



Mindfulness Meditation and Adolescent Mental Health: A Review of Its Impact on Academic Stress and Anxiety in School Settings

Ms. Jyoti¹, Dr. Vishnupriya Kannan²

¹Ph.D scholar, Mental Health Nursing, Desh Bhagat University, Mandi Gobindgarh, Punjab- 147301, India

²Professor, Mental Health Nursing, Desh Bhagat University, Mandi Gobindgarh, Punjab- 147301, India

ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by heightened academic stress and vulnerability to anxiety, often exacerbated by competitive educational systems. This review explores the role of mindfulness meditation as a school-based intervention to support adolescent mental health. Drawing from empirical studies and program evaluations, it highlights the effectiveness of mindfulness in improving emotional regulation, cognitive focus, and resilience among students. Implementation strategies, including teacher involvement and policy integration, are discussed to ensure program sustainability. The review also emphasizes the broader benefits of mindfulness beyond stress reduction, such as enhanced academic performance and social-emotional learning. Overall, mindfulness emerges as a practical, evidence-based tool for promoting mental wellness in educational settings.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Adolescents, Academic Stress, School-Based Interventions, Mental Health

Main text

Adolescence is a dynamic developmental period characterized by significant physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes. This transitional stage, typically spanning ages 10 to 19, marks a critical window during which individuals face mounting expectations and stressors associated with academic performance, peer relationships, familial obligations, and identity formation. In the context of increasingly competitive educational systems, adolescents are especially vulnerable to psychological challenges such as stress and anxiety. Academic pressure—often viewed as a defining factor in future career trajectories—has emerged as a key contributor to emotional distress among school-going youth. These stressors can manifest in various forms, including sleep disturbances, irritability, impaired concentration, social withdrawal, and more severe outcomes like clinical anxiety or depression.

In response to this growing mental health crisis, there has been a paradigm shift in recent years from purely pharmacological and symptomatic interventions toward holistic, preventative approaches that foster emotional resilience and self-regulation. Among these, mindfulness meditation has gained significant attention as a promising, evidence-based strategy for addressing adolescent mental health within educational settings. Rooted in ancient contemplative traditions and popularized through contemporary psychological frameworks, mindfulness is defined as the intentional, non-judgmental focus on the present moment. Practices may include focused breathing, body scans, guided visualizations, and conscious observation of thoughts and emotions.

The appeal of mindfulness lies in its versatility, low cost, and adaptability to diverse classroom settings. It can be taught in brief, structured sessions integrated into daily school routines. Empirical evidence suggests that mindfulness helps in cultivating self-awareness, improving emotional regulation, and reducing reactivity to stressful academic environments. A pioneering pilot study conducted in the Indian educational context demonstrated that adolescents who engaged in structured mindfulness practices reported notable reductions in perceived stress and emotional volatility, along with improved attentional control and peer interactions (1). These findings underscore the culturally adaptable nature of mindfulness interventions and their relevance in high-pressure academic systems like India's.

Beyond individual studies, systematic reviews have strengthened the argument for the utility of mindfulness in school settings. One such comprehensive analysis examined mindfulness-based school interventions (MBSIs) through the lens of study design rigor, revealing consistent evidence that these programs produce moderate to large improvements in student outcomes related to anxiety, stress, and overall emotional well-being (2). Importantly, the review highlighted that well-structured interventions—delivered by trained facilitators and integrated into the academic calendar—are most likely to yield sustained benefits. Such programs not only support individual students but also contribute to a healthier school climate by promoting empathy, patience, and social connectedness.

Furthermore, mindfulness has shown potential beyond stress reduction, acting as a preventive tool in mitigating the risk of future psychological disorders. In a randomized controlled study focused on eating disorder prevention, adolescents who received mindfulness-based training demonstrated lower levels

of body dissatisfaction, emotional dysregulation, and disordered eating behaviors compared to peers in the control group (3). These findings suggest that mindfulness equips adolescents with cognitive and emotional tools that extend well beyond the classroom, fostering long-term mental health resilience.

The theoretical underpinnings of mindfulness-based interventions are also well-established in clinical psychology literature. Baer (4) outlines mindfulness as a mechanism that encourages decentering—an ability to observe thoughts and feelings without being overwhelmed by them. This cognitive shift enables adolescents to respond to academic challenges with greater equanimity and reduces the tendency toward rumination and negative self-talk, which are common cognitive distortions during stressful periods such as examinations or college admissions.

Moreover, mindfulness does not solely address emotional well-being but has also been linked to improvements in academic performance. In a study conducted among elementary school students, the implementation of a mindful awareness program led to significant gains in quarterly academic grades (5). This dual benefit—improved mental health alongside enhanced academic performance—positions mindfulness as a highly efficient intervention within school systems that often struggle to balance scholastic rigor with student well-being.

Despite the encouraging evidence, challenges in program implementation remain. These include variability in curriculum design, inconsistent training of facilitators, and differences in student receptivity based on cultural or contextual factors. Additionally, most studies highlight the need for long-term follow-up to assess the durability of mindfulness effects. Nonetheless, the growing body of literature presents a compelling case for mindfulness as a sustainable, non-invasive, and scalable strategy to enhance adolescent mental health in educational environments.

This review aims to explore and synthesize current evidence on the application and efficacy of mindfulness meditation for reducing academic stress and anxiety in adolescents. By drawing on clinical studies, systematic reviews, and pilot interventions, it will analyze the mechanisms through which mindfulness exerts its beneficial effects, examine the practical considerations involved in its implementation in school settings, and identify gaps in the existing literature that warrant further investigation. Ultimately, this review underscores the importance of integrating mindfulness into school curricula as a proactive step toward nurturing psychologically resilient, emotionally intelligent, and academically motivated youth.

Understanding Academic Stress and Adolescent Anxiety

Academic stress is a psychological response to academic-related demands that exceed a student's adaptive capacities. In adolescence, this often stems from examination pressure, future career uncertainty, peer competition, and parental expectations. When unmanaged, academic stress contributes to generalized anxiety, sleep disturbances, and diminished academic performance. Adolescents are especially vulnerable due to developmental changes in brain regions associated with emotional regulation. Studies indicate that over 60% of high school students report feeling anxious about school-related tasks, with girls typically exhibiting higher anxiety levels. Chronic academic stress can impair neurocognitive development, reduce motivation, and lead to depressive symptoms. Additionally, the pressure to conform to academic expectations can result in behavioral issues, including disengagement, irritability, and disciplinary infractions, especially among those who lack emotional coping mechanisms. Research shows that stress-reduction strategies incorporated within school environments can significantly decrease disruptive behaviors and improve classroom participation, further emphasizing the need for school-based interventions (6-8).

Adolescents with learning disabilities or other educational challenges may face an amplified risk of academic anxiety. These students often struggle with self-esteem, social isolation, and frustration, leading to elevated emotional distress. Integrating targeted mindfulness approaches within special education frameworks has demonstrated encouraging results, such as improved emotional regulation and reduced anxiety symptoms (9,10). Thus, inclusive mental health interventions are not only beneficial but necessary to address the multifaceted nature of academic stress in adolescent populations.

The Concept and Practice of Mindfulness Meditation

Mindfulness, derived from Buddhist meditative practices, has been secularized and incorporated into modern psychological treatments, particularly Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). It involves cultivating present-moment awareness with an attitude of openness and non-judgment. For adolescents, mindfulness is taught through age-appropriate practices such as breath awareness, mindful listening, and movement-based meditations. Regular practice is shown to enhance the prefrontal cortex's functioning, responsible for attention regulation and executive function.

In classroom settings, mindfulness is often introduced through audio-guided sessions or structured modules that align with students' cognitive development. Such programs not only reduce anxiety but can also contribute to improved academic performance, as students become more focused and less reactive to classroom stressors. Audio-guided mindfulness training in particular has been shown to improve academic outcomes, suggesting that even brief, scalable interventions can yield significant educational benefits (6).

Moreover, qualitative research reveals that students themselves find mindfulness enjoyable and easy to engage with when appropriately contextualized. In one study, primary school students reported feeling calmer, more in control of their emotions, and better able to cope with stress after participating in mindfulness sessions (7). These findings point to the feasibility and acceptability of mindfulness in school settings, regardless of age group. When educators and facilitators are properly trained, and when the school environment supports psychological safety, mindfulness can be seamlessly woven into the academic routine, offering students a practical tool for managing stress and anxiety.

Mechanisms Linking Mindfulness to Reduced Stress and Anxiety

Mindfulness reduces stress and anxiety through various physiological and psychological pathways. It activates the parasympathetic nervous system, reducing cortisol levels and heart rate variability—both biological markers of stress. Psychologically, it fosters metacognitive awareness, allowing adolescents to observe their thoughts and emotions without impulsive reaction. This decentering helps prevent negative thought spirals that characterize anxiety.

Neuroimaging studies have demonstrated that mindfulness training can modulate neural circuits related to emotional regulation. Specifically, it reduces amygdala reactivity to emotional stimuli, a change associated with improved anxiety control and emotional resilience in adolescents (9). These neurobiological shifts are significant, as they suggest that mindfulness may help "rewire" stress responses during a critical neurodevelopmental window in adolescence.

In addition to regulating emotional responses, mindfulness positively affects other areas that influence stress, such as sleep quality. Adolescents experiencing high academic stress often struggle with insomnia or poor sleep hygiene, which further exacerbates anxiety and impairs academic functioning. A mindfulness-based sleep intervention for adolescent girls demonstrated not only improvements in sleep onset and duration but also reductions in daytime stress and fatigue, indicating the broad-spectrum efficacy of mindfulness practices (11).

Furthermore, for adolescents with cognitive or learning challenges, mindfulness appears to bolster self-regulation and enhance social functioning, leading to more positive school experiences (10). These cumulative effects—on physiology, cognition, and emotional behavior—underscore the potential of mindfulness as a robust, multifaceted intervention for reducing stress and anxiety in educational settings.

Evidence from School-Based Mindfulness Programs

Numerous randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental studies support the integration of mindfulness programs in school curricula. Programs such as the "MindUP Curriculum," "Learning to BREATHE," and "Smiling Mind" have shown significant reductions in student anxiety and improvements in mood, attention, and classroom behavior. A meta-analysis demonstrated small to moderate effect sizes for mindfulness interventions on psychological well-being and academic performance. Additional reviews affirmed that even short-duration interventions (4–8 weeks) can yield meaningful benefits. These findings validate the practicality and efficacy of mindfulness in real-world educational settings.

Evidence from trials indicates that even brief, audio-guided interventions integrated into the school day can positively influence academic outcomes, emotional regulation, and interpersonal dynamics in students (12). Improvements in classroom climate, peer interactions, and reduced teacher burnout have also been observed in schools implementing holistic well-being programs grounded in mindfulness principles (13,14). Furthermore, cluster-randomized and controlled pilot trials have demonstrated positive changes in behavior, attention, and emotional regulation among middle school students (15,16).

These outcomes are supported by data indicating reductions in negative school behavior following stress-reduction interventions such as regular mindfulness practice (8). Pilot programs tailored for adolescents with specific vulnerabilities—such as learning disabilities or sleep-related difficulties—have reported reduced anxiety levels and improved functioning in school environments (10,11). The accumulating evidence base highlights that mindfulness programs are both feasible for implementation in schools and effective across diverse educational settings and student populations.

Implementation Strategies in Educational Settings

Successful implementation of mindfulness in schools requires administrative support, teacher training, and curriculum integration. Programs should be culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate. Some schools adopt a whole-school approach, incorporating mindfulness not only into student life but also into teacher wellness and parent engagement. Common challenges include time constraints, instructor competency variability, and resistance from stakeholders unfamiliar with mindfulness. Digital delivery methods—such as guided apps or video-based sessions—have emerged as cost-effective alternatives, especially in the post-pandemic era. Clear guidelines and structured implementation models are essential for sustainability and scalability.

School-wide adoption often begins with educating staff and gaining administrative and parental support. Implementation fidelity improves when instructors receive formal training and ongoing supervision (16,17). Some institutions integrate mindfulness into broader social-emotional learning frameworks, increasing its relevance and impact across the school community (14). Programs that also address teacher well-being report improved classroom management, reduced burnout, and enhanced relational dynamics, indirectly benefiting students (14).

Mindfulness delivery should also be adapted to the cultural and infrastructural context of the school. In settings with limited resources, short daily practices or audio-guided modules may be more practical than in-person, instructor-led sessions (12). In culturally diverse regions like India, where stigma around mental health and academic pressure is prominent, mindfulness has shown promise when aligned with values like discipline, focus, and academic excellence (18). Longer program durations and consistency in practice are associated with greater and more lasting effects (17).

Benefits Beyond Stress and Anxiety Reduction

While the primary objective of mindfulness programs is often the reduction of stress and anxiety, research shows a broader array of psychological and academic benefits. These include improved self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, cognitive flexibility, and social skills. Students practicing mindfulness report enhanced concentration, reduced behavioral disruptions, and more positive peer relationships. Long-term studies indicate a correlation between mindfulness and higher academic achievement, potentially due to improved executive functioning and emotional stability.

Programs such as “Learning to BREATHE” have demonstrated benefits in emotion regulation, self-acceptance, and adaptive coping in adolescents (17). Additionally, mindfulness can positively influence school climate by promoting prosocial behavior, kindness, and collective well-being (15). This is particularly important during adolescence, when peer approval and social belonging are closely tied to mental health outcomes.

Mindfulness also contributes to better sleep quality, which in turn supports academic performance and emotional regulation. In-school interventions focused on mindfulness have improved sleep patterns and reduced daytime stress in adolescent participants (11). Neurophysiological studies suggest that mindfulness can enhance metacognitive awareness and diminish hyperactivity in brain regions associated with emotional overreaction (9).

Importantly, these benefits extend to at-risk groups. Adolescents with learning difficulties or emotional regulation challenges have shown improvements in classroom behavior, social engagement, and academic motivation following mindfulness-based interventions (10,13). These outcomes reinforce the value of mindfulness as not just a mental health tool, but as a developmentally enriching component of education.

Global and National Prevalence of Adolescent Mental Health Challenges

Adolescent mental health issues have reached alarming levels globally, with a significant percentage of youth reporting symptoms of anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic complaints. Studies estimate that nearly one in five adolescents worldwide suffers from a diagnosable mental health disorder, with many more experiencing subclinical symptoms that impair daily functioning (19). The burden is particularly concerning in academic settings where stress related to examinations, peer expectations, and performance metrics is constant.

In India, a systematic review has revealed a growing prevalence of mental health disorders among adolescents, with anxiety and mood disturbances among the most frequently reported (18). These issues often go undetected and untreated due to stigma, lack of awareness, and limited access to school-based mental health services. The long-term consequences include poor academic performance, increased dropout rates, and susceptibility to substance use or self-harming behaviors. Given these trends, there is an urgent need to embed mental health promotion within the school infrastructure, making preventive strategies like mindfulness a practical and scalable solution.

Mindfulness as a Public Health Intervention

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are increasingly recognized as viable public health tools capable of addressing widespread adolescent stress in both high-income and resource-constrained settings. Their effectiveness stems from their ability to promote emotion regulation, self-awareness, and adaptive coping, without the side effects or costs associated with pharmacological treatments. MBIs are inherently flexible and can be tailored to the age, cultural background, and learning context of adolescents, making them suitable for mass implementation.

Meta-analyses have demonstrated consistent, moderate effect sizes for mindfulness programs on reducing internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression (20-22). These programs also improve cognitive and behavioral regulation, resulting in enhanced academic engagement and interpersonal relationships (21). As a preventive approach, mindfulness does not target pathology alone but supports positive youth development. Its integration into public education frameworks has the potential to reduce long-term healthcare burdens by equipping students with lifelong tools for emotional resilience (23,24). Additionally, updated reviews emphasize the importance of implementing MBIs as part of tiered mental health frameworks in schools, aligning with broader public health goals (23).

Role of Educators and School Counselors

Teachers and school counselors are key facilitators in promoting mindfulness among adolescents. Their attitudes, training, and consistency in practice significantly influence the program’s effectiveness. When educators themselves engage in mindfulness practices, they report reduced burnout, improved classroom management, and greater empathy toward students (20). Embedding mindfulness in pre-service teacher training equips future educators with self-regulation skills and the capacity to model calm, attentive behavior in the classroom. Such modeling can significantly shape the school climate and influence student receptivity to mindfulness.

School counselors play an equally critical role. They can integrate mindfulness techniques into one-on-one sessions, group interventions, or broader wellness curricula. With their specialized training, counselors are well-positioned to identify students at risk of emotional distress and personalize mindfulness-based strategies accordingly. They can also facilitate referrals and combine mindfulness with cognitive-behavioral approaches when needed. Collaborative efforts between teachers, counselors, and school leaders contribute to a supportive ecosystem where emotional well-being is prioritized alongside academic achievement (17). For optimal success, whole-school participation and institutional commitment are essential to sustain mindfulness initiatives.

Future Directions and Policy Implications

As the demand for adolescent mental health interventions grows, mindfulness programs are increasingly gaining traction in educational and health policy circles. In countries like the UK and Australia, school-based mindfulness curricula are being rolled out at the national level. India and other low- and middle-income countries are also beginning to explore scalable, low-cost strategies that can be embedded within the existing school framework. To formalize these efforts, education boards and ministries should consider the inclusion of mindfulness in curriculum guidelines, supported by investments in teacher training and research grants (20).

Policy formulation must also acknowledge and address systemic stressors that exacerbate adolescent anxiety. These include high-stakes exams, rigid curriculum pacing, and insufficient emphasis on life skills education. Incorporating mindfulness alone, without reforming such structures, limits its long-term impact. Therefore, mindfulness should be integrated within a broader, multi-tiered mental health strategy that includes awareness programs, psychological first aid, peer support models, and counselor deployment.

Future research must prioritize long-term outcomes, cultural adaptability, and technological innovations. Digital mindfulness apps and hybrid delivery models have shown promise in extending reach, especially in post-pandemic education systems (16). Moreover, studies should examine how mindfulness interfaces with academic subjects such as literature, science, and physical education to promote interdisciplinary benefits. With ongoing empirical validation and administrative support, mindfulness can evolve from a supplemental activity to a core element of 21st-century education.

Conclusion

Mindfulness meditation has emerged as a promising, evidence-based approach to support adolescent mental health, particularly in reducing academic stress and anxiety within school settings. By enhancing emotional regulation, focus, and resilience, mindfulness empowers students to navigate academic and social challenges more effectively. Its adaptability, cost-effectiveness, and potential for wide-scale implementation make it a valuable tool in educational and public health strategies. Integrating mindfulness into school curricula, supported by trained educators and policy backing, can foster a more balanced and mentally healthy learning environment. Future efforts should prioritize sustainability, inclusivity, and long-term impact assessment.

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