

Social problem-solving skills and mental health: A comparison of undergraduate cohorts

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Problem Solving Skills is clearly indicated as a graduate attribute at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) and many other Australian Universities. This study was cross-sectional in design and aimed to compare perceived social problem solving skills and mental health variables between undergraduate year levels. Previous research has shown that first year university students are more likely to indicate signs of depression than students' in latter years. Research has also found that groups with higher education have indicated more positive problem solving appraisal. Finally, there is considerable research that has linked poorer problem solving appraisal with higher levels of depression and anxiety.

An online test battery was administered to 464 undergraduate students from the USQ. The Problem Solving Inventory, Form B (PSI-B; Heppner, 1988) measured perceived problem-solving ability, and is comprised of three subscales; Problem Solving Confidence, Approach Avoidance and Personal Control. The other measure was the shortened version of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) and measured mental health variables (Depression, Anxiety and Stress).

Participants were divided into year level (i.e. first, second or third year), and a one way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) indicated no significant difference between the groups on any of the problem solving or mental health variables. Given that the USQ has a large mature age student population, students were re-analysed with one-way ANOVA according to age (under 21, 21-29, 30-39 and 40 and over years).

Significant differences were found where the two older groups had a more positive problem appraisal than the two younger groups. The two older groups also indicated less depression and anxiety symptoms than the two younger groups. It is suggested that problem solving therapy programs specifically targeting younger students may be worth considering.