

## **The “PsychoŻak” program – an example of using positive concepts of mental health in practice**

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### **Summary**

For years experts have been advocating the need to develop an individual’s health potential, which enables him/her to maintain health and improve his/her effective functioning in difficult situations. A number of positive mental health models have been created, among others: the functional model of mental health, the complete state model of health, the salutogenic model and the model of psychological well-being. They cover both optimal and unfavorable aspects of human functioning. The article presents an authorial program for mental health promotion – “PsychoŻak”, which is based on the positive concepts of mental health, a review of empirical reports concerning health promotion and on the target group’s expectations. The program is addressed to young adults studying at universities as well as final-year secondary school students. Its aim is to strengthen students’ psychological, emotional, somatic, and social well-being. It can be used by higher education institutions and thus be a tool satisfying the demand for mental health promotion at universities.

**Key words:** positive psychology, mental health promotion, young adults

### **Introduction**

The concept of health is of interest to many areas of psychology, including clinical, health and positive psychology, with an emphasis on its negative or positive aspects [1]. Positive dimension of mental health is defined as a set of emotional and personality properties allowing a person to cope with difficulties and avoid health deterioration. This dimension enables a person to develop his/her strengths, for example, confrontation, or the ability to harmoniously overcome failures, difficulties and threats. Mental health promotion, which aims at improving mental health and developing an individual’s specific properties and skills, may offer young people the chance to grow and get a sense of satisfaction in life [2–5]. A sense of competence, strengths and high self-esteem are examples of factors improving young adults’ mental health and

thus the performance of further development tasks, such as, for example, continuing education, starting a career, building lasting and satisfying relationships [6]. In the light of the research, a lot of programs meant for young people (including those entering adulthood) can achieve this goal [7–10].

In Poland, students participate in mental health activities, which are, however, usually limited to providing help for those who have already developed a mental illness [11]. Moreover, such projects are rarely structured and multifaceted. There is a lack of long-term actions whose main objective would be mental health promotion referring to the recommended indicators of programs aimed at strengthening resources. For decades documents have been produced, signed by European and global government institutions, which emphasize the legitimacy of mental health promotion and of the implementation of programs aimed at such activities<sup>1</sup>. The necessity to introduce model forms of mental health promotion at consecutive education levels, including secondary schools and universities, is indicated by both European [12–16] and Polish recommendations [17, 18]. It is recommended that mental health promotion programs should refer to positive definitions and concepts of health. Mental health is sometimes equated with concepts which are key to positive psychology: happiness, life satisfaction, mental well-being and quality of life.

Among various programs aimed at young adults in Poland, there are few which emphasize positive aspects of mental health. In Poland, there are no long-term mental health promotion activities directed towards young adults – university and secondary school students, which would be subject to evaluation and preceded by a diagnosis of needs. An example of good practice is the mental health campaign “What drives us up the wall?” carried out at the University of Silesia in Katowice [19]. The campaign involves discussions, film shows, psychology workshops, psychological counseling and art workshops. The program is addressed to the entire academic community and generally available, among others, thanks to the information and articles published on a special website (defined as a student development service, which includes tabs such as: “I feel”, “I think”, “I am studying”, “I am among people”, “I am developing”, “I am working”, “I have a problem”).

Another example of mental health promotion activities addressed to university students is the program “The Constellation of Lion”, which has been implemented since 2010 at the Jagiellonian University. Its continuation is called “Leo” (since 2012) and a place where students can receive counseling: “Station Constellation” [20, 21]. The program is run by the Bureau for People with Disabilities, and its aim is to help and support people who are at risk of mental illnesses, as well as those who are already suffering, so that they will not drop out of university. An important objective of the program is also to prevent social exclusion. The program is addressed to the entire academic community (scientific faculty, administration, students). It offers information about mental illnesses as well as about possible preventive action. Within the project, there have been many debates and workshops for the academic community

<sup>1</sup> Such a document is, for example the National Mental Health Program, formulated by the Polish government in 2010 [43], the WHO resolution of 2002 [32] and the European Union recommendations of 2005 [44]

(e.g., “Let us stop taboo – university confronted with the problem of mental disorders”). An educational platform, which includes materials and articles on mental health as well as the addresses of centers providing support and a list of certified psychotherapists, has been established.

### **Theoretical assumptions of the mental health promotion program “PsychoŻak”**

Mental health models which draw upon the achievements of positive psychology aim at supplementing the characteristics of mental health with positive aspects of human functioning [22–26]. In accordance with the postulates of positive psychology, mental health models should:

- consider both normal and distorted aspects of human functioning;
- refer to empirical psychological knowledge;
- take into account the complexity of the objectives pursued by the modern man and the context of their implementation;
- have application in diagnostic and therapeutic activities [27].

Here are some examples of mental health models which use the resources of positive psychology: the functional model of mental health [28], the complete state model of health [22, 23]; the salutogenic model [29], and the theory of well-being [30].

Most theorists agree that lack of mental disorders accompanied by the presence of well-being is a precondition for full mental health [22, 31, 32]. They stress the need to develop such forms of activity that lead to an increase in what is desired, as opposed to activities which aim at removing the undesirable [22].

The “PsychoŻak” program was created in accordance with the guidelines for developing health promotion programs [33], the criteria included in the National Mental Health Program (2011–2015)<sup>2</sup>, *Priorities of mental health promotion in health care* [34], as well as with the recommendations from the World Health Organization [32] and the EU [13]. Formulated by the Polish government in 2010, the National Mental Health Program assumes, as one of its specific objectives: “spreading knowledge on mental health, shaping behavior patterns and lifestyles which are beneficial to mental health and developing the ability to cope with situations that threaten mental health” (see § 3.1). School and workplace are among the most important areas of activity to promote mental health. Jané-Llopis and Anderson [13, p. 7] list five main principles of promotion:

- 1) increasing knowledge about mental health;

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the previous mental health program for the years 2011–2015 is considered to be de facto unrealized [45, 46]. It is hoped that the National Health Program for 2016–2020 [47], within the framework of the prevention of mental health problems and the improvement of the mental well-being of the society, continues to emphasize the following aspects: caring for well-being through education about mental health and its determinants, developing the ability to cope in situations that threaten mental health, and shaping beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and lifestyles that support mental health [47, p. 35].

- 2) promoting effective implementation;
- 3) developing competences and training workers;
- 4) involving different entities;
- 5) evaluating the impact of a specific policy and program.

The “PsychoŻak” program has its theoretical basis in the concepts of positive mental health [see 28, 30, 35–36], which is understood as a state of well-being (predominance of positive emotions, satisfaction in life, a sense of happiness, the ability to experience feelings adequate for specific situations), the presence of strengths (self-esteem, optimism, maturity, a sense of having an impact on one’s own life, a sense of coherence), the ability to establish and maintain satisfying interpersonal relationships and the ability to cope with difficult situations (resilience) [1].

Before launching the mental health promotion program “PsychoŻak”, we studied empirical reports on the ways of promoting health and examining expectations concerning mental health promotion. The question of examining the expectations of people who participate in psychological activities is raised [among others 37–39]. In the analysis of the target group’s expectations, we also took into account the findings of our study on the diagnosis of students’ needs and expectations concerning mental health promotion [40]. This research involved 610 male and female students from eight state universities in Warsaw in 2013. The respondents were asked to answer two open questions: “What would you expect from a mental health promotion program?” and “How much time should be devoted to the implementation of a mental health promotion program and what intensity and methods of work would be optimal for you?”. The subject of health promotion, which proved important for the respondents, included three dimensions:

- 1) the **physical** dimension of health, feeling good physically, caring about one’s body (somatic well-being);
- 2) the **mental** dimension of health, feeling good mentally, caring about the state of mind and spirit, creativity, and so on. (psychological well-being);
- 3) the **social** dimension of health, feeling good socially, showing concern/care for others (social well-being).

The research results are discussed more extensively in another publication [40].

The main objective of the “PsychoŻak” program is to strengthen psychological, emotional, somatic, and social well-being [11]. This goal is achieved during 30-hour workshops – 10 meetings three hours per week, in the same place and at the same time. The subjects covered during the classes successively refer to strengthening mental and social well-being. The important elements of the program include: training in recognizing and expressing feelings, coping with stress, the ability to establish and maintain meaningful relationships and the ability to take care of one’s physical condition, expanding knowledge on mental health and the ways of looking after health as well as information on mental disorders – how to recognize them and the forms of assistance to those suffering from mental health disorders. The program emphasizes the multidimensionality of mental health. The workshops are held in strictly set thematic order and take into account group processes and potential difficulties associated with

the subjects dealt with during the meetings. The content of the tasks and materials for the mental health promotion program for university students is presented in detail in the relevant publication [11].

Our own research project BSTP 35/14-I included three editions of a 30-hour program. It received the approval of the university authorities (30 students participated in the program). The workshops were held once a semester in the years 2014–2015. It took us about a month to recruit the students. They were recruited using information posted on posters put up around the university building and sent to students by the student self-government. The participants signed up by e-mail. Then they received detailed information about the subject of each meeting and confirmed their readiness to participate in all the meetings.

The workshops were conducted by trained psychologists, who followed the schedule prepared by the authors of the program, but at the same time devoted attention to group processes and the needs of a specific group. They also had clinical experience and they knew the addresses of currently available institutions offering psychological support to students and could advise all interested what they should do if they wanted to receive this kind of assistance. The psychologists who worked for the program cooperated, among others, with the Counseling Service for Students and, if need be, offered the students individual consultation with a psychologist or psychotherapist. Each series of workshops was evaluated. The evaluation was based on a questionnaire which the participants had to fill out twice – at the first and last workshop [11]. The questionnaire consisted of closed – and open-ended questions. Below, we provide a few examples of these questions: “What is mental health promotion?”, “How to take care of mental health?”, “What would you expect from a mental health promotion program?” (in the version of the survey handed out prior to the workshop/pre-test) [11, p. 70] and “What would you expect from a mental health promotion program if it were to continue (in the later stages)?” (in questionnaires handed out after the workshop/post-test, the remaining questions in this version without any changes) [11, p. 145].

## Conclusions

1. The “PsychoŽak” program was created in accordance with the recommendations concerning mental health promotion [13, 18, 41]. It may be implemented by other higher education institutions [11] and thus be a tool satisfying the demand for mental health promotion at universities.
2. The assessment of the usefulness of the “PsychoŽak” program requires quantitative evaluation. We are planning to launch a project which will examine the group which participated in the “PsychoŽak” program as well as a group that did not – in terms of certain mental health indicators selected, among other things, by means of the authorial Mental Health Inventory, the General Health Questionnaire GHQ 28 and an evaluation survey.
3. Research conducted, among others, among young Frenchmen indicate a higher rate of psychiatric disorders among young adults who are not studying compared with those studying or working [42], which could be an additional argument to expand

the target group of this type of programs. The education issues currently discussed in the course of the program could concern vocational education and self-study; focus not on school but on issues related to professional activity and personal life.

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