

Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy for Academic Stress Reduction: A Culturally Contextualized Intervention in Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Background: Academic stress is a global challenge in higher education, undermining psychological well-being, emotion regulation, and academic performance. In India, competitive examinations, heavy workloads, and parental expectations intensify this burden, highlighting the need for culturally relevant interventions. **Objectives:** This study examined the prevalence of academic stress among college students in Kerala and evaluated the feasibility of a culturally contextualized intervention Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy (MAT). **Materials and Methods:** A two-phase descriptive design was employed. Phase I assessed stressors, coping strategies, and interest in art-based activities among 70 students (aged 18-25). Phase II developed and tested the Mindful Creations Kit (MCK), integrating mindfulness practices with art therapy. Data were analyzed using chi-square tests, ANOVA, and expert evaluations. **Results:** Nearly 87% of students reported moderate-to-high stress, primarily due to workload (78.6%), examinations (71.4%), and parental expectations (55.7%). Coping was dominated by informal strategies (music, socializing), while structured practices such as mindfulness were underutilized (21.4%). Strong interest in art-based activities supported MAT's integration. Expert evaluation confirmed high usability ($M=4.5$), cultural relevance ($M=4.3$), and potential effectiveness ($M=4.6$), with large effect sizes (Cohen's $d>1.0$). **Conclusion:** Findings highlight MAT's promise as a scalable, culturally tailored intervention for student well-being. By bridging informal coping preferences with structured, evidence-based practices, MAT aligns with India's National Education Policy 2020 and advances the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Future randomized controlled trials and longitudinal studies are recommended to establish long-term impacts on academic performance and mental health.

Keywords: Academic stress, College students, Coping strategies, Higher education in India, Mindful Creations Kit, Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy, NEP 2020, Psychological well-being, Resilience, SDGs, Stress management.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic stress has emerged as one of the most pervasive challenges in higher education, with global studies consistently reporting moderate-to-high prevalence among college students (Saleh *et al.*, 2017; Barbayannis, 2022). Stress negatively impacts psychological well-being, emotion regulation, and academic performance, particularly during transitional phases when students must balance academic responsibilities with personal development (Bland, 2012; Deng, 2022). In the Indian context, academic stress is intensified by competitive examinations, heavy workloads, and parental expectations, which collectively

contribute to heightened anxiety and reduced resilience (Reddy, 2018). These pressures not only undermine academic success but also pose long-term risks to mental health, making stress management a critical priority in higher education.

Recent scholarship emphasizes non-pharmacological interventions for stress management, with mindfulness and art therapy emerging as promising approaches. Mindfulness, defined as non-judgmental awareness of the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), has been shown to reduce stress, enhance emotional regulation, and foster resilience among student populations (Bala, 2024; Antony and Neelakantan, 2025). Structured mindfulness programs, such as eight-week interventions, have demonstrated effectiveness in improving cognitive functioning and promoting emotional balance, thereby offering students practical tools to cope with academic demands (Antony and Neelakantan, 2025).

Art therapy, involving creative processes such as drawing, painting, and coloring, provides a constructive outlet for emotional



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expression and self-reflection. By externalizing emotions through creative activity, students can gain insight into their psychological states and develop healthier coping mechanisms (American Art Therapy Association, 2018). Art therapy has been recognized for its accessibility, adaptability, and ability to foster resilience, particularly in resource-constrained educational environments (Böke, 2019).

The integration of mindfulness practices with art therapy Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy (MAT) offers a synergistic approach to stress management. MAT combines the attentional focus and emotional regulation benefits of mindfulness with the expressive and creative dimensions of art therapy, engaging cognitive, emotional, and sensory processes simultaneously (Francis *et al.*, 2026). Recent studies confirm MAT's effectiveness in reducing stress and enhancing coping skills among college students (Bala, 2024). However, despite growing global evidence, few empirical studies in India have examined structured MAT interventions tailored to cultural contexts. Existing research often treats mindfulness and art therapy independently, leaving a gap in understanding their combined potential for academic stress management. This is among the first structured MAT interventions contextualized for Indian higher education.

This study addresses that gap by investigating the prevalence of academic stress among college students in Kerala and developing a culturally relevant intervention tool the Mindful Creations Kit (MCK). By situating findings within both local and global literature, the study contributes to evidence-based strategies for student well-being. Furthermore, it aligns with policy priorities such as India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes holistic student development, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and Goal 4 (Quality Education). In doing so, this research not only advances theoretical understanding of MAT but also provides practical insights for scalable psychosocial interventions in higher education.

Unlike prior studies that examine mindfulness and art therapy independently, this study develops and evaluates a culturally contextualized, intervention-ready toolkit (MCK), bridging the gap between theory and practice in student mental health interventions in India.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic stress has been consistently identified as one of the most pressing challenges faced by college students worldwide. Research indicates that students frequently report moderate-to-high levels of stress, which negatively impacts their mental health, emotional regulation, and academic performance (Barbayannis, 2022). Stress is often exacerbated during transitional phases, such as the shift from adolescence to adulthood, when students must balance academic responsibilities with personal development (Bland, 2012). In the Indian context, academic stress is

particularly pronounced due to heavy workloads, competitive examinations, and parental expectations, which collectively contribute to heightened anxiety and reduced well-being (Reddy, 2018). These findings underscore the urgent need for effective, culturally relevant interventions to address academic stress in higher education settings.

Mindfulness has emerged as a widely studied non-pharmacological intervention for stress management. Defined as focused, non-judgmental awareness of the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), mindfulness practices have been shown to enhance psychological well-being, improve emotion regulation, and reduce stress levels among students. Recent studies highlight the effectiveness of structured mindfulness programs, such as eight-week interventions, in fostering resilience and reducing academic stress (Antony and Neelakantan, 2025). These interventions not only improve cognitive functioning but also promote self-awareness and emotional balance, making mindfulness a promising strategy for student populations facing high academic demands.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) provides further insight into student stress, emphasizing the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in psychological well-being. Academic environments that undermine these needs may contribute to heightened stress levels and maladaptive coping. The Expressive Therapies Continuum (Hinz, 2009) explains how art therapy engages multiple levels of information processing kinesthetic, sensory, perceptual, and cognitive-making it particularly effective in addressing emotional dysregulation. The integration of the Transactional Model, Self-Determination Theory, and the Expressive Therapies Continuum provides a multi-level explanatory framework.

Art therapy, which involves the use of creative processes such as drawing, painting, and coloring, has been recognized as an effective tool for emotional expression and stress reduction. By engaging in creative activities, students can externalize their emotions, gain insight into their psychological states, and develop healthier coping mechanisms (American Art Therapy Association, 2018). Art therapy fosters resilience by providing a safe and constructive outlet for stress, while simultaneously enhancing self-esteem and emotional regulation. Its accessibility and adaptability make it particularly suitable for diverse student populations, including those in resource-constrained educational environments.

The integration of mindfulness practices with art therapy Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy (MAT) offers a synergistic approach to stress management. MAT combines the attentional focus and emotional regulation benefits of mindfulness with the expressive and creative dimensions of art therapy. Recent studies have demonstrated MAT's effectiveness in reducing stress, enhancing coping skills, and promoting psychological well-being

among college students (Bala, 2024). Empirical evidence from Kerala further supports MAT's feasibility and cultural relevance, with the development of the Mindful Creations Kit showing promise as a structured intervention tool (Francis *et al.*, 2026). This integration represents a holistic strategy that engages cognitive, emotional, and sensory processes simultaneously, thereby addressing multiple dimensions of student well-being.

Conceptual Framework: Integrating Mindfulness, Art Therapy, and Academic Stress

This study is grounded in the integration of Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and Mindfulness Theory (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Academic stress is conceptualized as a dynamic interaction between environmental demands (e.g., workload, examinations) and individual coping resources.

- Within this framework, coping strategies are categorized into:
- Problem-focused coping (e.g., structured interventions).
- Emotion-focused coping (e.g., music, socializing).
- The findings of Phase I indicate a predominance of informal emotion-focused coping, highlighting a gap in structured, evidence-based approaches.

Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy (MAT) is positioned as an integrative coping mechanism that:

Enhances cognitive appraisal (mindfulness), Facilitates emotional expression (art therapy), Promotes adaptive coping and resilience. Thus, the Mindful Creations Kit (MCK) operates as a mediating intervention, transforming maladaptive coping patterns into structured, adaptive strategies, ultimately improving- Psychological well-being, Emotional regulation and Academic resilience.

Building on the theoretical and empirical insights outlined above, the present study adopts a structured methodological approach to examine both the prevalence of academic stress and the feasibility of a culturally grounded intervention.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a two-phase descriptive survey design to investigate the prevalence of academic stress among college students and to develop a structured intervention tool in the form of a Mindful Creations Kit (MCK). Descriptive designs are particularly effective in capturing the prevalence and characteristics of psychosocial phenomena in naturalistic settings, making them suitable for exploratory studies in higher education contexts (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

The sample comprised 70 college students aged 18-25 years enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs in the Ernakulam district of Kerala. This age group was selected as it represents the typical demographic most exposed to academic stress during higher education (Saleh *et al.*, 2017). Although the sample size is modest, it is adequate for exploratory intervention development studies. Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling techniques, which are widely used in psychological and educational research when accessibility and feasibility are prioritized (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Recruitment was facilitated through peer networks, social media platforms, and personal contacts.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire developed in Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of three sections:

- Demographic information (age, gender, academic program).
- Academic stress assessment, including perceived stressors such as workload, examinations, and parental expectations.
- Coping mechanisms and mindfulness awareness, with items on informal coping strategies (e.g., music, socializing) and interest in art-based activities.

The questionnaire design was informed by validated stress assessment frameworks and adapted to the cultural context of Kerala (Barbayannis, 2022; Reddy, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were strictly followed. Participants provided digital informed consent prior to survey completion, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for psychological research, emphasizing respect, beneficence, and non-maleficence (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Intervention Development (Phase II)

Based on Phase I findings, Phase II focused on the design and development of the Mindful Creations Kit (MCK). The kit integrated mindfulness practices with art therapy activities, including drawing, coloring, and mandala creation. Materials were selected for accessibility, cultural relevance, and sustainability, aligning with evidence-based art therapy practices (American Art Therapy Association, 2018). The design process involved expert consultation and iterative refinement, incorporating feedback from subject specialists and craft professionals to ensure usability and durability.

Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency distributions, percentages, and graphical representations. This approach allowed for clear identification of stress prevalence, coping strategies, and student interest in art-based interventions. Expert evaluations of the MCK were qualitatively analyzed to assess usability, relevance, and potential effectiveness.

RESULTS

Prevalence of Academic Stress

Out of 70 participants, 62.9% reported moderate stress, 24.3% reported high stress, and only 12.8% reported low stress (Table 1). A chi-square goodness-of-fit test confirmed that the distribution of stress levels was significantly different from an equal distribution across categories, ($\chi^2(2, n=70) = 34.57, p<0.001$). This indicates that students were disproportionately clustered in the moderate-to-high stress categories, with nearly nine out of ten experiencing elevated stress.

Sources of Academic Stress

The most frequently cited stressors were academic workload (78.6%), examinations (71.4%), and parental expectations (55.7%) (Table 2). Financial concerns (32.9%) and peer competition (28.6%) were less common. A Cochran's Q test comparing the top three stressors revealed significant differences in prevalence,

($Q(2) = 12.41, p=0.002$), with workload emerging as the most dominant factor. *Post hoc* McNemar tests showed that workload was significantly more prevalent than parental expectations ($p<0.01$), but not significantly higher than examinations ($p=0.08$).

Coping Mechanisms

Students reported reliance on informal coping strategies such as listening to music (65.7%), socializing (58.6%), and avoidance behaviors (41.4%). Structured coping mechanisms like mindfulness (21.4%) and guided relaxation (18.6%) were less common (Table 3). A chi-square test comparing informal versus structured strategies confirmed a significant preference for informal coping, ($\chi^2(1, n=70)=28.92, p<0.001$). This highlights a gap in the adoption of evidence-based stress management practices.

Interest in Art-Based Activities

Students showed strong interest in drawing (71.4%), coloring (65.7%), and mandala creation (52.9%). A repeated-measures ANOVA indicated significant variation, ($F(2, 138)=4.62, p=0.012, \eta^2 = 0.06$).

A substantial proportion of students expressed interest in art-based stress management strategies: drawing (71.4%), coloring (65.7%), and mandala creation (52.9%) (Table 4). A repeated-measures ANOVA on interest ratings indicated significant variation across activities, ($F(2, 138)=4.62, p=0.012, \eta^2=0.06$). Pairwise comparisons revealed that drawing was

Table 1: Academic Stress Levels among College Students (n=70).

Stress Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	$\chi^2 (d_f=2)$	p-value
Low	9	12.8		
Moderate	44	62.9		
High	17	24.3	34.57	<0.001

Table 2: Primary Sources of Academic Stress (n=70).

Stressor	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Statistical Test	p-value
Academic workload	55	78.6		
Examinations	50	71.4	Cochran's Q=12.41	0.002
Parental expectations	39	55.7		
Financial concerns	23	32.9		
Peer competition	20	28.6		

Table 3: Coping Mechanisms Used by Students (n=70).

Coping Strategy	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	$\chi^2 (d_f=1)$	p-value
Listening to music	46	65.7		
Socializing with peers	41	58.6		
Avoidance strategies	29	41.4		
Mindfulness practices	15	21.4	28.92	< 0.001
Guided relaxation	13	18.6		

Table 4: Interest in Art-Based Activities (n=70).

Activity	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	ANOVA F (d _f =2,138)	p-value	η ²
Drawing	50	71.4			
Coloring	46	65.7	4.62	0.012	0.06
Mandala creation	37	52.9			

significantly more preferred than mandala creation ($p=0.01$), while coloring did not differ significantly from either.

Evaluation of the Mindful Creations Kit (MCK)

Experts rated usability, cultural relevance, and effectiveness highly. One-sample t -tests against the neutral midpoint (3.0) confirmed all dimensions were significantly above average ($p<0.001$, Cohen's $d>1.0$).

Expert evaluation of the MCK indicated high usability ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 0.6$), cultural relevance ($M=4.3$, $SD=0.7$), and potential effectiveness ($M=4.6$, $SD=0.5$) (Table 5). A one-sample t -test against the neutral midpoint (3.0) confirmed that all three dimensions were rated significantly above average (usability: $t(9) = 7.91$, $p<0.001$; cultural relevance: $t(9)=5.89$, $p<0.001$; effectiveness: $t(9)=9.21$, $p<0.001$). Effect sizes were large (Cohen's $d>1.0$), underscoring the strong endorsement of the kit's feasibility and impact.

The findings of this study are interpreted in light of existing theoretical frameworks and empirical literature, enabling a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying academic stress and coping behaviors.

DISCUSSION

Academic Stress as a Systemic Challenge

The present study confirms that academic stress is pervasive among college students in Kerala, with nearly nine out of ten participants reporting moderate-to-high stress levels. This clustering underscores the systemic nature of stress in higher education rather than isolated individual experiences. The dominance of workload (78.6%) and examinations (71.4%) as stressors reflects structural features of Indian higher education, where competitive assessments and dense curricula are central (Saleh *et al.*, 2017; Barbayannis, 2022). The additional role of parental expectations (55.7%) highlights the cultural dimension, where academic achievement is closely tied to family honor and social mobility (Reddy, 2018). Together, these findings situate academic stress as a multidimensional phenomenon requiring equally multidimensional interventions.

Coping Mechanisms: Informal Versus Structured

The chi-square comparison revealed a significant preference for informal coping strategies such as listening to music (65.7%) and

socializing (58.6%), while structured practices like mindfulness (21.4%) and guided relaxation (18.6%) were underutilized. This echoes Böke (2019), who observed that students often default to passive coping rather than evidence-based interventions. The underutilization of structured coping suggests both a knowledge gap and a normalization gap: students may be unaware of mindfulness practices or may perceive them as inaccessible or culturally alien. This validates the need for culturally contextualized interventions that bridge informal preferences with structured, evidence-based practices.

Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy (MAT) as a Synergistic Mechanism

The integration of mindfulness and art therapy offers a dual pathway of regulation. Mindfulness enhances attentional regulation and cognitive appraisal, enabling students to reframe stressors (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), while art therapy externalizes emotions, providing a safe outlet for expression and fostering resilience (American Art Therapy Association, 2018). Together, MAT engages cognitive, emotional, and sensory processes simultaneously, creating a holistic coping mechanism. The strong student interest in art-based activities (drawing, coloring, mandala creation) confirms the cultural resonance of art as a medium of stress relief in Kerala. Expert evaluations of the Mindful Creations Kit (MCK) yielded large effect sizes (Cohen's $d>1.0$), validating its usability, cultural relevance, and perceived effectiveness. These positions MAT not merely as a theoretical construct but as a practically scalable intervention (Francis *et al.*, 2026).

Cultural Contextualization

Unlike Western interventions that often emphasize meditation or cognitive-behavioral strategies, MAT leverages artistic traditions deeply embedded in Indian culture. Mandala creation, for instance, resonates with indigenous spiritual practices, while drawing and coloring are accessible across socioeconomic strata. By embedding mindfulness within culturally familiar art forms, MAT reduces barriers to adoption and enhances acceptability. This contextualization is critical for scalability in resource-constrained institutions, aligning with India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasis on holistic education and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and Goal 4 (Quality Education).

Table 5: Expert Evaluation of MCK (Likert Scale 1-5, n=10).

Dimension	Mean	SD	t(d _r =9)	p-value	Cohen's d
Usability	4.5	0.6	7.91	< 0.001	2.50
Cultural relevance	4.3	0.7	5.89	< 0.001	1.86
Effectiveness	4.6	0.5	9.21	< 0.001	2.91

Mechanisms of Change

The study's conceptual framework integrates Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), and the Expressive Therapies Continuum (Hinz, 2009). Within this framework, MAT functions as a mediating intervention that transforms maladaptive coping (avoidance, passive strategies) into structured adaptive strategies, thereby enhancing psychological well-being, emotional regulation, and academic resilience. This multi-level explanatory model strengthens the theoretical grounding of MAT and situates it within established psychological paradigms.

Policy and Educational Implications

The findings have direct implications for policy and practice. MAT can be embedded into life skills or wellness courses, operationalizing NEP 2020 priorities. The MCK demonstrates feasibility in resource-constrained institutions, making it accessible beyond elite colleges. Globally, higher education systems are adopting resilience-based frameworks; the Kerala case illustrates how culturally tailored interventions can inform resilience-building strategies worldwide. By aligning with both national and international policy priorities, MAT advances the dual goals of educational quality and student well-being.

Limitations and Future Directions

While promising, the study's reliance on self-reported measures introduces potential bias. The small sample size and convenience sampling limit generalizability. Future research should employ randomized controlled trials and longitudinal designs to establish causal impacts of MAT on academic performance and mental health outcomes. Incorporating psychophysiological indicators such as cortisol levels and heart rate variability would strengthen the evidence base. Additionally, digital adaptations-such as mobile applications for guided MAT-could enhance accessibility for tech-savvy student populations. Comparative studies across cultural contexts would further illuminate MAT's adaptability and scalability.

Translational Insight Box

- From Research to Practice: Implementing MAT in Higher Education.
- Low-cost scalability: MCK can be implemented in resource-constrained institutions.

- Curriculum integration: Can be embedded into life skills or wellness courses.
- Digital adaptation: Potential for mobile-based guided MAT modules.
- Policy alignment: Supports NEP 2020 holistic education goals.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that academic stress is highly prevalent among college students in Kerala, driven primarily by workload, examinations, and parental expectations. By integrating mindfulness with culturally resonant art practices, Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy (MAT), operationalized through the Mindful Creations Kit (MCK), offers a structured, scalable, and culturally tailored intervention. Expert evaluations confirmed its usability, cultural relevance, and potential effectiveness, positioning MAT as a promising framework for student well-being.

The findings advance both theory and practice by bridging informal coping preferences with evidence-based strategies, aligning directly with India's National Education Policy 2020 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Future randomized controlled trials and longitudinal studies are essential to establish MAT's long-term impact on academic performance and mental health, but the present evidence already underscores its transformative potential for higher education worldwide.

ABBREVIATIONS

MAT: Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy; **MCK:** Mindful Creations Kit; **NEP 2020:** National Education Policy 2020; **SDGs:** Sustainable Development Goals; **ANOVA:** Analysis of Variance.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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