

# Stress Management Among Undergraduate Students Through Mindfulness Practices

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative research aimed to explore the effectiveness of mindfulness practices for stress management among undergraduate students of Kasetsart University in Thailand. The samples were 120 undergraduate students of Kasetsart University attending a one-hour lecture class about mindfulness practices, participating in three-hour mindful group activities, and being assigned to choose a few activities from “The Tree of Contemplative Practices” to handle the situations in their lives for a few weeks. The research tools were field notes and a self-reflection journal. Collected data were interpreted by content and categorical data analysis. Although results shed light on the fact that negative academic and lifestyle consequences are common sources of stress among students, they are potentially managing their stress, embracing both negative and positive life events, and solving daily life problems with a conscious mind. The most prevalent practice was stillness practice. Further research should be conducted regarding integrating mindfulness practices into the academic curriculum.

**Keywords:** Mindfulness Practices, Stress Management, Undergraduate Students

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### Introduction

Undergraduate students are no exception in avoiding the stress that is a part of life, especially during their college transition, academic pressures, financial concerns, and social challenges. There are many factors contributing to stress among undergraduates and possibly trigger depression when chronic and long-term. For example, academic life has pushed undergraduate students to face intense academic pressures, such as heavy workloads, tight deadlines, and the pursuit of high grades. Also, future uncertainty, like worries about post-graduation plans, career choices, and job prospects can lead to considerable stress and anxiety. Furthermore, financial stress from the cost of tuition, textbooks, and living expenses can financially force students to juggle work and academics (Chu et al., 2016; Robb & Grable, 2012; Tol et al., 2019), as well as poor time management in balancing classes, part-time jobs, extracurricular activities, and personal life that requires effective time management can lead to increased stress (Britton & Tesser, 1991). Moreover, many undergraduate students face social expectations, peer pressure, and the quest to fit in leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation, particularly during college transition which can be a prominent source of stress (Karyotaki et al., 2020; Matthews et al., 2018). It can be seen that stress may hinder undergraduate students from academic achievement. To mitigate this, institutional support services and structured learning activities based on mindfulness concept can be crucial in helping students manage these challenges in their lives.

Mindfulness, known as contemplative mind, refers to a state of awareness characterized by deep introspection, mindfulness, and inner reflection associated with practices that encourage a heightened level of consciousness

and a capacity to observe one's thoughts, emotions, and experiences without judgment (CE Mahidol University, 2009; Davidson, 2019). It is rooted in ancient Buddhist religion, traditions, and cultures and gained significant attention in recent years for its potential to improve mental well-being and resilience (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). It is often linked to the development of greater emotional intelligence, resilience, and inner peace, i.e., the holistic knowing where the mind, heart, soul, and senses are open and receptive to the moment, just as it is. It is about receiving and being present to the moment, to the now, without judgment, analysis, or critique. It is how to love things in themselves and as themselves by holding everything, both the positivity and the negativity, without judgments. (CAC, 2023; CE Mahidol University, 2009; Eaton et al., 2017).

There were many studies combined with previous research by Kabat-Zinn (1994) and Shapiro et al. (2011), providing strong evidence for the effectiveness of mindfulness practices in promoting mental well-being. Most of the studies demonstrated the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression across various populations, particularly among individuals with mental chronic or clinical conditions (Hofmann et al., 2010).

In this research, the implementation of stress management is adopted from the concept of mindfulness practices called "The Tree of Contemplative Practices" from Maia Duerr (2015) who is a member of Contemplative Mind in Society - CMind that promote non-judgmental attention to the present moment and encourage individuals to be fully aware of their thoughts, emotions, and sensations without attempting to

Figure 1

*The Tree of Contemplative Practices (Duerr, 2015)*



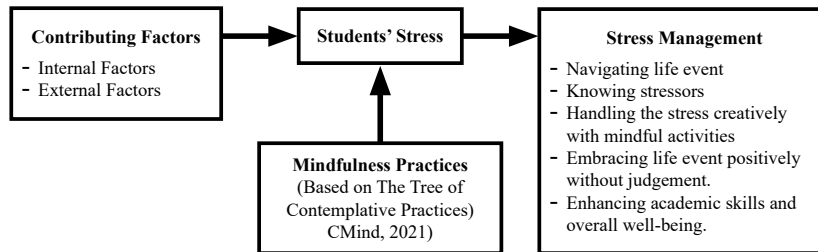
change or evaluate them. The tree framework (see Figure 1) is designed to help practitioners explore and understand the approaches to inner reflection, mindfulness, and spiritual growth, encourage them to foster personal well-being and promote a harmonious society.

The root of the tree is foundational belief, which serves as the basic forms of contemplation, enhancing awareness, communion, and connection. The tree's trunk provides stability and support for the entire structure, which is akin to the branches of various practices. The tree combines different practices that help individuals grow and connect (Duerr, 2015). Stillness practice like silence, meditation, and Vipassana promotes inner peace and quiets distracted thoughts and while the movement practice strengthens the mind-body connection, self-awareness, and the present moment through Yoga, Tai Chi, or walking meditation. (Davidson, 2019; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Relational practice nurtures relationships with others at a deeper level through compassionate

communication, dialogue, and deep listening (Condon, 2022). On the other hand, some practices encourage individuals to explore the inner world and creative expression. Generative practice like journaling or creating art and music enhances understanding the deeper aspects of the self, while creative practice involving artistic creation as a form of contemplation allows individuals to flow their creativity and gain insights. Moreover, ritual practices connect people with a deeper meaning with profound sacredness, like ritual and religious ceremonies. Finally, active practice emphasizes mindfulness in daily life activities. These practices include mindful eating, breathing, and mindful work, where individuals strive to maintain awareness and presence during routine tasks. This includes applying contemplative principles to social and environmental justice efforts encouraging individuals to engage in activism from a place of inner peace and mindfulness. (CE Mahidol University, 2009; Duerr, 2015).

Figure 2

*Conceptual Framework*



**Research Questions**

1. What factors contribute to stress in undergraduate students?
2. Do mindfulness practices enhance stress management among undergraduate students?

**Participants**

Research sample recruiting was announced publicly so that the undergraduate students from Kasetsart University could join this mindfulness program. The participants were 120 students aged 18-22 years old, from various faculties and majors, different year classes, including individual backgrounds. The criteria were as follows:

1. They must be students from Bangkok campus.
2. They were enrolled in the general education course, “Aesthetics in Lifelong Learning: Contemplative Education for Purpose in Life,” for the academic year 2023.
3. They volunteered and willingly participated in the program.

Moreover, they were aware that they felt free to reject any participation anytime they wished.

**Methodology**

This qualitative research was divided into two phases. The first phase explored the factors causing stress in undergraduate students of Kasetsart University, while the second phase studied the effectiveness of mindfulness practices for stress management among undergraduate students of Kasetsart University.

**Phase I: Lecture and Group Activity**

First of all, the students attended a one-hour lecture class on the topic of Contemplative Education for Purpose in Life, such as the contemplative concept, the contemplative approaches, and the implementation of the contemplative mind in daily life. After that, they would participate in three-hour group activities related to “The Tree of Contemplative Practices,” e.g., the stillness practice (sitting still with eye closing in Zen music ambiance and meditation in silence), the creative practice (mood reflection by drawing and singing), the relational practice (dialogue circle, deep listening, and storytelling), and the generative practice (spreading gratitude, love and kindness to one another).

The observation and the interviews with students were conducted using field notes to collect data from group activities provided in class. Content and categorical data analysis were the approaches to interpreting data findings.

**Phase II: Personal Selected Activity**

After the lecture and group activity week, students were assigned to choose any practice from the Contemplative Practices Tree for daily implementation to help them cope with life challenges over the course of three weeks. The instructor would follow up with the students via online platforms, such as Google Classroom and Zoom, for self-report, self-reflection, and private counseling.

Field notes were used as a research tool for the instructor to collect data from private counseling and self-reports from the students. Students’ self-reflection journal, consisting of

1) the choice of contemplative practices, 2) the objective, 3) the process, 4) the result, and 5) learning reflection, was used as a research tool for the students to record data. The content analysis was used to categorize data familiarization and identify recurrent themes. Interpreted data were thematically categorized which provided a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of students’ selected activities for their stress management.

**Findings**

**Phase I: Lecture and Group Activity**

Table 1 presented the general information of undergraduate students of Kasetsart University who were willing to participate in this research. The participants are from various faculties, such as Business Administration, Humanities, Education, Agriculture, etc. Half of them were sophomores and aged 20 years old.

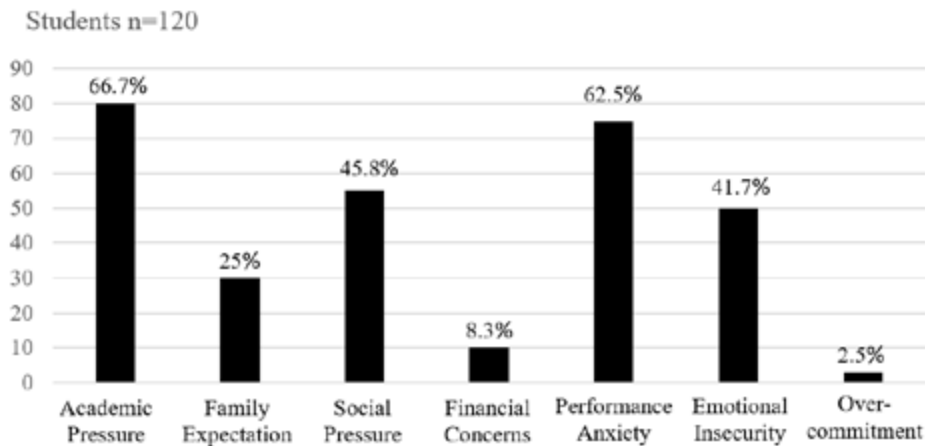
**Table 1**

*General Information of Participants of this Research*

Items	Description	n=120	%	Items	Description	n=120	%
<b>Sex</b>	Female	60	50	<b>Faculty</b>	Agriculture	10	8.32
	Male	30	25		Agro-industry	5	4.16
	LGBTQ+	30	25		Architecture	5	4.16
		<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>		Business Administration	30	25.00
<b>Age</b>	18	10	8.3		Fisheries	5	4.16
	19	20	16.7		Humanities	20	16.70
	20	50	41.7		Education	20	16.70
	21	10	8.3		Engineering	5	4.16
	22	30	25.0		Environment	5	4.16
		<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>		Science	5	4.16
<b>Academic Year</b>	Freshman	20	16.7		Social Science	5	4.16
	Sophomore	60	50.0		Veterinary Medicine	5	4.16
	Junior	10	8.3				
	Senior	30	25.0				
		<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>			<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>

Figure 3

*Factors Contributing to Stress Among Kasetsart University Students*



This phase allowed the students to explore the stress that affected their lives through group activity with their classmates. The findings (see Figure 3) from the interviews and observations presented the factors contributing to participants' stress and thematically described into external factors and internal factors as follows:

#### ***External Factors***

**Academic Pressure:** Most Kasetsart University students (66.7%) are worried about maintaining good grades and passing exams. It was primarily influenced by their educational environment based on majors or fields of study. Year 4 student (Faculty of Architecture) described academic pressure, including the feeling like he was "worried because I have many projects to be submitted, I don't want to graduate with unpleasant GPA." Several other participants mentioned the relevant academic stressors "bad score," "failing the exam," "tough major coursework," and "difficult test," including "too many workload for each subject."

**Social Pressure:** Some students (45.8%) accepted that they tried so hard to blend in with other students due to cultural background, societal norms, discrimination, and peer fitting-in. Year 3 student (Faculty of Education) explained about her pressure towards her practice teacher training in the real school context like "everyone expects the practice teacher will be the good role model for the students...school compellation makes me nervous." Year 1 student (Faculty of Business Administration) mentioned several difficulties associated with gender diversity, including feeling like he was "afraid of sharing my life detail with others – they seem coming from another world that I don't know."

**Family Expectations:** Some students' families had high expectations from their members regarding academic success or career choices. Many students (25%) reflected their stressful feeling as "afraid," "depressed," "stressed," and "confused."

**Financial Concerns:** From poor societal and economic status, some students (8.3%)

mentioned their financial pressures as “expensive tuition costs,” “student loans,” and “the need to work part-time.”

***Internal Factors***

**Performance Anxiety:** As academic pressure was the major factor, its impact was linked to internal factors psychologically shown as fear or the anxiety fear of exams, presentations, or public speaking. Many students (62.5%) were internally driven by their perfectionism mentioned as “must receive medal of honor,” “winning straight A,” or “being top of the class.” Year 3 student (Faculty of Engineering) described that he was “nervous to present the project in front of the class... wish I could be brave enough.”

**Emotional Insecurity:** Several students (41.7%) mention their emotional insecurity as “lonely,”

“hard to connect with classmates/advisors,” and “homesick.”

**Overcommitment:** Few students (2.5%) mentioned their internal tendency to take on many responsibilities, including leadership roles in clubs and organizations. Year 2 student (Faculty of Fisheries) described that she felt “burnout and stressful during an annual university activity – Kaset Fair.”

**Phase II: Personal Selected Activity**

After exploring the stressors in students’ lives during the first phase of the research, the students were assigned to select any mindfulness activities from the tree of contemplative practices to manage their stress. The findings from self-report via the interviews and self-reflection journal presented in Table 2 showing the creative way to manage

**Table 2**

*Personal Selected Activity*

Types of Practices	Selected Activity	Frequency	%
Stillness Practice	Being Still in Silence	65	
	Being Still with Chanting/Zen music	8	
	Meditation	45	
	Breath exercise	27	
	Total	145	48.33
Creative Practice	Drawing	20	
	Painting	15	
	Music Practicing	5	
	Singing – Karaoke	33	
	Composing – Music Lyrics/ Online Novel	2	
	Total	75	25.00
Relational Practice	Voice Dialogue	9	
	Dine & Talk with Friends or Family	10	
	Dialogue Circle & Deep Listening	5	
	Talk to The Dearest One	12	
	Total	36	12.00

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Types of Practices	Selected Activity	Frequency	%
Movement-Based Practice	Walking in The Park	9	
	Dancing – Ballet, Contemporary, K-Pop	5	
	Yoga	2	
	Sports – Football, Basketball, Running, etc.	11	
	Gym – Fitness, Weight Building	3	
	Total	30	10.00
Active Practice	Joining Campus Clubs	10	
	Contributing Something to Society	4	
	Total	14	4.67

their stress through their selective choices of activities enhancing their mindful lives. The five most chosen activities were stillness practice, creative practice, relational practice, movement practice, and activist practice respectively.

**Stillness Practice:** This was the primary choice (48.33%) for the students. Many students mentioned several activities associated with quieting their thoughts, calming their inner turmoil and finding their sense of inner peace as “sitting still in Chatuchak park,” “sitting with eyes closed and trying to focus on one point in the darkness,” “learning meditation,” and “listening to Zen or chanting music in silence,” including “breathing exercise.” They described “my bedroom,” “Chatuchak Park,” “temple near my area” as the sanctuary place to practice.

**Creative practice:** The second choice (25%) for the students was creative practice, which involves engaging in creative activities that allow the students to express themselves and tap into their artistic or imaginative side in order to enhance the academic skills and performances. Year 3 student (Faculty of Architecture) described the result associated with painting and drawing as “help me relax and feel comfortable...somehow it enhances skills in my architect field.” Creative practice can be a source of self-discovery and a way of exploring the students’ emotions

and ideas to handle challenges in lives. Year 2 student (Faculty of Social Science) mentioned her feeling of writing online novel that was like “I actually write about what happened to me when on campus and I’ve invented the character representing myself or other people. Somehow, this way helps me figure out many possibilities of what I can handle or manage if bad situations happen. I can choose the ending; I hope I can deal with the reality too.” Furthermore, Year 3 student (Faculty of Humanities) expressed his feelings by practicing guitar and composing love song for his crush like “letting worries become lyrics and melodies... I hope this can be a good way to express how I feel for her.”

**Relational practice:** This third practice (12%) helped many students focus on building and nurturing healthy relationships with others. Their activities promoted better communication, empathy, and connection with people in their lives, such as “dialogue circle,” “putting oneself in other people’s shoes,” and “learning to open and share thoughts,” including “learning not to judge.” Many students reflected on their feelings after practicing as “happy,” “comfortable,” or “relief.” They agreed that relational practice can enhance their social and emotional well-being. Moreover, Year 2 student (Faculty of Agriculture) stated that heartfelt talk with his advisor helped him find the solution of financial problem



because his advisor “advised about study loans and scholarships,” while Year 1 student (Faculty of Economics) mentioned that her dialogue circle with friends during working in group helped her understand her classmates better. It was stated as:

“I felt uncomfortable at first, but I learned not to judge and listen to my friends more about why they can or cannot contribute to work at a team-expected level. We tried to figure out the way to perform our best in the project by respecting the ideas and working collaboratively”

**Movement Practice:** This movement-based activity promoted fitness, flexibility, and overall physical well-being among the students. Several students engaged themselves in yoga, dance routines, exercises etc. They mentioned that it improved physical health and emotional balance like “getting stronger,” “being flexible and stretchy,” “getting over the troubles,” “being calm when feeling down and worried,” “distracting negative thoughts,” and “feeling good.” In contrast, some students grew connections with other people through this practice. Year 3 student (Faculty of Agro-industry) described that her dancing members were her besties, while Year 1 student (Faculty of Science) stated that he joined the gym and made new friends there.

**Active Practice:** This practice would be called “activism” as well. It involved actively engaging in efforts to bring about social, political, or environmental change. They agreed that active practice can raise awareness, advocate for causes, and take action to address various issues. Some of the student clubs at Kasetsart University provided great goodness projects contribute to society or disadvantaged community. Year 4 student (Faculty of Environment) expressed his

sincereness towards joining KU Volunteer Club – “I might not have the power or money to change it, but I have my brain and two hands to make this world a better place,” while Year 2 student (Faculty of Education) described her feeling after volunteering at a public foster home like “feeling overwhelmed with mixed emotions of sadness and happiness at the same time.” It helped her see another part of the human being and stop comparing her life with other people’s lives on social media.

From results above, the effectiveness of mindfulness practices in order to manage the stress could be seen since the first phase of the research because the students learnt how to navigate life events through mindful group activities in class leading them to reflect and share their experiences about the stressful lives. Moreover, the second phase of the research showed that students who attended the program could handle their stress creatively with their selected mindful activities. They embraced life event positively without judgement and enhance academic skills and overall well-being.

## Discussion

From the findings above, the state of stress among Kasetsart University’s undergraduate students crucially affects not only their academic performance but also their overall well-being. This demands attention and action from university administrators and faculty members. It is also similar to various study of stress among undergraduates around the world. The significant stress among Kasetsart University’s undergraduate students is academic pressure which accords to the study of Tol et al. (2019) that presented prominent factor rising stress levels among undergraduates was the academic

pressure and performance, e.g., maintaining high grades, deadline working, etc. Related to academic pressure, academic excellence from family expectations was deep rooted not only in Thailand but also Asian family. Li and Xie (2020)'s study presented that Asian parents value cultural and societal belief that success, future's prosperity, family honor, and socio-economic status are accomplished through high education. This was relevant to Chu et al. (2016) and Karyotaki et al. (2020) study showing that students' stress was from uncertainty surrounding post-graduation plans and career prospects demanding to meet family, peer, and social expectations.

### **Phase II: Personal Selected Activity**

The findings showed that most of the students who attended the class were aware of their stress caused by academic pressure, social pressure, family expectations and so on. They knew that stress could be a great impact to their lives academically and socially. However, they were potentially able to manage their stress by embracing both negative and positive life events and solving daily life problems with a conscious mind through their selected mindfulness practices.

The results above were accorded to many studies. According to Hofmann et al. (2010) and Shapiro et al. (2011), the studies presented that mindfulness practices combine a wide array of techniques, including mindfulness meditation, yoga, and relaxation exercises aiming to promote self-awareness, reduce anxiety, and enhance emotional regulation. The studies highlighted the positive impact of mindfulness meditation on stress reduction among undergraduates. By fostering mindfulness and introspection, mindfulness practices equip students with the

tools to cope with stressors effectively. The study of Khoury et al. (2013) found the moderate to large effects of mindfulness-based interventions in reducing stress, anxiety, or depression in various populations, including students. Chen et al. (2022) presented significant reductions in stress levels and improvements in sleep quality among university students participating in an MBSR program compared to a control group, as well as the study of Zuo et al. (2023) demonstrated that mindfulness training enhances coping mechanisms and reduces perceived stress in university students during exam periods. Moreover, several studies (Condit et al., 2019, Conversano et al., 2020, Creswell, 2017) showed that mindfulness-based interventions were effective in improving self-compassion and emotional regulation leading to emotional well-being and reducing negative emotions in university students. These practices encouraged individuals to be present in the moment which help alleviate worries about the future or past, leading to decreased stress levels.

Finally, using online platforms to connect with the students when giving counselling on mindfulness practice is appropriate for this digital era, as mentioned in Bartlett et al. (2021) that their mindfulness course on MOOC format offers low-cost and accessible means for extending the reach and potential benefits of training to numerous people.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative research explored the factors causing stress and studied the effectiveness of mindfulness practices for stress management among undergraduate students of Kasetsart University. Most students faced academic pressure, which lead them to rarely stay present,

focus on the task at hand, and manage stress effectively. Most students utilized stillness practices to help them become aware of stressors and causes and embrace both negative and positive lives' events. They applied various mindfulness practices to potentially manage their stress and solve daily life problems with a conscious mind. In a world filled with constant distractions and pressures, students need essential skills, such as mindfulness, resilience, and emotional intelligence for academic success and overall well-being. Universities can play an important role in fostering the development of these skills and equip their students with tools to manage stress by offering contemplative education, and creating supportive service programs, including a nurturing educational environment. However, mindfulness approach is hardly found and mentioned in higher education in Thailand context. The study's reliance on a single institution and a short timeframe may introduce bias and limit the representativeness of the findings. Further research should focus on exploring the integration of mindfulness practices into academic curricula which aim to empower undergraduate students to develop a contemplative mindset, heightened self-awareness, resilience, and holistic consciousness. Moreover, it is recommended to expand the scope of this study to include multiple campuses and conduct longitudinal studies to examine the persistence and long-term effects of mindfulness practices on student well-being and academic success.

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### Statements and Declarations

First of all, I would like to thank all of my students who are willing to volunteer and be a part of this study consensually and thank the Faculty of Education, Kasetsart University, for their financial support, especially for funding my virtual presentation at the 5th AsTEN Conference. Finally, I would like to thank the committee of the 5th AsTEN Conference for selecting this paper to receive the Best Paper Award for virtual presentation.

During the preparation of this work, I used ChatGPT and Gemini for the literature review process. After using this tools, I reviewed and edited the content as needed and I take full responsibility for the publication's content.

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**Bionote**

**Dr. Walainart Meepan**, lecturer at Lifelong Learning Promotions for Social Development Division, the Faculty of Education, Kasetsart University, Bangkok, Thailand, has given a lecture of Contemplative Education for Purpose in Life for many years. Her interesting areas of research are self-development, transformative learning, and contemplative education.