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Enhancing Emotional Tolerance to Support Self-Identity Development Among College Students: A Review of Intervention Research

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Abstract: *Background:* Between roughly 18 and 29 years of age, a person consolidates the self-identity that will organize much of adult life, and university students pass through this window under compounded academic, social, and vocational pressures. Emotional tolerance—the capacity to remain in contact with negative affect while continuing to act toward one's goals—has been repeatedly implicated in how deeply identity exploration proceeds. Although intervention research drawing on this link has accumulated for over a decade, it remains dispersed across therapeutic traditions and has never been integrated around the identity question itself. *Methods:* This review synthesizes theoretical and empirical literature on emotional tolerance and self-identity in college populations. Studies were organized into five intervention families according to their theoretical lineage: dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) skills training, narrative and identity-focused programs, emotion regulation training, mindfulness and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) approaches, and creative expression interventions. Each family was appraised with respect to its theoretical grounding, the strength and consistency of its evidence, and its plausible mechanisms of change; the methodological quality of the evidence base was then assessed as a whole. Results: DBT-informed programs showed the most consistent effects, with 15 of 16 reviewed studies reporting gains in emotion regulation, distress tolerance, or mindfulness that extended beyond symptom relief. Identity-focused and narrative programs reduced identity confusion and increased identity integration among emerging adults; emotion efficacy training improved distress tolerance while lowering regulation difficulties and experiential avoidance; seven of nine campus mindfulness programs improved emotional distress or self-perception; and ACT-based and creative expression approaches returned promising but preliminary findings. Mechanistically, emotional tolerance appears to buy the psychological time that sustained exploration requires, while a consolidated identity in turn stabilizes emotional responding, forming a reciprocal loop on which current interventions operate. *Conclusions:* Targeting emotional tolerance constitutes a theoretically coherent and empirically supported route to promoting self-identity development in college students. Confidence in this conclusion is tempered by the scarcity of longitudinal follow-up, heterogeneous outcome measurement, reliance on Western undergraduate samples, and thin reporting of implementation fidelity. Future work should emphasize extended follow-up designs, standardized identity-relevant outcomes, cross-cultural validation, and implementation research under realistic campus conditions.

Keywords: Emotional tolerance; Distress tolerance; Self-identity; College students; Emerging adulthood; Intervention strategies

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1. Introduction

Between the ages of 18 and 29, a person is no longer an adolescent but not yet a full adult. This interval emerging adulthood and characterized it by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, and a persistent sense of being in between. University students occupy this interval in its most concentrated form. Academic workloads steepen, friendship networks must be rebuilt almost from nothing, and career decisions that once felt distant acquire deadlines of their own. Beneath these practical demands runs a quieter and more consequential question: who am I, and who am I becoming?

Erikson (1968) treated the search for an answer as the central psychosocial task of late adolescence and early adulthood [1]. By self-identity, he meant a coherent, internally consistent sense of one's values, beliefs, goals, and role commitments—one that holds steady across situations and life domains. When consolidation fails, role confusion and psychological distress tend to follow. Marcia (1966) later operationalized the idea by crossing exploration with commitment, which yields four identity statuses: achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion [2]. Achievement, the status reached when a person has examined the available alternatives and committed to self-chosen directions, shows the strongest associations with well-being and resilience.

Exploration, however, is not emotionally free. Questioning beliefs inherited from one's family, weighing alternative futures, and living with the possibility of having chosen badly all generate anxiety, confusion, and self-doubt. What a student does with these feelings partly determines how far the exploration can go. Here emotional tolerance enters the picture. Referred to as distress tolerance in much of the literature, it denotes the capacity to remain in contact with negative emotional states—to keep behaving in a goal-directed way while feeling bad—rather than collapsing into impulsive avoidance.

Scholarly interest in the relationship between emotional tolerance and self-identity has grown over the past decade, yet the intervention literature remains scattered across therapeutic traditions. Neighboring reviews cover adjacent ground: Synthesized DBT trials with college students, and other syntheses have addressed mental health promotion across higher education as well as emotion regulation interventions among emerging adults. A focused treatment of self-identity interventions for university students, read through the lens of emotional tolerance, is still missing.

The present article supplies that integration. It first defines both constructs and traces their theoretical connections, then appraises the major intervention strategies in turn, examines the mechanisms that may account for their effects, weighs the methodological weaknesses of the existing evidence, and closes with directions for future research. Researchers and practitioners seeking a single integrative reference on this question are the intended audience.

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1. Emotional tolerance: Concept and measurement

The terms emotional tolerance and distress tolerance are used almost interchangeably in the academic literature. Simons and Gaher (2005) defined the construct as the capacity to keep behaving in a goal-directed manner while experiencing negative emotion, and their account contains two distinguishable components. The first is behavioral: the person continues to act rather than withdraw despite feeling bad [3]. The second is cognitive-perceptual: the person subjectively appraises the suffering as bearable, as something that can be withstood rather than escaped.

Measurement draws on both self-report and behavioral paradigms. Instruments such as the Distress Tolerance Scale capture how tolerant a person believes themselves to be, whereas behavioral tasks record how long someone actually persists under frustration or discomfort, offering a more objective read on the same capacity. Data from these converging sources tell a consistent story. Low emotional tolerance travels with anxiety disorders, depression, substance misuse, and self-harm; high tolerance operates as a protective factor, allowing adaptive coping to continue under stress instead of giving way to avoidance or impulsive action .

One further property deserves emphasis because it carries the practical weight of the entire intervention literature: emotional tolerance is not a fixed personality trait. Intervention studies conducted in recent years demonstrate that it responds to systematic training and practice. For anyone designing programs, this malleability is precisely where the opportunity lies.

2.2. Self-identity development among college students

Within Erikson's framework, self-identity is the coherent sense of self a person constructs by integrating self-understandings across social roles and life domains. College students build this sense along several interwoven dimensions—academic, social, vocational, and ideological identity each contributes to the overall picture a student holds of who they are.

The university setting is unusually favorable terrain for this construction, though the advantage cuts both ways. Campus life opens exploration on many fronts at once: unfamiliar cultures, student organizations, courses outside one's comfort zone, and rapidly forming friendships. The same openness generates considerable strain, because academic competition, relationship friction, uncertainty about life after graduation, and financial worry all press on students simultaneously. Research on students caught in prolonged and severe identity struggles reports markedly elevated mental health risk within this group.

Emerging adulthood itself has a distinctive character. People at this stage have left adolescent dependency behind without yet taking on the full social responsibilities of adulthood (Arnett, 2000)[3]. That in-between position lends identity exploration a particular urgency: major life decisions must be made within a fairly narrow window, and their consequences will echo through later life trajectories .

2.3. Theoretical linkages between the two constructs

Several theoretical threads explain why emotional tolerance and self-identity should be related, and three of them carry most of the explanatory load.

First, identity exploration is inherently affectively costly. Questioning long-held beliefs, weighing alternative paths, and confronting the possibility of choosing wrong each stir up anxiety, confusion, and doubt. A person unable to tolerate such feelings seeks an exit, and two escape routes are common: ending

exploration early and settling on whatever identity is at hand, which is foreclosure, or refusing to explore at all, which is diffusion. Students who can bear the turbulence are the ones who explore thoroughly enough to reach commitments genuinely their own.

Second, emotional tolerance shapes how identity-relevant social feedback is processed. University life supplies constant feedback bearing on identity—peer comparison, instructor evaluation, the experience of a first internship—and any of these can unsettle a student's self-perception. Students with stronger tolerance manage to take such feedback in and adjust their self-concept accordingly, without the defensive reactions that discard corrections worth keeping.

Third, the influence runs backward as well. A settled sense of identity supplies a cognitive frame for reading one's own emotions; someone who knows what they believe and value holds steady when feelings run high. The two constructs therefore feed each other in a loop: tolerance deepens exploration, exploration strengthens identity, and identity in turn raises tolerance.

This framework translates directly into guidance for intervention design. Raising emotional tolerance clears psychological space for identity work; building identity enlarges the internal resources a person can draw on when distressed. The interventions reviewed below build, in theory and in practice, on the two halves of this loop.

3. Intervention strategies: A critical review

Intervention research with college students has tested a number of routes from emotional tolerance to identity development, drawing on several distinct theoretical traditions. The five major strands are summarized and appraised below.

3.1. Dialectical behavior therapy-based interventions

Linehan (1993) developed DBT for borderline personality disorder, and the approach has since spread to wider populations struggling with emotion regulation [4]. Its four skill modules—mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness—map closely onto the competencies that identity work demands.

Johnston and Swales (2022) systematically reviewed DBT-informed interventions among college students, covering 16 studies that addressed trauma, social anxiety, emotional dysregulation [5], academic stress, and related concerns. Fifteen of the sixteen reported meaningful gains in student mental health, with emotion regulation and mindfulness improving most consistently. The review's central conclusion reached beyond symptom relief: DBT skills training appeared to build psychological resources that students carried into ordinary daily challenges.

One program deserves particular attention. The Wellness and Resilience Course (WRC), a 12-week modular curriculum grounded in DBT, trains mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness skills; participants outperformed controls on adaptive skill use, emotional acceptance, distress tolerance, mindfulness, and life satisfaction [4]. Gains of this kind lay the psychological groundwork on which identity exploration depends. Students who can sit with discomfort long enough tend to keep digging into the question of who they are rather than closing the inquiry early.

Brief DBT-based group skills training has also been piloted with students in severe distress, including those experiencing suicidal ideation or self-harm. Acute symptom relief is the primary aim of such programs.

Even so, the distress tolerance and emotion regulation skills they teach speak directly to the identity problems that so often accompany severe psychological difficulty.

3.2. Narrative and identity-oriented interventions

A second family works on the identity process itself through narrative and reflective practice. The premise is straightforward: identity is built out of the stories people tell about their own lives, so revising those stories should move identity forward.

The Miami Adult Development Project offers one example of a self-guided, identity-focused program. Researchers there assessed 141 emerging adults between 19 and 29 years of age. By the end of the program, participants showed less identity confusion and better mental health than controls—an effect traceable to two changes working together: identity confusion had dropped while identity integration, in the form of commitment and synthesis, had risen. Identity-focused intervention during emerging adulthood thus carries empirical support.

Related work has examined narrative processing of self-defining events as a route to reducing identity confusion. Two randomized controlled trials tested whether exploratory narrative processing could advance identity development across the college years, and both point the same way: specific autobiographical memories can serve as sources of identity strength.

Digital formats have entered this space as well. One study combined reflective activities with social media engagement, using the information access and social connectivity such platforms afford to support identity exploration and commitment during emerging adulthood. The design acknowledges a plain fact about the current cohort—students now grow their identities in digital and physical environments at the same time.

3.3. Emotion regulation training

A separate line of work trains emotion regulation skills specifically. These programs walk students through identifying, understanding, and managing emotional experience, with mental well-being as the target outcome.

Emotion Efficacy Training (EET) was designed for emerging adults. Participants first learn to recognize emotions as they arise, to understand what function an emotion serves in context, and to label its somatic, cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Mindfulness-based acceptance exercises then teach them to ride an emotion rather than react to it, and the program rounds out with coping strategies that include relaxation, self-soothing, perspective-taking, full acceptance, distraction, and time-outs. After eight weeks, participants showed significant gains in emotional efficacy and distress tolerance, while difficulties with emotion regulation and experiential avoidance both declined; self-acceptance and sense of environmental mastery improved as downstream effects.

Emotion regulation training has likewise been linked to gains in self-awareness among students, which suggests this kind of educational intervention reaches aspects of the self tied to identity functioning. Psychodrama group interventions offer a further pathway: within a structured group setting, they support honest emotional expression and let students rehearse more adaptive ways of coping.

3.4. Mindfulness and acceptance and commitment therapy-based interventions

Mindfulness programs have accumulated a fair amount of evidence with college samples. A review of universal promotion and prevention programs for higher education students located nine mindfulness intervention studies, of which seven reported improvements in emotional distress, self-perception, or social-emotional skills. The proposed mechanism is plausible: mindfulness trains non-judgmental awareness of present experience, which weakens the habitual move toward avoiding or suppressing difficult emotion.

ACT-based interventions have been tried with university populations too. In one study, ACT was combined with music relaxation therapy and applied to college students' self-identity; the experimental group went on to outscore the control group on every dimension of psychological resilience measured, covering resilience, strength, and optimism. ACT asks clients to accept difficult internal experiences while acting on personal values—a combination that fits the demands of identity development in emerging adulthood well.

What the two approaches share is an ability to change a person's relationship to their own emotions. Once emotions are assessed by their function rather than sorted into good and bad, acceptance and non-reactivity become possible; less psychological energy goes into avoidance, which frees capacity for the identity work itself.

3.5. Creative expression interventions

A newer and smaller literature examines creative activity. One study of 354 college students probed the relationship between drawing practice and pain tolerance, finding significant associations linking drawing practice, self-disclosure, psychological resilience, and pain tolerance. On that evidence, creative expression could serve as a low-cost, easily implemented tool within university counseling and peer support programs.

Drama education has been proposed for similar reasons, as a route to psychological resilience and self-identity development. Scholars in this area have articulated the mechanisms conceptually: role-playing enables self-exploration, scenario simulation supplies emotional experience, and collective creation provides social interaction. The empirical base remains thin, but the theoretical and practical value of the approach merits attention [6].

4. Mechanisms of change

Read together, the five intervention families suggest a set of overlapping mechanisms rather than a single active ingredient. Four appear repeatedly.

The first is prolonged exposure to affect. Every successful program, whatever its lineage, extends the time a student can remain in contact with uncomfortable feelings—through distress tolerance drills, mindful acceptance, or narrative dwelling on difficult memories. This extension is what allows identity exploration to run to depth instead of terminating in premature closure.

The second is reduced experiential avoidance. When avoidance declines, identity-relevant feedback that would previously have been deflected can actually be processed, and the self-concept becomes more accurate and better differentiated as a result.

The third is values clarification. ACT and its relatives ask students to identify what matters to them and act on it while discomfort persists, which is close to a procedural definition of identity achievement: exploration under aversive affect followed by self-chosen commitment.

The fourth is narrative reconstruction. Programs in the identity-focused family operate on the stories

students tell about themselves, reworking autobiographical material into more integrated accounts—a process through which commitment and synthesis measurably rise.

Group and relational processes run alongside all four. Several of the stronger trials were delivered in group formats, where witnessing others tolerate distress and articulate identity commitments may model the very capacities the interventions aim to build.

5. Methodological limitations of the evidence base

Four limitations constrain what the existing literature can support.

Longitudinal follow-up is rare. Most studies stop at pretest and posttest, which is an acute problem for identity research because identity forms over years rather than weeks. Whether short-term gains persist, and whether an intervention genuinely changes the quality of identity development rather than producing a temporary lift, are questions only extended follow-up can answer.

Outcome measures vary widely. Pain tolerance anchors some designs; others measure emotion regulation broadly, and a few take identity outcomes as primary indicators. Comparison across studies—and any attempt at meta-analysis—becomes difficult under this heterogeneity. The field would accumulate knowledge faster if outcome measurement were standardized.

Samples pose a third problem. The evidence base comes almost entirely from university students in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies. How far these findings travel to non-Western populations, to students in other institutional types, or to emerging adults outside higher education altogether remains open, and the stakes are real: culture shapes both how emotional distress is experienced and how identity forms.

Reporting on implementation fidelity, finally, is often thin. The issue matters most for multi-component programs such as DBT-informed interventions, where variation in delivery can move outcomes. Feasibility under actual university conditions—with limited resources and a highly diverse student body—deserves far more attention than it has received.

6. Directions for future research

The limitations above translate into a research agenda. Longitudinal designs with follow-up extending at least one academic year would establish whether intervention effects on identity endure. A consensus battery—pairing identity status measures with both self-reported and behavioral indices of distress tolerance—would render studies comparable and enable quantitative synthesis. Sampling beyond WEIRD undergraduates, particularly in non-Western higher education systems where collectivist identity norms alter the exploration process, would test the cross-cultural reach of the theoretical loop described in Section 2.3. Digital delivery deserves systematic study rather than opportunistic pilots, given that students already conduct much of their identity work online. Finally, implementation research examining fidelity, cost, and scalability under real campus constraints would convert promising protocols into standard practice.

7. Conclusion

The college years are formative ones for self-identity, and emotional tolerance does indispensable work

during them. This review has examined the field from two angles: the theoretical connections between the two constructs, and the interventions that have tried to translate those connections into practice. Five intervention families, rooted in DBT, narrative practice, emotion regulation training, mindfulness and ACT, and creative expression, have each returned evidence consistent with the proposition that raising emotional tolerance supports identity development, with DBT-informed skills training currently carrying the strongest evidentiary base.

The field is young and its limitations are plain: short follow-up windows, inconsistent outcome measurement, narrow sampling, and underreported fidelity. Future work needs firmer methods, deeper theory, and closer alignment with the actual conditions of university life. Even so, the evidence gathered so far indicates that interventions built around emotional tolerance hold genuine promise for supporting healthy identity development among college students. As this research matures, such interventions may well become a standard way of helping students through emerging adulthood and toward a settled sense of who they are.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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