

Emotional Learning, Resilience, and Compassion in times of Crisis

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Mental Health

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Abstract

The increasing exposure of children and adolescents to global crises and digitally mediated distressing news represents a growing challenge to mental health. Psychological research indicates rising levels of anxiety, emotional overload, helplessness, and withdrawal, while educational and preventive responses often remain predominantly cognitive. This article argues that emotional learning, conceptualized as a dimension of interdisciplinary framed *Lebenskunstbildung* (education for the art of living), constitutes a crucial resource for mental health promotion. Integrating psychological concepts such as emotional competence, resilience, salutogenesis, and compassion with theological perspectives on hope, being recognized and mercy, the article develops a dialogical framework addressing emotional regulation, self-worth, and meaning-making in times of crisis. Emotional learning is shown to foster resilience not through emotional suppression or optimism, but through reflective engagement with emotions, perspective change, and relational connectedness. The article concludes that interdisciplinary approaches linking psychology with theology can enrich preventive mental health strategies, particularly for young people facing pervasive uncertainty and emotional stress.

Keywords: Emotional learning, Resilience, Compassion, Mental health, Crisis, Interdisciplinarity

Introduction

Contemporary societies are increasingly characterized by a permanent awareness of global polycrisis [1]. A polycrisis involves multiple co-occurring, causally entangled crises with synergistic and cascading effects on multiple systems, degrading humanity's prospects beyond the sum of individual crises [2]. The 2023 Synthesis Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concludes that human-caused climate change has already led to widespread and in some cases irreversible impacts, that risks will intensify with every increment of warming. And that only immediate, rapid, and deep reductions in greenhouse gas emissions across all sectors can still limit global warming to 1.5°C or well below 2°C [3]. But besides climate crisis, armed conflicts, forced migration, social inequality, and economic instability form a dense backdrop of uncertainty that permeates everyday life. These developments are intensified by digital media, which

provide continuous access to images and narratives of crisis and catastrophe [4–6]. Children and adolescents, in particular, are exposed to a steady stream of distressing information that they are often unable to contextualize cognitively or integrate emotionally. Research in media psychology and developmental psychology indicates that such exposure may lead to heightened anxiety, emotional overload, helplessness, and depressive tendencies [7]. While information is essential for democratic participation and social awareness, an excess of negatively framed information without opportunities for emotional processing can undermine mental health [8]. Mental health therefore cannot be conceptualized merely as the absence of mental disorders. Rather, it must be understood as a dynamic capacity for emotional regulation, meaning-making, and sustained agency under conditions of stress [9–11]. Against this background, the present article proposes emotional learning as a key preventive and stabilizing factor for mental health. Drawing on psychological research and

theological perspectives, it explores how emotional learning within an interdisciplinarity framed *Lebenskunstbildung* can foster resilience and compassion in times of crisis.

Emotional Overload in a Media-Shaped Crisis Context

The mediatization of everyday life has fundamentally altered how individuals perceive and emotionally process reality. Digital media not only transmit information but actively shape emotional responses, interpretive frameworks, and perceptions of threat and safety [4]. Recently, there has been talk of the so-called ‘digital affect cultures’: digital media not only convey emotions, they actually amplify them [12].

Continuous exposure to images of violence, destruction, and human suffering frequently triggers intense emotional reactions, particularly fear and helplessness. Effective emotion regulation in adolescence is positively associated with emotional self-efficacy, both directly and indirectly through the mediating roles of emotional stability and extraversion [13]. Psychological research suggests that emotional overload arises when strong emotional activation is not accompanied by opportunities for reflection, regulation, and social integration [10]. In such situations, individuals may experience diminished self-efficacy, as global crises appear overwhelming and beyond personal influence. Adolescents are especially vulnerable, as their emotional regulation capacities are still developing and closely intertwined with identity formation. One observable response to emotional overload is news avoidance. While temporarily protective, this strategy can foster long-term disengagement, resignation, and social withdrawal [7]. From a mental health perspective, emotional withdrawal does not resolve distress but may increase vulnerability to depressive symptoms.

These dynamics underscore the importance of addressing emotional processing explicitly in educational and preventive contexts. Without structured opportunities to reflect on emotions such as fear, anger, grief, or despair, individuals remain at risk of chronic stress and emotional dysregulation.

Emotional Learning as a Protective Factor for Mental Health

Emotional learning refers to processes through which individuals acquire the ability to perceive, differentiate, express, and regulate emotions in themselves and others. Emotional competence is widely recognized as a key protective factor for mental health across the lifespan [9,12,14]. Individuals with higher emotional competence show greater resilience, more adaptive coping strategies, and more stable interpersonal relationships [10]. Importantly, emotional learning does not imply emotional control through suppression or avoidance.

Rather, it involves reflective engagement with emotions, enabling individuals to understand emotional signals, contextualize them cognitively, and integrate them into coherent self-narratives. This capacity is particularly relevant in crisis contexts, where emotions arise with high intensity and ambiguity.

Educational settings, however, often prioritize cognitive learning outcomes while marginalizing emotional dimensions. This imbalance becomes problematic when learners encounter emotionally charged content, such as media reports on war or climate catastrophe. Without emotional learning frameworks, learners may be left alone with intense feelings that remain unarticulated and unprocessed.

From an interdisciplinary perspective, emotional learning integrates cognitive, affective, and embodied dimensions of experience. Learning is not a purely rational process but is deeply intertwined with emotional states and existential concerns [15]. Educational approaches that acknowledge this complexity can foster emotional awareness and regulation, thereby strengthening mental health.

Resilience, Perspective Change, and Meaning-Making

Resilience is commonly defined as the capacity to maintain or regain mental health despite adversity [16]. Contemporary psychological research emphasizes that resilience is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process shaped by individual resources, social relationships, and cultural meaning systems [10]. A core component of resilient functioning is perspective change. By reframing experiences, individuals can shift from purely deficit-oriented perceptions toward interpretations that preserve agency and hope. The salutogenetic model highlights the importance of a sense of coherence—comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness for mental health [9].

Meaning-making plays a particularly important role in contexts of chronic or global crises, where solutions are neither immediate nor fully controllable. Empirical studies show that individuals who integrate adverse experiences into meaningful narratives demonstrate greater emotional stability and lower distress [10,17]. Importantly, meaning-making does not entail denial or naïve optimism, but rather the capacity to acknowledge suffering while situating it within a broader interpretive horizon.

From a theological perspective, Christian *Lebenskunst* can be understood as a form of resilience grounded in trust and hopeful assurance that the resources for coping with life and crisis do not rest solely in human capability but ultimately lie beyond the self. This orientation does not idealize success, but cultivates a “sense of possibility” that opens alternative horizons of meaning even when prevailing realities appear

constraining. Biblical narratives function here as stories of hope that affirm a compassionate and accompanying presence, enabling individuals to perceive crisis experiences as non-absolute and open to transformation.

Central to this perspective is a shift in perception: resilience is fostered not only by what is seen, but by how it is emotionally interpreted. Theologically, this shift precedes even perception itself, insofar as human self-understanding is grounded in the experience of being seen—recognized and valued—prior to action or achievement. This foundational sense of being regarded with dignity and care supports gratitude, hope, and emotional stability, thereby functioning as a form of resilience *a priori*. Interdisciplinarity interpreted, Christian *Lebenskunst* thus offers symbolic and affective resources that complement psychological models of resilience by anchoring perspective change in enduring meaning and relational assurance.

Being Seen, Self-Worth, and Emotional Security

A central theological motif within *Lebenskunstbildung* is the experience of being seen. This concept articulates an unconditional form of recognition that affirms human worth independent of performance or achievement [18]. Psychologically, this motif resonates with attachment theory and research on emotional security.

Early experiences of recognition and acknowledgment play a decisive role in the development of self-worth and emotional regulation. Individuals who feel seen and valued are more likely to develop secure attachment patterns, higher self-efficacy, and greater resilience to stress [9,19]. Conversely, perceived invisibility or conditional recognition increases vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation.

From a theological perspective, this motif can be further deepened by shifting the focus from seeing to being seen as a foundational category of emotional and existential orientation [20].

In Christian theology, the experience of being seen by God—unconditionally and prior to any merit or achievement—constitutes a fundamental source of self-worth and relational security. Emotions psychology similarly locates the roots of stable self-esteem and the capacity to value others in early, often pre-verbal experiences of being perceived with care and attention. The biblical tradition expresses this assurance symbolically, for example in the Aaronic blessing [Num 6:24–26; 21], which affirms a sustaining gaze that confers peace and dignity.

Interpreted in terms of resilience, this enduring experience of being seen can be understood as a form of resilience *a priori*: a stable emotional ground that enables individuals to withstand crisis without becoming affectively attached to deficit-

oriented interpretations of reality. Christian *Lebenskunst* thus fosters a resilient disposition rooted in the capacity to “return” to a foundational sense of being regarded with benevolence, allowing perspectives to be widened or reoriented in the face of adversity.

In a media culture that often equates being seen with self-presentation and evaluation, the theological notion of being seen offers a counter-narrative. Interpreted psychologically, it functions as a symbolic resource reinforcing unconditional self-worth and emotional safety, particularly relevant for adolescents navigating identity development in highly evaluative digital environments. Educationally, this perspective can be translated into reflective engagement with practices of seeing and being seen in media contexts, combined with biblical-theological narratives and creative didactic approaches. Such integration highlights the ethical implications of *Lebenskunst*: those who no longer need to struggle for visibility become more capable of empathetic perception, shifting from self-centered attention toward compassionate recognition of others.

Compassion as a Core Emotional and Social Competence

Compassion is increasingly recognized as a central emotional and social competence. It involves the capacity to perceive the suffering of others, to respond emotionally, and to maintain boundaries that preserve both empathy and autonomy [22]. Unlike pity, compassion does not imply hierarchy or emotional fusion but relational engagement with maintained differentiation [23–26].

Empirical research demonstrates that compassion contributes not only to prosocial behavior but also to individual mental health. Compassionate individuals report lower stress levels, greater emotional balance, and a stronger sense of meaning [10,19]. Compassion thus functions as both a social and intrapersonal protective factor.

Theologically, compassion is closely linked to the concept of mercy and to images of a relationally responsive God. Biblical texts ground the relational dimension of Christian *Lebenskunst* in God’s compassion for humanity. In Old Testament prophecy, divine judgment in response to sin is repeatedly overcome by unexpected mercy, as exemplified in Isaiah 1:18 [27], where forgiveness and renewal are promised despite guilt. This pattern of grace against expectation shapes the biblical understanding of God. In the New Testament, God’s compassion becomes tangible in the healing miracles of Jesus, who turns toward the sick, marginalized, and sinful without attributing blame, thereby opening new possibilities for life and enabling transformation [cf. Matthew 9:27–30; 28]. Interdisciplinarity interpreted, these narratives model

empathic engagement without emotional exhaustion and offer emotionally supportive frameworks that counteract isolation and resignation.

Educational and Preventive Implications for Mental Health Promotion

The preceding analyses suggest that mental health promotion in times of crisis requires educational approaches that go beyond cognitive information processing. While such cognitive work remains indispensable, it is insufficient on its own. Educational practice must also attend to the emotional dimensions of global crises and their profound impact on adolescents, reflecting them constructively in order to enable perspective change, foster impact and open pathways for innovative forms of action and transformation. Emotional learning must be integrated systematically into preventive strategies, particularly in educational contexts where young people encounter emotionally charged global issues [29].

Emotion-oriented educational practices create spaces for reflection, expression, and dialogue. They enable learners to articulate fears, uncertainties, and hopes, to recognize emotional diversity, and to develop perspective-taking skills [10]. Such practices can be understood as low-threshold preventive interventions that strengthen emotional regulation and resilience before clinical symptoms emerge. In this context, the great importance of self-compassion as the basis for openness towards others should not be underestimated—even if there is a great need for interdisciplinary research in this area: “Although these studies are promising first steps to better understand origins of self-compassion, future research, including longitudinal, and possibly experimental research is necessary to corroborate these findings” [26].

Within this framework, *Lebenskunstbildung* offers a holistic model integrating emotional, ethical, and existential dimensions of learning [30]. Interdisciplinary collaboration between psychology, education, and theology can thus enrich preventive mental health strategies and promote both individual resilience and social cohesion.

Conclusion

This article has argued that emotional learning, conceptualized within an interdisciplinarity framed *Lebenskunstbildung*, constitutes a significant resource for mental health promotion in times of crisis. By integrating psychological research on emotional competence, resilience, and compassion with theological perspectives on hope, recognition, and mercy, a holistic understanding of mental health emerges. In a world marked by persistent uncertainty and emotional strain, particularly for children and adolescents, emotionally reflective learning environments are essential. Emotional learning does

not eliminate crises, but it enables individuals to engage with them without becoming emotionally overwhelmed or disengaged. Interdisciplinary approaches provide valuable resources for preventive mental health strategies addressing emotional, relational, and meaning-oriented dimensions of human experience.

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