

# Assessing the Contribution of Adult Education to Mental Health and Psychological Well-Being

Abiola Michael Akinyemi.

Department of Health and Social Care, Waltham International College, Barking, England.

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\*Corresponding Author: Abiola Michael Akinyemi.

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## Abstract

## Review Article

Adult education has increasingly been recognized as a critical determinant of psychological, social, and emotional well-being among adult learners. Despite the growing global emphasis on lifelong learning, the relationship between adult education and mental well-being has received comparatively limited systematic attention, particularly within developing contexts. This paper presents a comprehensive review of existing literature on the influence of adult education on mental well-being. Drawing on established theoretical frameworks, including Transformative Learning Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory, the review conceptualizes adult education as a multidimensional process that fosters psychological resilience, self-efficacy, and social integration. Evidence from prior empirical and theoretical studies consistently indicates that engagement in adult learning is associated with improved emotional stability, enhanced coping strategies, increased social connectedness, and greater life satisfaction. The review further highlights the role of adult learning environments in promoting autonomy, competence, and a sense of belonging, all of which are central to psychological resilience. The paper concludes that adult education constitutes a vital mechanism for promoting mental health and well-being and underscores the need for policy frameworks that expand access to lifelong learning opportunities, particularly in developing countries.

**Keywords:** adult education, mental well-being, lifelong learning, psychological resilience, self-efficacy, transformative learning.

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## 1. Introduction

In contemporary societies, lifelong learning has emerged as a central pillar for sustainable development, personal empowerment, and societal well-being (Kucuksuleymanoglu, 2025; Vieira, 2020). Adult education, as a key component of lifelong learning, enables individuals to continuously acquire knowledge, skills, and competencies beyond formal schooling (Verma & Ambedkar, 2023). While the economic and occupational benefits of adult education are well documented, increasing

scholarly attention has been directed toward its psychological and social implications (Ackerman & Kanfer, 2020).

Mental well-being is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional stability, resilience, life satisfaction, and the capacity to cope effectively with life's challenges (Mayordomo et al., 2021). Contemporary research suggests that educational experiences extend beyond cognitive development, significantly shaping

psychological health and social functioning (Lövdén et al., 2020).

Despite these insights, the relationship between adult learning and mental well-being remains relatively underexplored in the literature (Lewis, 2023; Martínez-García et al., 2024; Sherman, 2021). Much of the existing scholarship has prioritized the economic returns of education, often overlooking its psychosocial benefits (Eneogu, 2025; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). This gap is particularly pronounced in developing contexts, where adult education may serve as a critical mechanism for improving both individual well-being and broader societal outcomes (Faradova, 2020; Rustamova et al., 2025).

Within such contexts, adults frequently encounter socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, inequality, and limited access to formal education. These conditions are often associated with increased stress and reduced psychological well-being. Engagement in adult education has been identified as a potential pathway for enhancing coping strategies, strengthening social networks, and improving overall quality of life (Abidogun & Mumuni, 2024; Ayantunji, 2023).

## Literature Review

### Adult Learning and Mental Well-Being

Adult learning encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal educational activities undertaken after the completion of initial education (Adult Education; UNESCO, 2022). While traditionally valued for its role in career advancement and skill development, contemporary research highlights its substantial contributions to psychological well-being. Engaging in adult education has been consistently linked to enhanced self-confidence, greater social participation, and improved life satisfaction (OECD, 2021; Schuller, 2021). These benefits underscore the multidimensional impact of lifelong learning, which extends beyond economic or occupational gains to encompass personal growth and social integration.

A growing body of research demonstrates that participation in adult education promotes mental well-being through multiple pathways (Melendro et

al., 2020; Sherman, 2021; Martínez-García et al., 2024; Boyadjieva et al., 2024). Cognitive stimulation derived from learning activities strengthens problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, and adaptive reasoning, which collectively enhance psychological resilience (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020; Field, 2020). In parallel, structured learning environments provide a platform for social interaction, enabling learners to form meaningful connections, exchange experiences, and develop supportive networks (Cheung et al., 2021). These social opportunities contribute to emotional regulation, mitigate feelings of isolation, and foster a sense of belonging—factors that are closely linked to overall life satisfaction (OECD, 2021; Waller et al., 2022).

Self-efficacy, a central mechanism in adult learning, is also enhanced through educational engagement (Chen, 2025). As learners acquire new knowledge and skills, they gain confidence in their ability to manage challenges and achieve goals, which in turn positively influences their motivation, perseverance, and mental health (Windisch, 2021). Moreover, adult education serves as a protective factor against mental health challenges by equipping individuals with the tools to navigate stress and adversity. Experiences of mastery, problem-solving, and collaborative learning strengthen adaptive coping strategies, contributing to long-term psychological resilience (Field, 2020; Schuller, 2021).

Adult education additionally promotes health-conscious behaviours that indirectly enhance mental well-being (Moravec & Kovács, 2025, Budai, 2024). Studies indicate that learners involved in lifelong learning are more likely to engage in preventive health practices, maintain healthy routines, and cultivate awareness of health-related issues (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). This interplay between cognitive, social, and behavioural benefits underscores the holistic nature of adult learning as a pathway to improved mental well-being.

### Conceptualizations of Well-Being

Well-being is a complex and multidimensional construct that encompasses both objective and

subjective dimensions (Voukelatou et al., 2021) Objective approaches conceptualize well-being through measurable indicators such as income, employment, health status, and educational attainment, reflecting the material and structural conditions that influence life quality (Diener et al., 2020). In contrast, subjective approaches focus on individuals' perceptions of their own lives, including life satisfaction, positive and negative emotional experiences, and overall happiness. This dual perspective highlights the need to consider both external circumstances and internal experiences when assessing well-being (Ryff & Singer, 2021).

Contemporary perspectives on well-being integrate these approaches, framing it as comprising emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. Emotional well-being relates to the presence of positive affect and the absence of distress, while psychological well-being emphasizes personal growth, autonomy, and self-acceptance (Chaurasia, 2024). Social well-being, in turn, captures the quality of interpersonal relationships, social support, and community engagement (Huppert & So, 2021). Adult education plays a critical role in promoting these dimensions by providing learning environments that encourage self-reflection, critical thinking, and skill acquisition, which enhance emotional regulation and psychological resilience.

Furthermore, adult learning facilitates social integration by creating opportunities for collaborative learning, peer support, and shared experiences, all of which contribute to a sense of belonging and connectedness (OECD, 2021). Lifelong learning also encourages continuous personal development, enabling individuals to adapt to life transitions, acquire new competencies, and maintain cognitive engagement, all of which have been linked to sustained well-being across the lifespan (Windisch, 2021).

## Theoretical Framework

### Adult Learning Theories

Adult learning theory provides a structured understanding of how adults acquire new knowledge and skills, in contrast to theories that explain learning

in children (Murtonen & Lehtinen, 2020) It serves as a framework with scientific underpinnings that clarifies how adult learning operates, enables educators to successfully adapt their approaches, and addresses the particular needs and challenges faced by adult learners (Merriam & Bierema, 2020). Understanding adult learning theory is particularly important for creating effective educational and training programs because it provides a foundation for creating solutions that address the unique psychological and experiential needs of adults (Ishanova, 2025). Malcolm Knowles invented andragogy, which stands out from other theories of adult learning due to its comprehensive methodology and historical prominence. However, adult learning encompasses a range of concepts that, when combined, enhance adult learners' understanding and application of learning concepts (Tight, 2023).

### Fundamental Concepts of Adult Learning Theory

Adult learning theory emphasizes the distinctive characteristics of adult learners, which are shaped by their goals, motives, and life experiences. Knowles (1970), who created andragogy as the cornerstone of adult learning, stated that adults are self-directed, bring extensive life experiences, goal-oriented, relevance-oriented, practical, and driven by internal incentives. These unique qualities are emphasized by these six concepts (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2019). These basic concepts form the basis of adult learning theory, which explains why adults have certain learning expectations, preferences, and limitations. They seek out educational possibilities that directly impact their practical applications and personal growth. Adults, for example, frequently take a "what's in it for me?" posture during training because they value knowledge that they think will benefit them in their personal or professional lives (Bouchard & Greene, 2023).

### The Importance of Andragogy

Andragogy is sometimes considered the primary theory of adult learning due to its focused framework for understanding the particular needs of adult learners. Knowles' andragogical paradigm holds that

adults are self-directed learners who thrive when given the chance to take control of their education (Knowles et al., 2019). In a contemporary educational setting, this translates to providing adult learners with options, permitting flexible learning pathways, and recognizing their desire for independence. Unlike traditional educational techniques where instructors play a central, directive role, andragogy encourages teachers to take on the role of facilitators, helping adults improve their knowledge.

### Transformative Learning Theory

A fundamental framework in adult education, transformative learning theory describes how people alter and reinterpret meaning structures via experience and critical reflection. The idea, which has its roots in Jack Mezirow's groundbreaking research from the late 1970s, highlights that learning entails significant perspective changes that alter people's perceptions of themselves and the environment in addition to the acquisition of knowledge (Mezirow, 1997; Taylor & Cranton, 2021).

Fundamentally grounded in humanistic traditions, transformative learning is consistent with more general ideas of self-actualization and personal development. According to the theory, adult learners evaluate their experiences according to preexisting frames of reference that include presumptions, beliefs, and values. When these frames are critically analyzed and altered, transformation takes place. This is frequently brought about by what Mezirow called a "disorienting dilemma," which is an experience or incident that calls into question preconceived notions (Taylor & Cranton, 2021; Kitchenham, 2023). Significant life transitions, such as losing a loved one, changing careers, or returning to school, can cause these kinds of conundrums and make students reevaluate their preconceived notions.

According to Mezirow, transformative learning is a step-by-step process that includes critical introspection, discussion, and final reintegration. Even if the initial ten stages have been improved, they still cover a wide range of topics, including

emotional reactions, critical evaluation of presumptions, investigation of novel roles, and the growth of proficiency in updated viewpoints. Critical reflection is essential to this process because it allows students to examine the psychological and social presumptions that underlie their worldview (Taylor, 2020). By exposing students to other viewpoints, dialogue with others promotes a more inclusive and integrated understanding of reality, which further aids in change.

By highlighting its social, cultural, and relational aspects, modern research has extended transformative learning theory beyond its initial definition. According to recent research, context, power dynamics, and social interaction all influence transformation, which is not only an individual cognitive process (Hoggan, 2021; Kitchenham, 2023). This more comprehensive view emphasizes the value of educational settings that foster transparency, diversity, and critical thinking, empowering students to effectively negotiate challenging and frequently upsetting situations.

The role of the educator in transformational learning has changed in educational practice from that of a typical instructor to that of a facilitator or "host" of learning events. It is the responsibility of educators to establish safe spaces that promote critical thinking, validate students' experiences, and promote both intellectual and emotional development (Taylor & Cranton, 2021). This is consistent with humanistic ideals, which emphasize holistic growth, learner autonomy, and individual meaning-making. Teachers assist students in reconstructing their identities and incorporating fresh viewpoints into their daily realities rather than imposing change.

Crucially, transformative learning can happen in everyday situations and goes beyond formal education. It is becoming more widely acknowledged as a way to promote psychological adaptation, resilience, and lifelong learning, especially in societies that are changing quickly. Transformative learning promotes social change and personal growth by empowering people to critically reevaluate their presumptions and adopt fresh perspectives (Hoggan, 2021).

## Self-Determination Theory

A thorough framework for comprehending human motivation, personality development, and wellbeing is Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT, which was created by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, promotes a meta-theoretical viewpoint that combines social and cultural impacts on human functioning with motivational processes (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The idea makes a distinction between different types of extrinsic motivation, which vary in how much they are internalized and self-endorsed, and intrinsic motivation, which is the act of engaging in tasks for intrinsic satisfaction.

Three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are central to SDT. Competence is the sense of mastery and efficacy in dealing with the environment; relatedness is the need to feel connected to others; and autonomy is the perception of volition and self-direction in one's actions. SDT holds that meeting these requirements is crucial for promoting psychological development, high-quality motivation, and general well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). People are more likely to show improved engagement, perseverance, creativity, and performance when they work in settings that meet these demands.

On the other hand, SDT suggests that motivation and mental health may suffer if these psychological demands are not met. Reduced well-being and worse performance results are linked to environments that weaken relatedness through social isolation, undermine autonomy through excessive control, or degrade competence through negative feedback (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021). As a result, the theory emphasizes how important contextual and environmental elements are in determining psychological functioning and motivational quality.

SDT's sophisticated understanding of extrinsic motivation is one of its main contributions. SDT recognizes a spectrum from external regulation—behaviour motivated by incentives or penalties from outside sources—to integrated regulation—behaviour consistent with one's identity and values—instead than presenting extrinsic motivation as a

homogenous concept. This continuum emphasizes the internalization process, in which people convert demands from outside sources into objectives that are important to them. The degree to which social settings facilitate or obstruct the fulfilment of fundamental psychological demands has a substantial impact on the degree of this internalization (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

SDT has been validated by empirical study in a variety of settings, such as workplaces, sports, healthcare, and education. For example, autonomy-supportive teaching strategies have been associated with better psychological health, deeper learning, and higher student motivation in educational contexts (Reeve, 2021). In a similar vein, need-supportive leadership increases productivity, job satisfaction, and employee engagement in organizational settings. These results show how SDT is widely applicable in comprehending how interpersonal dynamics and societal structures affect behaviour and motivation throughout life.

Additionally, SDT offers a useful perspective for analyzing individual variations in motivation and wellbeing. The idea explains why people react differently to comparable situations by highlighting the interplay between environmental factors and human tendencies. Additionally, it emphasizes how crucial it is to create policies and interventions that support need fulfillment in order to improve both individual flourishing and group results (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

## Social Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) offers a thorough framework for comprehending how people learn and control behaviours through the dynamic interaction of environmental, behavioural, and personal elements. The idea of reciprocal determinism, which holds that social influences, cognitive processes, and observable behaviours constantly interact to affect human functioning, is fundamental to this theory (Bandura, 1986; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

Observational learning, in which people learn by observing the actions of others and the results that

follow, is a crucial mechanism within social cognition theory. People, especially children, internalize social norms, expectations, and roles through processes including modelling and reinforcement. Gender-typed behaviours and attitudes are greatly influenced by exposure to male and female role models in home, school, peer groups, and media environments (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Endendijk et al., 2021). These experiences aid in the formation of self-efficacy beliefs, which are people's views of their own abilities to carry out particular activities, and outcome expectancies, which are beliefs about the likely effects of behaviour.

Children can process and organize increasingly complicated social information as their cognitive and social capacities develop. Their capacity to extract patterns from observed behaviours and apply them in various circumstances is improved by this developmental cycle. As a result, gender role learning develops throughout time and is reinforced by a wider variety of social actors. For example, parents are crucial because they influence early experiences and reinforce gender norms through interaction and communication (Endendijk et al., 2021). Parental influence frequently grows more complex as children's verbal and cognitive skills grow, adding beliefs and expectations that direct behaviour.

Peers become effective socializing facilitators as well. Peer groups influence the adoption of gender-typed behaviours through mechanisms like imitation, social comparison, and reinforcement. Peer acceptance or rejection can influence identity development and self-efficacy views in addition to reinforcing compliance to socially mandated roles (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Teachers in school settings play a part in this process by quietly reinforcing gender norms and communicating expectations. Whether deliberate or unintentional, treating boys and girls differently can affect kids' self-esteem and interest in a variety of subjects, influencing their academic and social paths (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020).

Furthermore, ubiquitous models that uphold gender norms are provided by broader social influences, such as media depictions and professional

institutions. The gendered division of labour in society and ongoing exposure to stereotypical depictions of men and women in the media reinforce learned behaviours and expectations. Through repeated observation and internalization, these environmental inputs interact with personal cognitive processes to reinforce behavioural patterns.

Self-efficacy is a key concept in social cognitive theory and is essential for motivation and behaviour control. High self-efficacy people are more likely to take on tough jobs, persevere through setbacks, and accomplish their goals. Low self-efficacy, on the other hand, can restrict goals and encourage the adoption of conventional roles. Accordingly, self-efficacy affects long-term growth and wellbeing in addition to mediating learning (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

### Synthesis of Empirical Evidence

Participation in adult education is consistently and favourably associated with improved mental health, according to a summary of recent empirical research (Adult Education; Mental Health). Improvements in self-confidence, emotional control, and social connectivity are often reported by adult learners; these outcomes are strongly associated with consistent participation in both organized and unstructured learning environments (OECD, 2021; Windisch, 2021). These psychosocial advantages are especially important since they support both greater social inclusion and personal resilience.

The body of research also shows that adult education helps people develop healthy coping mechanisms so they can better handle stress and life changes. By fostering a sense of belonging through meaningful social connection, learning activities improve emotional well-being and lessen feelings of loneliness (UNESCO, 2022; Waller et al., 2022). This is particularly important in situations where there may not be many social support networks.

Furthermore, a higher feeling of purpose and greater life satisfaction are positively correlated with lifelong learning. These effects are especially noticeable in socioeconomically limited settings,

where involvement in education can offer chances for personal growth as well as psychological empowerment (Schuller, 2021; OECD, 2021). All things considered, the data emphasizes how important adult education is as a multifaceted instrument for enhancing mental health and quality of life.

A review of the literature shows that involvement in adult education is consistently positively correlated with mental health. Improvements in social connectedness, emotional control, and self-confidence are often reported by adult learners.

According to additional research, adult education helps people develop healthy coping mechanisms and a feeling of community through social engagement. Furthermore, lifelong learning is linked to a greater feeling of purpose and life happiness, especially in socioeconomically limited settings.

## Discussion

Beyond its financial advantages, adult education significantly contributes to psychological well-being, according to the evaluated literature (Adult Education; Mental Health). The methods by which learning processes improve self-efficacy, autonomy, and cognitive transformation are explained by a number of modern theoretical frameworks, such as Transformative Learning Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory. According to these views (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Taylor & Cranton, 2021), adult learning is deeply developmental rather than merely instrumental, creating internal psychological resources that facilitate adaptive functioning and resilience.

Empirical data also suggests that by incorporating the social, emotional, and cognitive aspects of human functioning, adult education promotes holistic growth. People gain critical thinking abilities, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal skills through participation in both formal and informal learning environments, all of which improve general well-being (OECD, 2021; Waller et al., 2022). This multifaceted effect emphasizes how crucial it is to see adult education as an all-encompassing process

that includes social integration and personal development in addition to knowledge acquisition.

Furthermore, learning environments that emphasize critical reflection, teamwork, and involvement are especially successful at promoting psychological flourishing. These settings support the ideas of learner-centered education, in which people actively create meaning via communication and shared experiences. In addition to meeting fundamental psychological needs, these environments foster a sense of purpose and belonging, both of which are critical elements of wellbeing (UNESCO, 2022; Reeve, 2021).

## Conclusion

The importance of adult education for psychological health and general quality of life is becoming more widely acknowledged (Adult Education; Mental Health). By giving people the mental and emotional tools they need to deal with life's obstacles, lifelong learning promotes resilience (Windisch, 2021). Additionally, it increases self-efficacy, which enables students to gain confidence in their capacity to handle responsibilities, make choices, and pursue their own objectives (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Additionally, by offering chances for meaningful engagement, teamwork, and the creation of supportive networks, adult learning fosters social integration (OECD, 2021; Waller et al., 2022).

Adult education is an important public health and developmental tool given the increasing global prevalence of mental health issues. In addition to improving individual well-being, policies that make lifelong learning more accessible also promote healthier, more cohesive societies (UNESCO, 2022).

## Policy Implications

One of the most important steps in encouraging lifelong learning and psychological well-being is increasing access to adult education programs. Barriers like cost, geography, and timing can be lessened by expanding learning options for people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Increased accessibility makes it possible for more

adults to take advantage of the social engagement, skill development, and cognitive stimulation that come with attending school, which eventually improves resilience on both an individual and community level.

A proactive approach to holistic education includes incorporating assistance for mental health into adult education programs. Teachers can assist students in developing psychological tools that support cognitive and professional abilities by incorporating techniques for stress management, emotional control, and mindfulness into educational programs. Such integration highlights the transformative potential of lifelong learning and strengthens the connection between education and general mental health while also enhancing learners' ability to deal with life's obstacles.

Promoting social cohesion and group well-being requires bolstering community-based learning programs. Peer groups, cooperative workshops, and local learning centres offer settings where adults can engage, exchange stories, and create networks of support. In addition to improving learning results, these social connections foster inclusion, lessen feelings of loneliness, and foster a sense of belonging—elements that are closely linked to mental and emotional well-being.

Lastly, acknowledging adult education as a tool for promoting mental health highlights its wider societal importance beyond financial and professional advantages. The importance of adult education in boosting resilience, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction should be recognized by policymakers, educators, and public health professionals. Communities can use learning opportunities as a long-term intervention to enhance well-being and develop healthier, more capable people by integrating adult education into mental health policies.

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