should strive to keep their minds focused on the immediate experiences occurring between the brush and paper, avoiding immediate judgments of the quality or merit of the characters being written or already written.

3.3 The "adjustment" stage: comparing and distinguishing, adjusting the body and mind

The "adjustment" stage emphasizes the "Three Adjustments": adjusting the characters, adjusting the body, and adjusting the mind. While writing, one must constantly be aware of and make minor adjustments based on this awareness. After completing a character or a group of related strokes, the practitioner can naturally introduce a brief

pause to engage in "comparing and observing differences," which involves comparing the newly written characters with the model characters in the calligraphy book. Observe whether the length of a particular stroke is too long or too short, whether the variations in stroke thickness align with the model, and so on. This helps gain a clearer, more concrete understanding of the objective relationship between one's current writing state and the target form, providing a basis for subsequent adjustments. "Regulating the body and mind" emphasizes that practitioners should pay attention to whether their breathing remains smooth and deep while focusing on writing, or whether it has unconsciously become shallow and hurried; whether their body posture has changed unconsciously; and whether their attention remains stably concentrated on the movement of the pen tip ^[6]. When encountering difficulties in writing or when strokes do not meet expectations, do they experience emotions such as frustration, impatience, or self-doubt? Once any of the above situations are noticed, it is necessary to promptly adjust breathing, consciously take one or two deep breaths to restore smooth and deep breathing, relax the tense body parts that have been noticed, and understand that this is a normal phenomenon in the practice process and not to resist it. This "adjustment" process is precisely the application of the core attitude of mindfulness practice—non-judgmental awareness and acceptance (equanimity)—to the specific context of writing practice in real time.

3.4 The "conclusion" stage: slowly stop and finish, avoid rushing or judging

The "conclusion" stage marks the successful completion of a full round of mindfulness calligraphy practice. During the writing process, practitioners should always follow their natural rhythm and pace. After the pre-set practice time has ended, there is no need to stop writing immediately. The correct approach is to "slowly stop and finish," meaning to complete the character currently being written at the original speed and rhythm. This method fully respects the integrity and continuity of the writing process itself, avoiding the psychological discomfort caused by sudden interruption ^[7]. Once the writing activity has completely stopped, the practitioner should spend one or two minutes carefully observing the characters they have written with a calm and clear awareness. Observation should follow the principle of "no rushing, no judging", neither deliberately seeking out merits to praise themselves nor picking out flaws to criticize themselves, but simply "seeing" the form of the characters on the paper, the changes in ink color, and the structural features. This non-judgmental, accepting observation is a direct application of the core attitude of mindfulness at the end of the practice, helping to cultivate tolerance for one's achievements and reduce attachment to "good results." Finally, practitioners are encouraged to engage in a brief verbal sharing session to exchange their authentic experiences and insights from the practice. The focus of the sharing is on describing the subjective experiences and the process of awareness itself during the practice, thereby extending the mindful attitude from the specific act of writing to a calm acceptance of the writing results and a reflective summary of the entire process, laying the foundation and accumulating experience for the next calligraphy practice.

4 The practical application of mindfulness calligraphy in mental health education in higher education

Anxiety and depression caused by academic and interpersonal stress and conflicts are common psychological issues among college students. The Psychological Education and Counseling Center at the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology has explored various methods to address this issue, among which mindfulness therapy—specifically mindfulness relaxation groups—has proven to be an effective treatment model. In practice, the university does not adhere strictly to the traditional eight-week mindfulness training method. Instead, it applies the concept of mindfulness to group psychological counseling activities such as mindfulness calligraphy and mindfulness tea tasting. This makes it easier for college students to accept mindfulness, participate in mindfulness practice activities, and deepen their mindfulness training, thereby paving the way for the implementation of mindfulness calligraphy in the university's mental health work. Specifically regarding mindfulness calligraphy practice, the team carefully designed a plan to integrate mindfulness calligraphy into an eight-week mindfulness course. Students strictly followed the four-stage mindfulness model of "preparation-writing-adjustment-conclusion" under professional guidance during writing exercises, with each session emphasizing focusing attention on the present-moment experience of the writing process. Additionally, through standardized pre- and post-assessment psychological evaluations, the Psychological Center obtained objective data support: students participating in mindfulness calligraphy activities showed statistically significant improvements in emotional indicators such as anxiety and depression; positive changes also occurred in teacher-student interaction and peer relationships.

5 Conclusion

In summary, this study systematically integrates mindfulness concepts with Chinese calligraphy practice through the construction of a four-stage model of "preparation-writing-adjustment-conclusion," providing a practical approach for mental health education in higher education. The "preparation" stage lays the foundation for focus through environmental awareness and mind-body adjustment; the "writing" stage uses pen tip awareness training to anchor attention in the present experience firmly; the 'adjustment' stage provides real-time feedback on physical and mental states and dynamically adjusts them; and the "conclusion" stage reinforces non-judgmental acceptance and integration of experiences. Future research could further explore the adaptability differences of the four-stage model across different populations and conduct long-term tracking of the sustainability of practice effects to leverage the model's potential better.

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