

## The Relationship between Hope and Mental Health Amongst Iranian Students

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**Abstract.** In the recent years, psychologists have looked at hope construct as a psychological strong point, and are of the belief that this construct can help nurture and create mental health. The current study, therefore, initiated to determine the extent of relationship between mental health and hope as well as the prediction of mental health variations by using a descriptive-correlative research method. The participants of the study included 340 subjects, 135 males and 205 females, from Urmia University in Urmia, Iran, selected by stratified random sampling. The instruments utilized in the study were Snyder' Hope Scale (HS) and the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28), respectively. The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods such as independent samples t-test, Pearson correlation, and regression. The results indicated a significant difference between the average scores of male and female students across the hope variable, but there was no significant difference within mental health scale. A significant correlation was also found between hope and mental health. The final results revealed that the hope variable could predict and explain 20.4 % of the mental health variations. In other words, hope can predict mental health significantly, it can be concluded, therefore, that with increased attention to such concepts as hope, optimism, happiness, and other human-adapted capacities amongst students, their mental health will improve.

### 1. Introduction

Acquiring mental health is not a spontaneous and involuntary event; it requires conscious effort and investment. Individual's mind starts shaping in a specific genetic field in the childhood which is considered the best period for individuals' mental health recovery and instruction. Without a sound thought, appropriate behavior, and acceptable communication, a healthy body will not contribute to increased social health [1].

The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined mental health as "capacity to interact systematically with one another and environment in ways that change and reform individual and social environment, eliminate personal tendencies and conflicts in an impartial, reasonable, and suitable manner, and promote well-being" [2]. Another definition of mental health proposed by the world health organization is that mental health is a state of well-being in which individuals are able to realize their potentials and talents, work productively and effectively, cope with ordinary demands of everyday life, and contribute actively to their society. According to the [2], the people who are mentally healthy typically have the following characteristics:

1. Feel good and security about themselves,
2. Neither underestimate nor overestimate their abilities,
3. Respect themselves and others accept their deficiencies,
4. Have the potential to establish an enthusiasm with others and love them,
5. Can meet their needs and find solutions for whatever difficulties they face in their life,
6. Are able to take responsibility by selecting logical objectives,
7. A capable of making their own decisions,
8. They have lasting and satisfying personal relationships,
9. Are not overwhelmed by their own emotions - fears, anger, love, jealousy, guilt or worries,
10. Are flexible.

Mental vulnerability is not identical among different social classes. The university students are mentally amongst the most susceptible social groups. Due to the severe mental modifications resulting from rapid variations during academic life and other problems (for example, academic, economical, separation from family, friends, etc) as well as the absence of supportive mechanism for facilitating effective coping of problems , university students have a high level of mental vulnerability [3,4].

The research conducted in the recent years indicates the presence of mental disorders among different levels of university students. The frequent reference of students to the student's counseling departments proves their mental, social, and academic problems [5] Research on the mental health disorders among students reveals that, after entering the university, quite a number of them about (15 % females , 13% males) manifest such emotional disorders as depression and anxiety. It is worth mentioning that the majority of mental and emotional disorders occur within the age range of 18-24 [6]. The low level of mental health status among students often leads to increased class absence and consequently decreased exam scores [7]. It has often been observed that the students experiencing high levels of mental vulnerability are less capable of accomplishing academic education; therefore, taken the importance of mental health among Iranian students, we are required not to ignore its prevalence [8]. Different factors may expose positive effects on mental health and well-being one of which is life expectancy. In the recent years, psychologists have looked at expectancy construct as a psychologically strong point and believe that this construct can contribute to nurturing and generating mental health [9].

Hope is an inner state, attitude, or situation that, in addition to making individuals predict a special event, makes them ready for change and variation. In this definition, agency is a person who devotes necessary energy and determination to reaching his/her goals; accomplishing pathways also include the planning made for providing and achieving goals [10]. According to [11] hope is, "a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (1) agency (goal-directed energy) and (2) pathways (planning to meet goals)" (p. 287). Furthermore, [12] in his last writings, which were published one year after his death, defined hope as, " a kind of goal-directed thinking in which individuals think about pathways (applying one's perceptual capacity for finding pathways to achieving goals) and about agency or agents (i.e., about necessary motivations for using those pathways in the way of accomplishing goals). According to [12], hope has three necessary ingredients as follow:

1. goals- unintentional human actions are directed by some goals; therefore, goals should be of great significance in order to occupy conscious thought
2. pathways to achievement- in order to achieve goals, people need to view themselves as being capable of generating plausible routes to those goals,

3. Agency thoughts- the motivational component in hope theory which is the perceived capacity of individuals to use the pathways so as to achieve intended goals. For so doing, they start to move along a pathway and continue progressing along that route.

Feeling hope occurs when a person thinks he/she possess the required motivation and will to move along the chosen pathways for achieving his plausible goals. That's why hope is mainly defined as thinking about goals (or goal-directed thoughts)[12].

Hope plays an important role in mental health which is all human beings' desire. Hope is a factor of intrinsic life essence and psyche's dynamics. It is the mental prerequisite for life and development; that is, every moment's preparation for it is something not accomplished yet. The growth of hope or hopelessness in individuals depends to a great extent on the society's culture and values or the social class in which those people are living [10].

According to [13], hope has two cognitive and affective components the affective component of which can predict the occurrence of positive events in the future and consequently increase mental health. Research findings revealed that people with higher hope exhibit greater self-esteem, improved academic performance, and more commitment to performing activities leading to further health and well-being. A large body of research evidence suggests that there is a relationship between individuals' high level of hope and success in sport activities, increased level of academic achievement, improved mental and physical health, and more effectiveness of psychotherapy procedures utilized in treating disorders [14]. The positive people are less likely to experience physical health weakness or depression when encountering life difficulties. Therefore, hope level is a powerful predictor of psychological consistency, health, and complying with [12]. Given the relationship of life expectancy with mental health variables, the constant attention to this construct in university contexts and among university students is always deemed essential. As such, the present study was developed to examine the relationship between the student's hope and mental health.

## 2. Method Participants

This study employs a descriptive correlational research. The statistical population comprised all undergraduate Urmia University students in 2012-2011 academic year of which 360 subjects were chosen by stratified sampling. However, due to the imperfection of some questionnaires or not completion of demographic information, the information obtained from 340 students (205 females & 135 males) who properly completed the questionnaires entered the statistical stage. Questionnaires were completed individually or in groups by students.

### Instruments

**Hope scale:** This scale was developed by [11] to measure the degree of hope among adults. This scale taps into dispositional hope in adults aged above 15 years. It is a self-report questionnaire comprising 12 items, eight items of which are utilized and the remaining four items are **دروغ سنج** which are not counted in scoring. Of these eight items, four are related to agency component (2,9,10,12) and four item are associated with pathway thoughts (1,4,6,8). [15] reported a total internal consistency of 0.74 to 0.84 and a retest reliability of 0.80. In Iran, the reliability of this questionnaire was measured by [16] on some university students; coefficient alpha for agency and pathway components were 0.71 and 0.67, respectively. In the current study, the total reliability of questionnaire, by using Cronbach alpha, as well as its agency and pathway components were 0.78, 0.62, and 0.71, respectively.

**General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28):** this questionnaire is composed of 28 items which measures individual's mental state in the last month and includes such symptoms as abnormal thoughts and feelings and some dimensions of observable behavior. This questionnaire consists of four components of physical problems, anxiety, social functioning disorder, and anxiety. Each item

has four alternatives with scores from 0 to 3. Through Cronbach's alpha, [4] reported a validity of 0.85 for this questionnaire. Furthermore, [17] have reported a validity coefficient of 0.67 to 0.76, with a split-half reliability and re-test reliability of 0.83 and 0.85, respectively. In the current study, the total Cronbach's alpha was equal to 0.92 and its dimension for physical problems, anxiety, social functioning disorder, and depression were 0.83, 0.82, 0.75, and 0.87, respectively. In this scale, the low score of subject indicates improved mental health.

### 3. Findings

In Table 1 correlation between variables is indicated. Based on the information in Table 1, hope along with its two components (agency and pathway) had a negative significant relationship with mental health and the sub-scales of physical problems, anxiety, disorder in social function, and depression. The regression results demonstrated that hope by beta of 0.452 could predict and explain 20.4 % of mental health-associated variables. Furthermore, the analysis of gender differences displayed that the average scores in females (32.12) was higher than males (30.67), and a significant difference was statistically found between these two gender groups in hope variable ( $p < 0/01$ ),  $df = 0/336$ ,  $t = 2/56$ ). Although the average score of females (24.89) was greater than males (24.60), no statistical negative differences was observed  $t = 0.20$ ,  $df = 0.336$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

Table 1  
Correlation between research variables

7	6	5	4	3	2	1	
						-	hope
					-	** 0/88	agency
				-	** 0/54	** 0/88	pathway
			-	** -0/38	** -0/41	** -0/45	mental health
		-	** 0/76	** -0/25	** -0/25	** -0/28	physical problems
	-	** 0/63	** 0/85	** -0/27	** -0/26	** -0/30	anxiety
-	** 0/47	** 0/36	** 0/71	** -0/32	** -0/43	** -0/43	Social functioning disorder
** 0/50	** 0/58	** 0/44	** 0/83	** -0/36	** -0/37	** -0/42	depression

<0/01P\*\*

### 4. Conclusion

The present study was conducted to inquire into the relationship between hope and mental health. The findings revealed a significant relationship between these two variables. This finding is in line with [18,14]. Since the occurrence of low scores in mental health questionnaire indicates a higher mental health, the findings suggest that there was a significant relationship between increased hope level and reduced mental vulnerability. Hope and positive attitude to the future among the university students could moderate the harmful effects of stress during this period and provide more adaptive emotional responses by them. People with higher hope have greater coping skills in dealing with stress, use less denial, have a great sense of humor, and apply more problem-focused coping style; therefore, the combination of all these factors contribute to their mental health promotion.

The results of the analysis of subjects' functioning with respect to their gender in hope variable indicated that females' score was greater than their males' counterparts; moreover, a significant difference was found between these two groups. These findings are incongruent with [19,20]'s study which displayed no gender differences. These findings can be explained with respect to the fact that hope and happiness sources are different in different countries across genders; men are more affected by occupation, economic satisfaction, and etc; whereas women are mostly impacted

by their children, family health, and so on. As such, life expectancy among women can be higher than men.

In addition, the results of the subjects' functioning regarding their gender manifested no significant difference between two genders. These results, hence, are consistent with [ 21, 22, 3, 23] s' investigations and in contrast with [24,25,5] s' study. This shows that socio-demographic characteristics are likely to play a more significant role than gender. In other words, it is even possible that a gender's supremacy in mental health may be affected by social context and other contextual variables. Although contradictory findings were found in the literature, the high rate of mental illnesses prevalence in women than men in the general population has been more emphasized [24,5].

Finally, the results of regression analysis indicated that hope could significantly predict the mental health. Therefore, it can be concluded that by increasing attention to such concepts as hope, optimism, happiness, and other adaptive human powers among university students, their mental health will improve. This study was restricted to Urmia University students, so generalizing the findings to a wider population is not advisable, and any generalization should be done with cautious. It is, therefore, suggested that such research is replicated across other universities and populations; moreover, the effect of other factors intervening with mental health is also taken into account.

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