

## A Study of Mindfulness, Academic Stress and Attention levels among Mizo College Students

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### ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the relationship between Mindfulness, Academic Stress and Attention levels among Mizo College students. Participants for the study included 159 Mizo college students, who are studying in different colleges in Mizoram. The participants of the study were measured using 3 scales namely Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (Baer et al., 2006), Scale of Academic Stress (Rajendran and Kallippan., 1990) and Attention Control Scale (Derryberry and Reed., 2001). Results showed the tests to be trustworthy for the target population, i.e.,  $r=0.60$ ,  $r=0.94$  and  $r=0.70$  for the Mindfulness scale, Academic Stress scale and Attention scale respectively. The results of the correlation analysis indicated significant relationship between Mindfulness, Academic Stress and Attention for both males and females. Among males, higher levels of Mindfulness are significantly associated with lower academic stress ( $r= -2.91^*$ ), suggesting that males who exhibit greater mindfulness, will experience lower levels of academic stress. Additionally, Mindfulness is positively correlated with attention among males ( $r= .299^*$ ), which indicates that increased levels of Mindfulness are linked to increased attention. The analysis revealed a significant negative correlation between academic stress and attention among males ( $r= -3.20^{**}$ ), indicating that higher levels of academic stress is associated with lower attention. For females, there is a significant positive correlation between Mindfulness and attention ( $r= .270^*$ ), which suggests that females with higher levels of Mindfulness tend to exhibit increased levels of attention. However, there seems to be no significant correlation observed between Mindfulness and Academic stress among females found in this study. Thus, there is a need to investigate into other factors that may be associated with academic stress and in turn, this particular study thereby highlights and sheds the mere significance on the various benefits of practicing Mindfulness and how college students can be better equipped to deal with the various internal as well as external stressors in a more efficient manner. Therefore, this study can be considered as a baseline for further studies and researches on this given area.

**Keywords:** *Mindfulness, Academic Stress, Attention, College students, Gender*

According to Brown & Ryan, (2003), Mindfulness can be defined as a receptive attention to and an awareness of present events and experiences. At any given moment, the mind is oscillating between thoughts about the past, present and future.

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Here, the act of being mindful involves complete and a total engagement and awareness of the present moment with a slight attitude of nonjudgmental acceptance. Similarly, Baer et al. (2006) characterized Mindfulness along five distinct yet interrelated dimensions: observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging and non-reacting. Mindfulness can be thought of as a mode of awareness that is induced when attention is regulated in a specific manner while cultivating a nonjudgmental attitude (Bishop et al., 2004). Therefore, mindfulness is considered as more akin to a state than a trait, because it is evoked when attention is regulated, while cultivating an accepting and open orientation, and ceases when attention is no longer regulated in this manner. Mindfulness practices are also used to create a viewpoint on thoughts and feelings so that they are recognized as mental events rather than as accurate reflections of the self or reality; in times of stress, the individual will be able to step back from thoughts and feelings, instead of engaging in ruminative thinking patterns of the past or worries about the future that can escalate into anxiety or depression. It thereby allows an individual to decenter from stress appraisals into a metacognitive state of awareness and in turn, there is a reframing of adverse circumstances that reduces distress.

Mindfulness has been suggested as a potential protective factor for stress, as experienced by university students according to Bamber & Schneider, (2016). Stress among college students have been of great concern. According to Dixon and Sharon (2008), two of the major concerns that can be considered as detrimental to college's graduation rates are found to be stress and depression. Here, it can be noted that academic stress falls under the category of stress often associated with the daily pressures which are faced by college students. Similarly, researchers have also conducted studies in order to determine what could be the major cause of stress for college students. Dusselier et al. (2005) also conducted a study in order to determine college student's primary source of stress and found it to be academic stress, financial concerns and pressure from their families. Additionally, Academic stress can be deemed as among the most common mental health problem among college students even within the Indian context. Similarly, in a study conducted by Margalit & Rosenstreich, (2015), they demonstrated that mindfulness practices in turn improves certain cognitive abilities. The main premise of their study was to measure the correlation between loneliness, optimism, academic self-efficacy and memory and the results indeed show that not only was loneliness controlled through mindfulness practices, but it also helped to increase academic achievement within the students as well. Thus, Mindfulness is proven to be beneficial for college students, especially when they are attempting to excel in their studies and it also helps them to control their negative emotions throughout the academic session as well.

Academic stress is the part of an adolescent's life, which influences not only his academic performance but his life achievements also. So, academic programmes including interactive sessions, workshops, conference and co-curricular activities etc. should be enhanced for the reducing the academic stress among adolescents. Furthermore, empirical pieces of evidence suggests that mindfulness can also act as a buffer against academic stress. Moreover, Zeidan et al. (2010) stated that those students who utilized mindfulness into their daily lives or even incorporate them as an intervention have thereby reported reduced levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms and have inculcated healthier habits, that has led to an improvement in their overall physical health. Most importantly, college students in turn appear to embrace the notice of mindfulness and believe that it helps them focus, manage stress, and deal with relationships in a more effective manner Bamber & Schneider, (2016). Similarly, a mindfulness-based intervention study conducted by Strickland and Selwyn (2019) among college students thereby indicated that mindfulness improves attention and decreased stress levels among the experimental group as compared to the control group

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respectively. A study conducted by An et al. (2022) examined the effects of mindfulness practices on the psychological outcomes of college students, especially when they are exposed to stressful situations. The college students were given an 8-week-long standardized Mindfulness- Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) intervention. The results of the study proved that the test group showed a decreased in the overall negative emotional states after the intervention was given to the students, compared to that of the Control group, as indicated by the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) (33% reduction in the negative score) and Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS-42) scores (nearly 40% reduction of the three subscale scores) respectively.

Attention is commonly thought of as a single process, however, it may encompass multiple subtypes, all of which can be affected by Mindfulness Meditation. The process of attention thereby involves selectively attending to certain specific variables, while filtering out the less relevant ones. Greater efficiency in each type of attention indicates enhanced ability in that particular attentional process. Therefore, an increase in its efficiency is seen as the result of Mindfulness Meditation practice indicates that it thereby improves the attentional process. Mindfulness is considered as a mental mode which is characterized by attention to the present moment without any emotional reactivity or conceptual engagement. Becerra et al., (2017) conducted an experimental study in order to determine the effect of mindfulness training on attentional skills in novice practitioners. Forty-six university students participated in the study and changes were measured using the Attention Network Test (ANT). Results of the study thereby indicated a significant improvement in orienting and executive control skills. However, no changes in alerting attentional skills were detected. Mindfulness practice impacted on the fundamental processes of the selective (orienting) and executive attention (executive control) networks which may in turn have additional beneficial effects in a variety of domains and situations. The findings add to existing literature that supports the positive and beneficial effect of regular mindfulness practice for the enhancement of attentional skills. Eisenbeck et al., (2018) conducted an experimental study to effects of the Focused Breathing exercise (FB) on cognitive performance, using standardised tests. 46 students were randomly divided into control group and experimental group and the experimental group were given the Focused breathing exercise for a duration of 50 minutes. The post-test indicates that the focused breathing mindfulness exercise increases the memory and attention ability of the students but not mood. The findings revealed that the impact of mindfulness exercise does not affect all cognitive functions equally. Prakash et al., (2020) conducted a meta-analysis in order to view the changes in attention after mindfulness training. 57 studies were identified and outcome measures were broadly categorized based on whether they involved maintenance of an aroused state (alerting), selective prioritization of attention to target items (orienting), or assessed conflict monitoring (executive attention). Most research evidence indicates that mindfulness had impacted alerting and orienting functions. The impact on executive function was seen to be relatively weaker. The study also indicated the necessity to adopt methodological rigor in the study of mindfulness.

Specifically, Mindfulness Meditation training will in turn, help an individual learn to ignore distracting stimuli during meditation (e.g., a recent transgression or an uncomfortable sensation) rather than focusing and elaborating on those particular stimuli. Mindful attention regulation could also counteract stress-related rumination as well as worry in learning and testing situations, by helping students gain control over distracting thoughts and redirect their attention to the given task at hand (Perciavalle et al., 2017). Since Mindfulness is deemed as a purposeful way of attending, it is thereby subject to an intentional choice of the

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individual regarding the object that they wish to focus their attention on. Furthermore, the present-moment focus of mindfulness can thereby highlight the value of the “here and now” phenomenon, as learning in the educational setting takes place in the present moment.

Based on the theoretical and methodological foundations, the objectives of the present study are mentioned as follows:

1. To elucidate the gender differences in the measures of the various variables under study.
2. To assess the relationship between the variables i.e. Mindfulness, Academic Stress and Attention levels of college students in Mizoram.
3. To find out the predictability of Mindfulness on Academic Stress and Attention levels of college students in Mizoram.

### ***Hypotheses***

The hypotheses for the proposed study were thereby framed based upon the objectives, which are set forth as follows:

1. There will be a significant gender difference in mindfulness, academic stress and attention levels.
2. There will be a significant relationship between mindfulness and academic stress and significant relationship between mindfulness and attention levels and significant relationship between academic stress and attention levels.
3. Mindfulness will significantly predict the levels of academic stress and attention.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Sample***

Purposive sampling technique was used for the study and total number of 159 Mizo college students were selected as sample for the present study. The age of the college students ranged from 19-22 years of age. The samples were taken from Government Aizawl College, Mualpui Campus and Pachhunga College, University. Undergraduate students from various streams were selected for the present study.

### ***Measures***

The following tools were used in order to achieve the objectives set three:

1. **FIVE FACET MINDFULNESS QUESTIONNAIRE (FFMQ) (BAER ET AL., 2006):** The FFMQ is a Likert scale that was developed in order to measure the five factors of mindfulness, such as observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging of inner experience, and non-reacting to inner experience. These five factors can be considered to represent the broad construct of mindfulness based on existing literature. The scale is made up of 39 items with five response options, ranging from 1-never or very rarely true, 2- rarely true, 3- sometimes true, 4- often true, and 5-very often or always true. Higher scores indicate higher levels of mindfulness. Moreover, all the subscales have eight items, except for non-reactivity, which has seven. Cronbach’s alpha for the subscales ranged from 0.68 to 0.88 respectively. Furthermore, of the five facets of FFMQ, it is noted that construct validity was evident in the four facets of observing, describing, non-judging, and non-reacting (Baer et al., 2006). Reliability was also established through test-retest and internal consistency methods as well. (Veehof et al., 2011).
2. **SCALE OF ACADEMIC STRESS (SAS) (RAJENDRAN AND KALIAPPAN., 1990):** The Academic Stress Scale consisted of forty items developed by Kim (1970) and adopted by Rajendran and Kaliappan (1990) and Rao (2012) for Indian context

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and culture specifically. It is a 5- point Likert- type scale and it comprises of 40 items. Moreover, each item has five alternatives varying from the responses- ‘No Stress’ to ‘Extreme Stress’. Each response carries a score of ‘0’, ‘1’, ‘2’, ‘3’ and ‘4’ respectively. The items are thereby classified into five areas, containing 8 items each. The five areas of the scale include the following: a. Personal Inadequacy b. Fear of Failure c. Interpersonal difficulties with teachers d. Teacher pupil relationship / Teaching methods e. Inadequate study facilities. A total number of 285 subjects in their study were assessed for the efficiency of behavioral programs in managing academic stress and improving academic performance (Saji, 2014). The test-retest correlation of 50 students with an interval of 25 days has been found to be 0.82 (Saji, 2014). The validated 40- item of ASS has high internal consistency and adequate construct and concurrent validity (Oluwafemi & Agbolade, 2017).

- 3. ATTENTION CONTROL SCALE (ACS) (DERRYBERRY AND REED., 2001)** : The Attention Control Scale (ACS) is a self-report scale, that is designed to measure the two major components of attention (attention focusing and attention shifting). It consists of 20 items, that are rated on a four-point Likert scale from 1(almost never) to 4 (always). It measures an individual’s ability to focus perceptual attention, switch attention between tasks, and have flexible control over their thoughts. The internal consistency is reported to be as 0.88 and the test-retest reliability of the ACS items varies from 0.45 to 0.73 and it is 0.61 for the total score as well.

### Procedure

Before conduction of the test, a brief self-introduction was made to the participants, and the main purpose of the test was explained in a detailed manner. The importance of filling up the consent forms were clearly explained to the participants. Additionally, the participants were informed that their responses were to be honest and genuine in nature. Participation in the study were voluntary and they were allowed to withdraw from the study at any given point of time. It was clearly mentioned that the data obtained from the participants were to be solely used for research purposes only. In such cases where, the participants were to have any doubts, it would be cleared up immediately. Lastly, after successful completion of filling out all the questionnaires, the participants were politely thanked for their time, efforts and cooperation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Mean age and Standard Deviation was ascertained for the characteristics of the sample which is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 Characteristics of the sample**

	N	Category	Mean age	SD
Gender	71	Male	20.62	1.378
	88	Female	20.05	.801

**Table 2 Reliability statistics, Mean, SD, and t statistics of the behavioural measures for males and females**

	Cronbach’s alpha	Male		Female		t	p
		M	SD	M	SD		
Mindfulness	.60	115	11.2	112	9.96	1.9	.05
Academic stress	.94	107	27.5	105	21.0	.58	.55
Attention	.70	47.4	5.53	48.8	6.29	1.4	.14

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Table 2 provides information on the reliability of the measures used in the study, indicating that they were found to be satisfactory. The table also includes a comparative analysis of mean scores for males and females on behavioural measures, namely Mindfulness, Academic Stress, and Attention.

The findings revealed that males tend to have slightly higher mean scores in mindfulness ( $M = 115$ ) compared to females ( $M = 112$ ). Conversely, males demonstrate slightly higher mean scores in academic stress ( $M = 107$ ) compared to females ( $M = 105$ ). However, females exhibit slightly higher mean scores in attention ( $M = 48.8$ ) compared to males ( $M = 47.4$ ).

Despite these observed differences in mean scores, the results of the independent t-test indicate that none of these gender differences in the behavioural measures of mindfulness, academic stress, and attention reach statistical significance. This is also due to the fact that there is also very little research looking at whether males and females report similar or different levels of mindfulness. In most of the existing studies, gender differences in mindfulness are not found (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

**Table 3 Correlation matrix for the behavioural measures for Males and Females**

	<b>Mindfulness</b>	<b>Academic stress</b>	<b>Attention</b>
Mindfulness	1	-.003	.270*
Academic stress	-.291*	1	.134
Attention	.299*	-.320**	1

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

NOTE: male (below the diagonal), female (above the diagonal).

The results of the correlation analysis in Table 3 indicate significant relationships among mindfulness, academic stress, and attention for both males and females.

Among males, higher levels of mindfulness are significantly associated with lower academic stress ( $r = -.291^*$ ), suggesting that males who exhibit greater mindfulness tend to experience lower levels of academic stress. Additionally, mindfulness is positively correlated with attention among males ( $r = .299^*$ ), indicating that higher levels of mindfulness are linked to increased attention. Moreover, the analysis reveals a significant negative correlation between academic stress and attention among males ( $r = -.320^{**}$ ), indicating that higher levels of academic stress are associated with lower attention.

For females, there is a significant positive correlation between mindfulness and attention ( $r = .270^*$ ), suggesting that females with higher levels of mindfulness tend to exhibit increased attention. However, no significant correlation is observed between mindfulness and academic stress among females. Studies have also supported that learning mindfulness skills in college can improve attention as well as decrease stress. For example, in a study done at the University of Minnesota, college students assigned to the mindfulness meditation group showed significant improvement on attention tests when compared to students who did not learn the mindfulness meditation technique (Strickland & Selwyn, 2019).

**Table 4.1 Result of simple linear regression analyses predicting Academic stress from Mindfulness for Males and Females**

Gender	Model	Variables	B	SEB	t	p
Male	1	(constant)	190		5.97	.000
		Mindfulness	-.715	-2.91	-2.52	<b>.014</b>
Female	1	(constant)	106		4.13	.000
		Mindfulness	-.006	-.003	-.027	-.979

Note:

**For Males,  $\Delta R^2 = .071$ ,  $p = .014$**

**For Females,  $\Delta R^2 = .012$ ,  $p = .979$**

The results of the regression analysis in Table 4.1 indicate that mindfulness significantly predicts academic stress for male individuals, but not for female individuals.

The results of the regression analysis indicate that mindfulness is a significant predictor of academic stress for males ( $\beta = -2.91$ ,  $p = .014$ ). This implies that males who exhibit higher levels of mindfulness tend to experience lower levels of academic stress. The model itself explains 7.1% ( $\Delta R^2 = .071$ ,  $p = .014$ ) of the variance in academic stress within this group, suggesting that mindfulness accounts for a meaningful portion of the variability in academic stress among males.

In contrast, the analysis reveals that mindfulness does not have a significant impact on academic stress for females ( $\beta = -0.003$ ,  $p = .979$ ). The model's ability to explain the variance in academic stress for females is relatively low, accounting for only 1.2% ( $\Delta R^2 = .012$ ,  $p = .979$ ) of the variability.

**Table 4.2 Result of simple linear regression analyses predicting Attention from Mindfulness for Males and Females**

Gender	Model	Variables	B	SEB	t	p
Male	1	(constant)	30.3		4.60	.000
		Mindfulness	.148	.229	2.60	<b>.011</b>
Female	1	(constant)	29.7		4.01	.000
		Mindfulness	.170	.270	2.59	<b>.011</b>

Note:

**For Males,  $\Delta R^2 = .076$ ,  $p = .011$**

**For Females,  $\Delta R^2 = .062$ ,  $p = .011$**

The results provided in Table 4.2 indicate that mindfulness significantly predicts attention for both males ( $\beta = 0.229$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ) and females ( $\beta = 2.59$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ). This implies that individuals who exhibit higher levels of mindfulness are more likely to have higher levels of attention.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that the model explains 7.6% of the variance in attention for males ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.076$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ) and 6.2% of the variance for females ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.062$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ). Although these percentages represent a relatively small proportion, they indicate that mindfulness, accounts for a significant portion of the variation in attention experienced by both males and females. Mindful attention regulation could also counteract stress-related rumination as well as worry in learning and testing situations, by helping students gain control over distracting thoughts and redirect their attention to the given task at hand

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(Perciavalle et al., 2017). Since Mindfulness is deemed as a purposeful way of attending, it is thereby subject to an intentional choice of the individual regarding the object that they wish to focus their attention on. Hence, Mindfulness can re-establish the value of a first-person perspective in addition to the third-person perspective which is predominant in the current educational systems. Furthermore, the present-moment focus of mindfulness can thereby highlight the value of the “here and now” phenomenon, as learning in the educational setting takes place in the present moment.

Similarly, Millett et al., (2021) conducted a study where students were assigned to either 3-minute breathing meditation at the beginning of each class over one semester or to a no-intervention condition. The results of the study showed that by the end of the semester, there are less frequent incidents of mind wandering and lower levels of distractibility, which were reported by the meditation group only. Specifically, Mindfulness Meditation training will in turn, help an individual learn to ignore distracting stimuli during meditation (e.g., a recent transgression or an uncomfortable sensation) rather than focusing and elaborating on those particular stimuli.

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the results revealed that males exhibited slightly higher mean scores in mindfulness and academic stress, while females displayed slightly higher mean scores in attention. However, these mean score differences did not reach statistical significance. Correlation analysis indicated significant relationships among mindfulness, academic stress, and attention for both genders. Specifically, higher levels of mindfulness were associated with lower academic stress and increased attention among males. For females, mindfulness was positively correlated with attention but not with academic stress. Regression analysis further showed that mindfulness significantly predicted academic stress for males but not for females, explaining a small but significant portion of the variance in academic stress for males. Similarly, mindfulness significantly predicted attention for both genders, accounting for a small proportion of the variance in attention.

College is deemed as a period of time that can often be filled with academic, personal as well as identity stressors and one potential way that college students can cope with perceived stress is through the practice of incorporating mindfulness techniques into their everyday life. The research thereby, puts emphasis on Mindfulness and its benefits, and how college students can be better equipped to deal with the various internal as well as environmental stressors that they may face and deal with them in a more efficient manner and in turn, it would also lead to a better state of well-being. Moreover, it is vital to note that practicing mindfulness can also be beneficial for college students with exceptional academic workload, especially in the context of those college students who are currently transitioning into their first semesters and into their new college life. This particular period of transition thereby tends to enhance feelings of being alone and isolated and in turn, these students are likely to underperform academically due to the depletion of cognitive resources.

Practicing mindfulness can also be beneficial for students with exceptional academic workload, especially with those college students who are currently transitioning into their first semesters into their new college life. These personal and contextual characteristics are considered to be dynamic and interactive in nature, wherein they seem to have an influence on each other at any given instance. Similarly, when there are an array of demand that arises and are not met in an adequate manner, then there is a greater likelihood for mental health issues and other consequences, which may be faced by the student. Therefore, it is vital to

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shift our main focus primarily on the individual-personal as well as the environmental-contextual characteristics, as they are likely to have a significant impact on the appraisal and coping processes employed by the individual, when faced with adversities. These personal and contextual characteristics are considered to be dynamic and interactive in nature, wherein they seem to have an influence on each other at any given instance.

### **Limitations**

The sampling technique utilised for the study is purposive type of sampling and thereby it limits the generalization to other samples with similar characteristics and thus, the generalization of the findings should be done with caution. Moreover, the study was conducted on a small sample size i.e. only 159 participants, which is not enough to make a generalizable conclusion and these pose limitation in terms of bringing the participants biases and cultural limitation in the responses. Additionally, the data collected is restricted to two colleges in Mizoram and the results therefore may not be generalized to all the other colleges. Future researches can be directed to include other variables including demographic characteristics and also examine more complex interactions of Mindfulness with other variables such as perceived stress and academic motivation levels of college students. Moreover, this study was conducted only on college students, which is limited in nature. Future researches could look into a comparison between different age groups and their level of Mindfulness could be assessed.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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