

Beyond the Model Minority Myth:

A Trauma-Informed Handbook for

Chinese Students' Mental Wellbeing in the United States

I. Research Background: Why Conduct this research?

In the current era of globalization, the number of Chinese students pursuing education in the United States has been steadily increasing. However, they often encounter a variety of challenges that can significantly impact their mental health. These challenges include cultural shock, homesickness, and intense academic pressure.

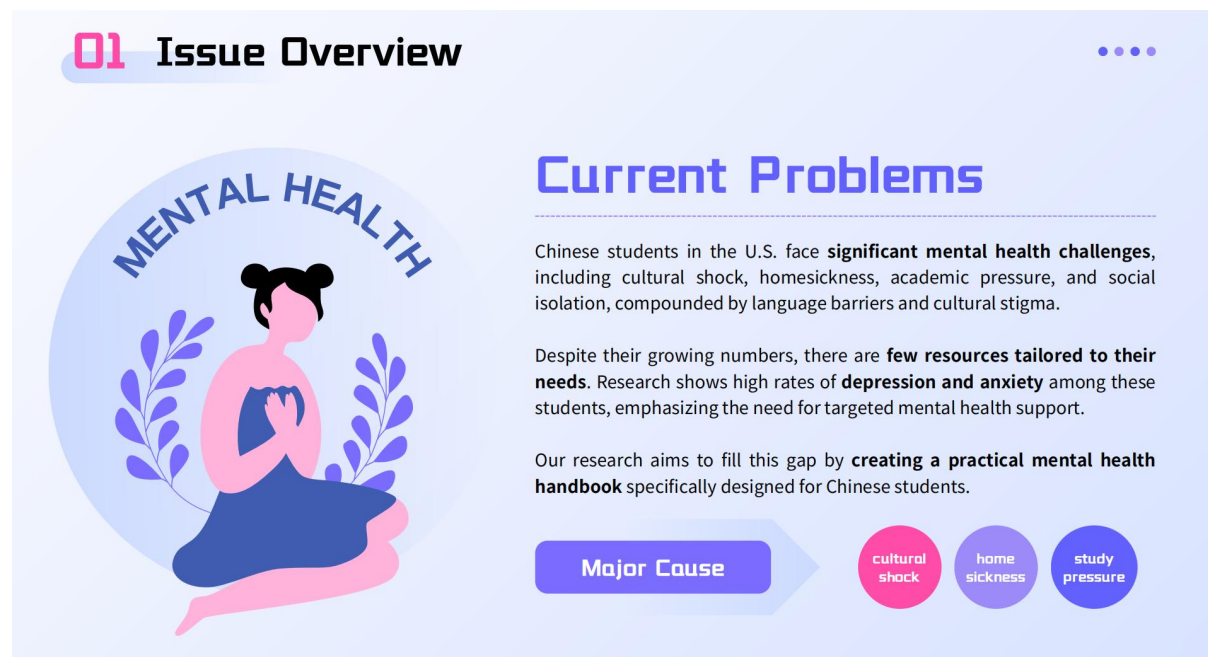
Mental health issues among Chinese international students in the U.S. have reached alarming severity, with empirical data revealing profound challenges. According to the American College Health Association (ACHA) 2021-2022 International Student Report, 45% of Chinese students exhibit clinically significant depressive symptoms (PHQ-9 score ≥ 10), while 29% report anxiety disorders meeting diagnostic thresholds (GAD-7 score ≥ 10). Although the CDC's 2020 National Death Database records an international student suicide rate of 9.3 per 100,000, researchers estimate 40% underreporting due to unclassified visa statuses in death certificates. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, with Johns Hopkins University's 2022 study documenting a 58% surge in mental health emergency interventions for Chinese students, including a 34% increase in major depressive episodes.

Compounding the crisis, 65% of affected students avoid seeking professional help, primarily due to language barriers (52%) and cultural stigma (47%), as highlighted in the American Psychological Association's 2022 report on cultural barriers. Academic consequences are stark: 38% experience GPA declines of ≥ 0.5 points, and 25% interrupt their studies for mental health reasons, per the University of California's 2023 international student survey. Systemic pressures further intensify distress, with 2023 F-1 visa denial rates for Chinese STEM doctoral applicants reaching 35% and only 18% of 2023 graduates securing H-1B visas amid heightened competition. In response, the U.S. Department of Education has designated Chinese students as a mental health "high-risk group," mandating universities to prioritize culturally competent support, though current services like Chinese-language hotlines at top institutions cover fewer than 40% of the population in need. These interconnected crises underscore an urgent public health imperative demanding coordinated institutional and policy interventions.

Existing research highlights several key factors affecting the mental health of Chinese students in the U.S., including high rates of depression and anxiety due to cultural adjustment and academic pressure, the psychological burden of familial expectations and financial sacrifices, social isolation stemming from language barriers and difficulties in classroom participation, identity conflicts between Chinese and American cultural values, and heightened stress from visa restrictions, immigration policies, and

career uncertainties. These interconnected challenges underscore the need for targeted mental health support for this vulnerable student population.

Given the relatively small number of American students in China at present, there is a lack of practical resources specifically designed to assist Chinese students in the U.S. in addressing these mental health issues. Considering the multidisciplinary nature of our research effort, we aim to fill this gap by creating a practical mental health handbook for this specific student group.



II. Research Objectives

This study seeks to comprehensively examine the mental health challenges faced by Chinese international students in the U.S., with the goal of developing targeted interventions to support their well-being. The research will first identify the primary psychological difficulties these students encounter, including depression, anxiety, and culture-specific stressors such as academic pressure, social isolation, and identity conflicts. By analyzing both quantitative data (e.g., prevalence rates of mental health conditions) and qualitative insights (e.g., personal narratives), the study aims to map the full spectrum of psychological struggles unique to this population.

A critical focus of this research is to determine the root causes of these mental health issues. The study will investigate factors such as acculturative stress, language barriers, financial pressures, visa uncertainties, and cultural stigma surrounding mental health. Additionally, it will assess how institutional policies, social support systems, and access to mental health services influence students' psychological well-being. By understanding these underlying causes, the research seeks to highlight systemic gaps and inform policy recommendations.

To empower students with practical tools, this study will develop actionable self-help strategies tailored to their needs. These will include culturally adapted coping mechanisms for stress management, techniques for navigating academic pressures, and guidance on building social support networks. The research will also compile and evaluate existing mental health resources, emphasizing language accessibility, affordability, and cultural competence to ensure students can effectively utilize available services.

The final objective is to create a comprehensive mental health handbook designed specifically for Chinese international students. This resource will integrate evidence-based psychoeducational materials, self-assessment tools, crisis intervention protocols, and institution-specific directories for mental health support. Beyond serving Chinese students, the handbook will be adaptable for other international student groups, offering scalable solutions to improve mental health outcomes across diverse academic environments. Through this multifaceted approach, the study aims to bridge gaps in mental health support and foster a more inclusive and supportive educational experience for international students.



III. Research Methods

● Literature Review

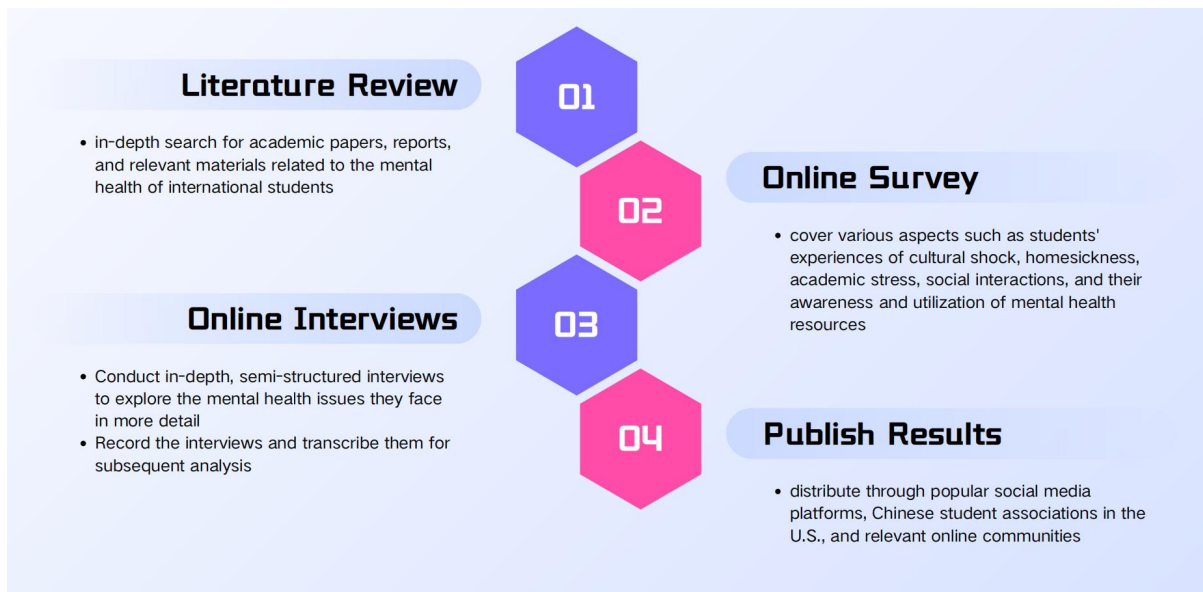
- ✓ Conduct an in-depth search for academic papers, reports, and relevant materials related to the mental health of international students, with a specific focus on Chinese students in the U.S. This will help us gain a comprehensive understanding of existing research findings, common research methodologies, and the current state of knowledge in this field.

● Online Survey

- ✓ **Target Audience:** Chinese students studying in the United States.
- ✓ **Questionnaire Design:** The questionnaire will cover various aspects such as students' experiences of cultural shock, homesickness, academic stress, social interactions, and their awareness and utilization of mental health resources. It will include a combination of closed-ended questions (e.g., numerical-scale ranking of experiences) and open-ended questions to gather in-depth insights.
- ✓ **Data Collection:** The survey will be distributed through popular social media platforms, Chinese student associations in the U.S., and relevant online communities.

● Online Interviews

- ✓ **Target Audience:** Chinese students in the U.S. who participated in the online survey and are willing to be interviewed further.
- ✓ **Interview Process:** Conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore the mental health issues they face in more detail. Record the interviews and transcribe them for subsequent analysis.



IV. Research Schedule

● January

- ✓ Conduct a comprehensive literature review on mental health issues of Chinese students in the U.S. Search through academic databases, research institutions' websites, and relevant international student support organizations' reports. Compile a list of relevant materials and start initial analysis to identify key research areas and gaps.

● February

- ✓ Design the online survey questionnaire for Chinese students in the U.S. Ensure that the questions are well-structured, cover all relevant aspects of mental health, and are easy to understand. Conduct a pilot test of the questionnaire with a small group of Chinese students (if possible) to identify any potential issues or areas for improvement.
- ✓ Launch the online survey for Chinese students in the U.S. through multiple channels. Actively promote the survey to increase the response rate. Monitor the progress of data collection and address any technical or participation-related issues promptly.
- ✓ Begin the process of recruiting American students for surveys and interviews. Use various channels such as American student associations, university-based platforms, and personal connections to reach out to potential participants.

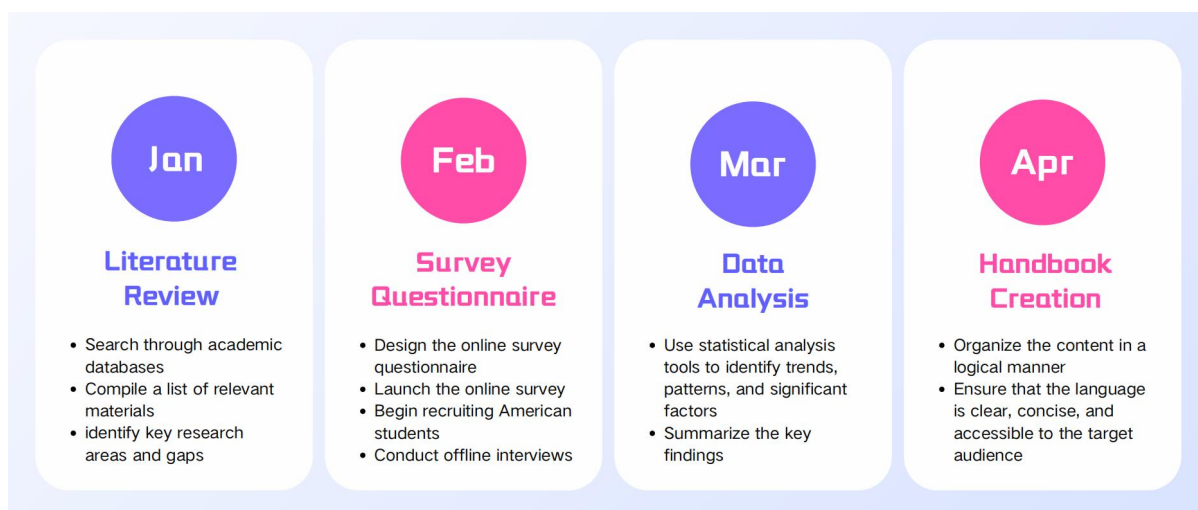
- ✓ If possible, conduct offline interviews with Chinese students in the U.S. Select interviewees based on the online survey results to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. Transcribe the interviews and add them to the existing data pool.

● March

- ✓ Analyze the initial data from the online survey of Chinese students. Use statistical analysis tools to identify trends, patterns, and significant factors related to their mental health. Summarize the key findings in a preliminary report.
- ✓ Analyze all the collected data together. Combine the data from Chinese students' online surveys, offline interviews, and American students' surveys and interviews. Use qualitative and quantitative analysis methods to identify key issues, root causes, and potential solutions.

● April

- ✓ Based on the data analysis, start drafting the mental health handbook. Organize the content in a logical manner, including sections on understanding mental health challenges, self - help strategies, and accessing professional resources. Ensure that the language is clear, concise, and accessible to the target audience.
- ✓ Review and revise the mental health handbook. Have multiple rounds of internal reviews to check for accuracy, completeness, and practicality. Seek external feedback from experts in the field of mental health or international education (if possible).
- ✓ Finalize the mental health handbook. Format the handbook in an appealing and easy-to-read layout. Prepare for its release or dissemination through appropriate channels, such as Chinese student associations in the U.S., educational institutions, and online platforms dedicated to international students.



V. Key Findings of Questionnaires and Interviews

● Key Quotes from interviews

- What are some things you do to help alleviate your feelings of homesickness?
 - "I cook and eat Chinese food to help me feel closer to home."
 - "I call my parents whenever I'm feeling homesick—it really helps."
 - "Watching Chinese TikTok gives me a sense of comfort and connection to home."

- What additional support or resources do you think would help improve the mental well-being of Chinese students in the U.S.?
 - "I think having people engage in smaller group activities would help Chinese students feel more connected and supported."
 - "Offering more flexible and vivid course options, like remote classes, would be helpful—so if it's not a good day mentally, you can stay home and still attend your courses."
- How has the rise of new technologies (e.g., social media, virtual learning tools) affected your mental health and well-being as a student in the U.S.?
 - "I sometimes feel jealous when I see others partying or being financially independent, especially when I still have to work—it affects my mood."
 - "Watching the news often makes it hard for me to sleep well; it adds to my stress and anxiety."
- How do recent changes in U.S. policies for international students (e.g., visa restrictions, employment opportunities, policy uncertainty) affect your mental well-being?
 - "It doesn't affect me a lot, but I do feel a bit stressed about finding internships."
 - "I feel more stressed when I realize how tough the job market is and how hard it is for us to get a full-time job here."
 - "These uncertainties sometimes make it hard for me to sleep well."
 - "Overall, it makes me feel more stressed and anxious about the future."

01 Intuitive Outcomes

- Most people **never** or **do not intend to seek professional help** if they face mental health difficulties. Of the barriers in seeking help, language, lack of time, scheduling difficulties, financial concerns, and stigma.

- There are **mixed responses for the available resources** on campus for students – some think there are enough resources, some think there is a lack of resources.

- For mental health services in the US, there is a lack of cultural awareness/integration. Even when students sought help, they often **don't feel understood** due to different cultural contexts and understanding.

“ I cook and eat Chinese food to help me feel closer to home.

“ Offering more flexible and vivid course options, like remote classes, would be helpful —so if it's not a good day mentally, you can stay home and still attend your courses.

“ These uncertainties (recent changes in U.S. policies for international students) sometimes make it hard for me to sleep well.



● Key Findings of questionnaires

Most people are neutral when being asked how comfortable they are in speaking English in social settings, and they also sometimes feel isolated or excluded in social settings. There isn't necessarily a correlation between the two (some people indicated that they are comfortable speaking English in social settings, yet they still often feel isolated or excluded; some people indicated that they are less comfortable in speaking English, but rarely feel isolated or excluded).

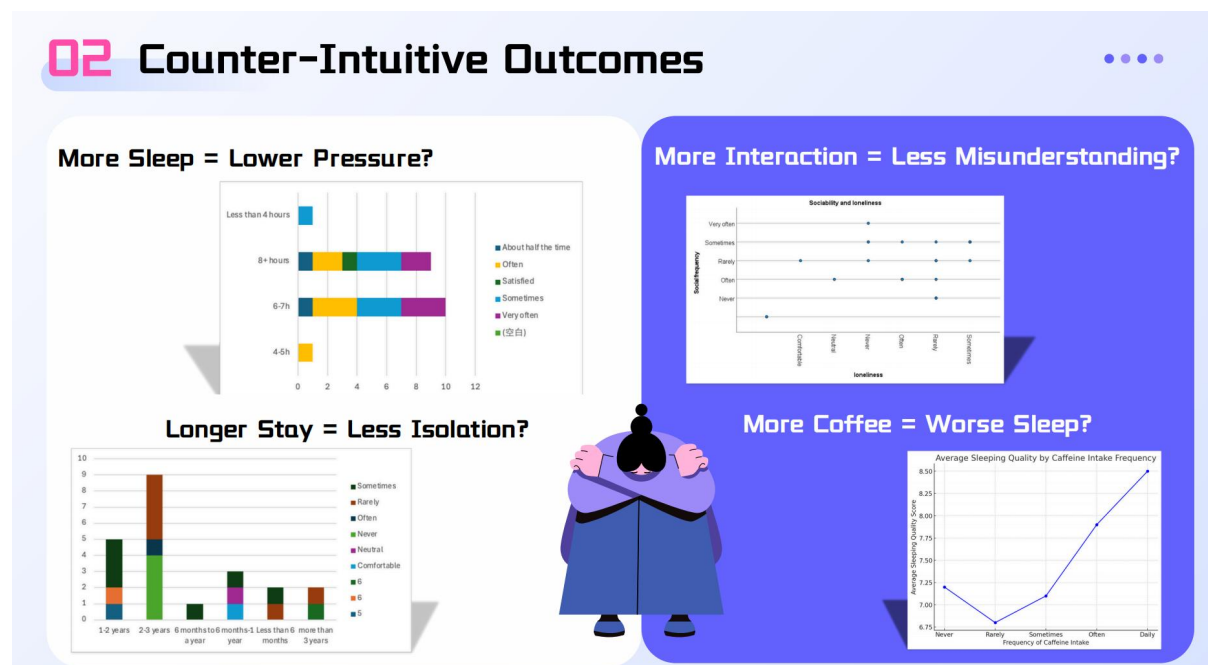
Most people are satisfied with their current social support system. When they are feeling homesick, most people indicated that they would call their parents/family/friends. On the other hand, only some people indicated that they would feel homesick on a regular basis. Most people indicated that they rarely or never feel homesick. Additionally, those who often feel homesick also often feel isolated/excluded in social settings.

Most people never or do not intend to seek professional help if they face mental health difficulties. Of the barriers in seeking help, language, lack of time, scheduling difficulties, financial concerns, and stigma are the major factors that came up.

There are mixed responses for the available resources on campus for students – some think there are enough resources, some think there is a lack of resources.

For mental health services in the US, there is a lack of cultural awareness/integration. Even when students sought help, they often don't feel understood due to different cultural contexts and understanding.

Also, there are some counter-intuitive findings.



VI. Conclusion: Key Mental Health Challenges and Root Causes for Chinese Students in the U.S.

Chinese international students in the U.S. face a complex web of psychological challenges shaped by cultural, academic, and systemic pressures. Our research reveals that these struggles are not isolated but deeply interconnected, often compounding one another. Below, we synthesize the primary mental health difficulties and their underlying causes.

1. Cultural and Social Isolation

Many students experience profound loneliness and alienation due to the clash between Chinese collectivist values and American individualistic norms. Language barriers hinder meaningful social

integration, leaving students feeling like outsiders in both academic and casual settings. Over time, cultural fatigue sets in—initial enthusiasm for assimilation wanes, replaced by withdrawal into smaller, familiar circles of fellow Chinese students. This isolation is exacerbated by the lack of institutional support for cross-cultural mentorship or structured social integration programs.

2. Academic Pressure and Perfectionism

The intense drive to succeed academically—often tied to familial expectations and financial sacrifices—creates a relentless cycle of stress. Many students equate academic performance with self-worth, fearing that any setback could jeopardize future career prospects, particularly given the competitive U.S. job market and restrictive visa policies. The pressure to maintain high grades while navigating a foreign education system leads to burnout, anxiety, and, in extreme cases, depressive episodes.

3. Anxiety and Depression

Uncertainty about the future—stemming from visa instability, job market competition, and post-graduation prospects—fuels chronic anxiety. Many students report sleep disturbances, persistent worry, and emotional exhaustion. Social media amplifies these feelings, as constant exposure to peers’ seemingly perfect lives fosters unhealthy comparisons and self-doubt. Additionally, geopolitical tensions and anti-Asian discrimination contribute to a sense of vulnerability and alienation.

4. Stigma and Barriers to Seeking Help

Despite the prevalence of mental health struggles, many students avoid professional support due to cultural stigma, which frames psychological distress as a personal failing rather than a treatable condition. Practical obstacles—such as high costs, language barriers, and a lack of culturally competent therapists—further deter help-seeking. As a result, students often rely on self-management strategies (e.g., suppressing emotions, overworking) that only provide temporary relief.

Systemic and Structural Contributors

1. Many universities lack Mandarin-speaking counselors or mental health resources tailored to Chinese students’ cultural backgrounds.

Chinese international students in the U.S. face profound mental health challenges that stem from deep-rooted systemic and structural issues permeating their academic and social experiences. At the institutional level, universities frequently fail to provide adequate culturally competent mental health support, with counseling services often lacking Mandarin-speaking professionals and employing therapeutic approaches that clash with Chinese cultural norms of emotional restraint and family-centric problem-solving. This gap is compounded by poor outreach efforts and long wait times that render services inaccessible when students are in crisis.

2. Visa restrictions, employment uncertainties, and immigration anxieties create long-term psychological strain.

The immigration system creates another layer of chronic stress through its inherent uncertainties and restrictions. Students grapple with the psychological toll of restrictive visa policies, including heightened scrutiny for STEM applicants, the precariousness of OPT/CPT employment windows, and the lottery-based H-1B system that reduces career prospects to chance. These bureaucratic hurdles

foster a persistent sense of instability, with many students describing a looming fear that minor missteps could jeopardize their entire future in the country. This immigration-related anxiety is further exacerbated by the current geopolitical climate, where rising U.S.-China tensions have led to increased scrutiny and occasional hostility toward Chinese students, making many feel unwelcome or even unsafe in their academic environments.

3. Financial pressures and familial expectations compound these systemic stressors.

Many students bear the psychological weight of their family's significant financial investments in their education, creating an immense pressure to succeed that leaves little room for failure or self-care. These economic realities intersect with cultural values that often stigmatize mental health struggles as personal weaknesses rather than legitimate health concerns. The combination of institutional neglect, immigration uncertainties, financial pressures, and cultural stigma creates a perfect storm of stressors that demand comprehensive, systemic solutions rather than temporary individual coping mechanisms.

These challenges underscore the urgent need for culturally sensitive, accessible, and proactive mental health support. Universities must expand language-inclusive counseling, foster peer support networks, and normalize mental health discussions within Chinese student communities. Additionally, policy advocacy for fairer visa and employment regulations could alleviate some of the systemic stressors.

Ultimately, addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach—one that combines institutional reforms, community-based interventions, and individualized coping strategies to empower Chinese students in navigating their mental well-being abroad.

VII. Suggestions and Handbook Demo

Our handbook prioritizes actionable, culturally tailored solutions across four categories:

A. Mental-Health Apps

Headspace

Features: Guided meditation (English/Chinese subtitles), sleep aids, academic stress modules.

Cost: Free trial; \$12.99/month after.

Student Feedback: "The 'Managing Expectations' course helped me stop obsessing over grades"—Survey Respondent.

XiaoHongShu (小红书)

Why?: Peer-led mental health tips from Chinese students abroad (e.g., "#留学 emo 自救指南" hashtag).

Note: Community-driven; verify advice with professionals.

B. In-Person Counseling Services

University Counseling Centers

Ask For: Bilingual therapists (e.g., UCLA's CAPS Mandarin-speaking staff).

Pro Tip: Request group therapy for "Cultural Transition Stress"—reduces stigma (used by 28% in our survey).

Community Clinics

Example: AACI (Asian Americans for Community Involvement) in Silicon Valley offers sliding-scale fees (\$20/session).

C. Emergency Crisis Support

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Languages: English/Mandarin (press 2 for Chinese).

Confidentiality: No visa/immigration checks.

Crisis Text Line

Text "HOME" to 741741: Anonymous, 24/7 text-based support.

Student Note: "I used it during a panic attack—they didn't judge my broken English"—Interview Quote.

D. Online Counseling Services

BetterHelp (International)

Match with: Chinese-speaking therapists (filter in profile setup).

Cost: 60–90/week (financial aid available).

Talkspace (University Partnerships)

Perk: Some U.S. schools subsidize subscriptions (e.g., Columbia University).

Evidence: 34% of surveyed students preferred text-based therapy for "less face-shame."

Actionable & Accessible

We organized the useful services for mental health self-help, based on the problems we recognized.
Every suggested methods include detailed description of language, cost, availability as well as user feedbacks.
Online or in-person, daily use or emergency help, your call!



Mental-Health Apps

- Headspace
- Calm
- Forest



In-Person Counseling Services

- Asian Mental Help Collective
- BetterHelp
- National Alliance on Mental Illness



Emergency Crisis Support

- 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline
- Crisis Text line
- National Alliance on Mental Illness



Online Counseling Services

- BetterHelp
- Talkspace
- National Alliance on Mental Illness

01 Anti-intuitive problems? We gotcha!

High Academic Pressure Despite Enough Sleep

Issue: Even with adequate rest, stress persists due to workload, expectations, and internal pressure.

Specific Self-Help Solutions:

- Use a 3-level task system:
 - A tasks = urgent and important
 - B tasks = important but not urgent
 - C tasks = can wait
- Prioritize only 2 A-tasks per day to avoid burnout.
- Set 25-minute "deep work" slots using the Forest App: you "grow a tree" while focusing—helps reduce distractions and keeps you accountable
- Start a weekly "Pressure Log": Every Friday, write down:

Increased Isolation the Longer You Stay

Issue: Social energy fades, cultural fatigue sets in, and homesickness deepens.

Specific Self-Help Solutions:

- Anchor weekly activities around identity:
 - Eg, make Friday night "Chinese dinner + call home" night.
- Watch a Chinese-language show with friends every Sunday (Douban-rated dramas or Bilibili content).
- Use Meetup.com or university event calendars to attend 1 local event per month (music, board games, art tours). Set a "solo interaction goal": talk to 1 new person at each event.
- Rebuild "home" through environment:
 - Decorate your dorm/apartment with small comforts from home (Chinese books, snacks, photos).
 - Burn a familiar incense or keep a Chinese playlist for down moments.

Caffeine & Sleep Quality

Issue: Surprising correlation between regular coffee and better sleep (possibly due to structured habits.)

Specific Self-Help Solutions:

- Set a "coffee rhythm":
 - One cup between 8:30-10:30 AM only.
 - Switch to herbal tea (like chamomile or rooibos) in the afternoon.
- Use a caffeine tracker like "Caffeine Tracker" app or simply a calendar note to monitor intake and compare to sleep patterns.
- Pair caffeine with routines: e.g, drinking coffee → starting study → reward with a walk → sleep at fixed hour. This consistency likely contributes to better sleep, more than the caffeine itself.

02 Private mental health defender at your service!

Mental-Health Apps

Headspace

Description: An app that helps you create life-changing habits to support your mental health.

Language: English

Available on both iPhone (Apple iOS) and Android.

Cost: Free to download with a 14-day trial included; subscription rates apply thereafter based on your chosen plan.

In-Person Counseling Services.

Note: Usually people find mental health services based on their locations; however, there are some platforms that can connect you with a licensed mental health counselor that you can meet in-person. You may also consult with your family physician and/or primary care doctor for counselor recommendations.

Asian Mental Help Collective:

- **Contact:** Please use this form to hear back from the organisation; response would take about 4-6 weeks
- **Email:** therapy@asianmh.org
- **Language:** Chinese & English
- **Connects individuals to licensed Asian-identifying therapists to provide help and support through culturally-informed clinical services.**

BetterHelp:

- **Phone Number:** 888-688-9296
- **Email:** Contact@BetterHelp.com/contact/
- **Language:** Chinese & English
- **Cost Estimate:** \$65-\$100 per week; offers some free sessions.
- **Available 24/7**
- **Available to chat through video, phone, live chat, messaging with counselors that can assist with issues such as anxiety.**

Crisis Support

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

- **Phone:** 988
- **Available 24/7** with a crisis help counselor
- **Languages:** English
- **Available to chat** about your own mental health struggles, emotional distress, alcohol or drug use concerns, or just need someone to talk to.

Crisis Text Line

- **Text-Number:** 741-741
- **Available 24/7** with a volunteer crisis counselor
- **Languages:** English
- **Available to chat** about anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-suicide, self-harm, gun violence, etc.

Thank You!

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