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Research Article

Heartfulness HELP Program Reduces Stress in Students

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Abstract:

Background: Given the growing recognition of stress as a pervasive issue impacting students' mental well-being, educational institutions in India have implemented various intervention strategies. Among these strategies, the 'HELP Programme' has garnered significant attention for its innovative and comprehensive approach tailored to address student stress. The programme encompasses a holistic framework that incorporates diverse interventions, including heartfulness exercises, counselling services, and academic support.

Aims and Objectives: The study seeks to investigate the impact of the 'HELP Programme' on stress levels among students in India and provide valuable insights for Indian educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals.

Materials and Methods: This cross-sectional and observational study was conducted between 2020 and 2021, involving school students from multiple states in India. A total of 31,603 students participated in the stress level analysis. Before the introduction of Heartfulness meditation, students were provided with questionnaires to gather socio-demographic details and measure stress levels. Following the completion of 16 weeks of sessions, the same questionnaires were administered to collect students' post-intervention responses. The collected data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 21, employing descriptive and inferential statistics such as counts, percentages, frequencies, and paired t-tests to compare mean levels between baseline and end line assessments.

Results: The findings revealed a significant decrease in students' stress levels (mb= 73.76 > me= 65.98, $p<0.05$) following the implementation of the HELP programme.

Conclusion: This study confirms the stress-reducing efficacy of the HELP programme among students, aligning with previous research findings. The observed decline in students' stress levels highlights the positive impact of the programme and its potential for promoting student well-being in educational settings.

Keywords: help programme, stress levels, students, intervention, heartfulness exercises, counselling services

1. Introduction

In recent times, there has been a growing focus on the issue of student stress and its negative impact on academic achievement, mental health, and overall welfare within the educational community in India [1-2]. The Indian context is characterized by various factors such as academic demands, societal expectations, and personal hurdles that often act as triggers for stress, posing a significant threat to the emotional and psychological equilibrium of students [3-4]. Consequently, educational institutions in India are increasingly acknowledging the necessity for effective strategies to confront and alleviate this concern.

One notable strategy that has emerged as a viable solution is Heartfulness meditation, which has demonstrated its effectiveness in reducing stress levels among students. Within the Indian education system, Heartfulness meditation has been incorporated into the Holistic Education and Life-skills Program (HELP), a comprehensive intervention gaining popularity as a successful approach to enhancing students' well-being and academic performance [5-7]. This program is specifically designed to comprehensively address student stress within the Indian context, taking into account the distinct challenges encountered by Indian students. It offers culturally sensitive interventions that empower students to effectively cope with the pressures and demands they face [8-10]. The HELP Programme encompasses various elements, including heartfulness exercises, counseling services, and academic support, all tailored to cater to the specific needs and pressures experienced by students in the Indian academic milieu.

In spite of the increasing acclaim and implementation of the HELP Programme within educational institutions in India, there remains a dearth of empirical investigations into its efficacy in alleviating stress levels among Indian students. This knowledge gap underscores the pressing need for meticulous evaluation to scrutinize the programme's impact on student stress within the Indian context and to identify areas where improvements or enhancements can be made. Additionally, such research holds the promise of offering evidence-based perspectives for Indian educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals who are actively engaged in student support services.

Consequently, this study aims to fill this void by examining the influence of the HELP Programme on stress levels among students in India. Employing a research design that integrates mixed methods, including quantitative stress measures and qualitative interviews, our objective is to provide a comprehensive appraisal of the programme's effectiveness within the Indian context. The outcomes of this study can serve as a compass for future programme development and inform evidence-based interventions that foster student well-being and academic achievement in India.

On the whole, this research strives to make a meaningful contribution to the existing body of literature on student stress and intervention strategies within the Indian context by evaluating the impact of the HELP Programme. The findings will illuminate the programme's effectiveness, underscoring its potential to diminish stress levels and augment the overall well-being of students in the realm of Indian education. Such insights hold the power to empower educational stakeholders in India to make

well-informed decisions regarding the implementation and refinement of student support initiative.

2. Materials and Methods

The study was conducted between the years 2020 to 2021 and involved school students aged between 16 to 18 years from various states in India. It was designed as a prospective observational study to assess the impact of the 'HELP' program on students' stress level. Prior to the implementation of Heartfulness meditation, the students were given questionnaires to fill out that included socio-demographic details and a stress scale [11-12]. After the completion of the 16-week program, the students were given the same questionnaires again without prior notice.

The study included a total sample size of 32,913 [13-14]. Some participants were excluded from the study due to incomplete data or lack of regular attendance during the 16-week program. The final analyzed sample size was 31,603.

Parameters	No of Participants
Initial total sample size	32,913
Incomplete data	544
Did not follow up 16 weeks intervention regularly ,thus excluded from data	766
Final analysed sample size	31, 603

The collected data were analyzed using the statistical package of social sciences (SPSS) version 21. The data were presented using descriptive and inferential statistics in the form of counts, frequencies, and percentages. The paired t-test was used to compare the mean between the baseline and end line stress levels of the students. P-value ≤ 0.05 was considered significant.

3. Results

Among 31603 students 47.0% were male and 53.0% were female. The students from urban area (38.8%) were higher than Sub urban (10.2%), Rural (35.7%) & Metro (15.2%). Based on type of family, 33.6% of the students were from joint family system, while 66.4% were belonging to nuclear family system. In this study 8.0% of the students had reported with physical illnesses and 92.0% without physical illnesses. Likewise with mental illnesses, 6.4% with mental illnesses and 93.6% students without mental illness. Among the students, 59.6% were already practicing meditation and 40.4% of them were not practicing any form of Meditation.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the study participants

Variable		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Overall		31603	100.0
Gender	Male	14861	47.0
	Female	16742	53.0
Place of residence	Metro	4818	15.2
	Urban	12276	38.8
	Sub-urban	3234	10.2
	Rural	11275	35.7
Type of family	Joint	10626	33.6
	Nuclear	20977	66.4
Chronic physical illness	Physical illness	2519	8.0
	No illness	29084	92.0
Mental illness	Mental illness	2013	6.4
	No illness	29590	93.6
Practicing meditation	Yes	18832	59.6
	No	12771	40.4

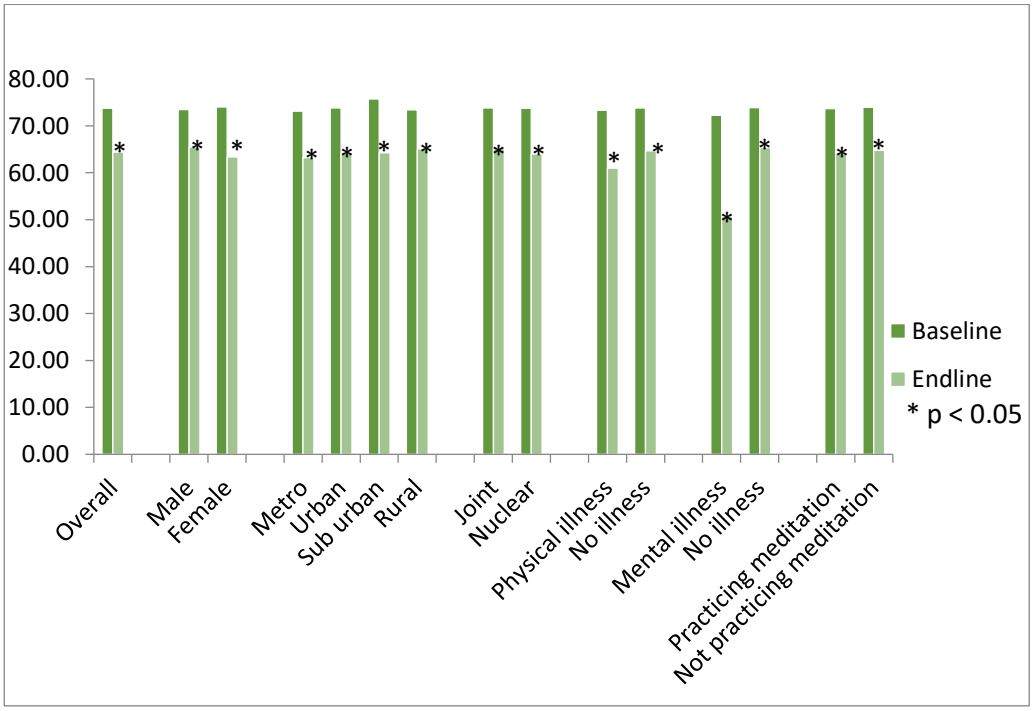

Figure 1. Comparison of Stress level between baseline and end line

Overall, Students stress level have decreased significantly (mb= 73.76 > me= 65.98, p<0.05) after the intervention of the HELP programme. In gender category, male students (mb= 73.46 > me= 66.73) as well as female students (mb= 74.03> me= 65.31) have decreased their stress level significantly after the intervention. Based on the place where the student resides, those who were from rural area (mb= 73.43> me= 66.57), urban (mb= 73.81> me= 65.51), sub urban (mb= 75.69> me= 66.79) and metro area (mb= 73.12> me= 65.25) reported significant (p<0.05) reduction in their stress level. Students from both, nuclear family system (mb= 73.72> me= 65.68) and joint family system (mb= 73.84> me= 66.57) have decreased their stress level significantly. Students without Mental illnesses, with or without Physical illnesses have significantly reduced their stress level after the intervention (p<0.05). Students who were not practicing meditation before the intervention of HELP Programme, have decreased their stress levels significantly (mb= 73.95> me= 66.23), the same was observed for those who practices meditation (Figure 1) (Table 2).

Note: mb=Mean Value of Baseline, me=Mean Value of End-line

Table 2 shows the comparison of stress levels before and after treatment. The results show that there were significant decrease (p-value < 0.05) in stress level after the treatment in overall comparison, gender based comparison, place of residency, type of family, physical illness, mental illness and practicing meditation.

Table 2. Comparison of pre and post stress level of the students

			Paired Differences					T	Df	Sig.(2 tailed)
			Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Pre & Post stress				Lower	Upper			
Variables										
Overall		Pre & Post	9.37452	19.14524	.10770	9.16343	9.58561	87.047	31602	.000
	Male	Pre & Post	7.96225	19.13717	.15698	7.65454	8.26996	50.720	14860	.000
Gender	Female	Pre & Post	1.06281E1	19.06553	.14735	10.33930	10.91694	72.129	16741	.000
	Metro	Pre & Post	9.91324	19.56499	.28187	9.36065	10.46583	35.170	4817	.000
Place of residency	Rural	Pre & Post	9.58065	19.11301	.17250	9.24251	9.91878	55.538	12275	.000
	Sub-Urban	Pre & Post	1.14592E1	18.65628	.32806	10.81595	12.10241	34.930	3233	.000
	Urban	Pre & Post	8.32195	19.07390	.17963	7.96984	8.67406	46.328	11274	.000
Type of family	Joint	Pre & Post	8.67184	19.19434	.18620	8.30685	9.03684	46.572	10625	.000
	Nuclear	Pre & Post	9.73047	19.11092	.13195	9.47183	9.98910	73.743	20976	.000
Physical illness	Physical illness	Pre & Post	1.23493E1	20.06917	.39987	11.56524	13.13345	30.884	2518	.000
	No illness	Pre & Post	9.11687	19.04162	.11165	8.89802	9.33572	81.652	29083	.000
Mental illness	Mental illness	Pre & Post	2.15792E1	15.29275	.34085	20.91078	22.24769	63.310	2012	.000

	No illness	Pre & Post	8.54424	19.09846	.11103	8.32662	8.76185	76.957	29589	.000
Practicing meditation	No	Pre & Post	9.51519	19.13755	.13946	9.24184	9.78853	68.231	18831	.000
	Yes	Pre & Post	9.16710	19.15544	.16950	8.83484	9.49935	54.082	12770	.000

4. Discussion

Heartfulness meditation, integrated into the HELP program, has displayed promising potential in mitigating stress levels among students. Numerous studies have underscored the beneficial influence of meditation practices on stress reduction and overall well-being [15-16]. Within the realm of student stress, Heartfulness meditation provides tailored techniques that specifically address the distinctive challenges encountered by students in academic environments.

A notable characteristic of Heartfulness meditation lies in its focus on heartfulness and being fully present in the moment. This practice fosters a state of inner serenity, enabling students to observe their thoughts and emotions without judgment [15]. Through the development of such heartfulness students can attain a heightened sense of control over their stress responses and enhance their capacity to effectively manage academic pressures.

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that regular engagement in Heartfulness meditation can yield significant reductions in perceived stress levels. For example, a study conducted by [16] revealed that students who participated in a Heartfulness-based intervention reported decreased stress and improved well-being compared to a control group. The findings emphasized the vital role played by Heartfulness meditation in stress reduction, as it facilitates relaxation, enhances emotional regulation, and fosters a positive mindset.

Additionally, Heartfulness meditation has also been found to positively impact physiological indicators of stress. A study by [17] explored the effects of meditation on stress-related biomarkers and observed that consistent practice of meditation, including Heartfulness techniques, led to reductions in cortisol levels—a hormone associated with stress. This suggests that Heartfulness meditation may exert a direct physiological influence on stress reactivity, thereby contributing to its stress-alleviating effects. The HELP program's integration of counselling services alongside Heartfulness meditation provides comprehensive support for students. Counselling services can offer a platform for students to address underlying psychological factors contributing to stress and develop coping strategies [18-22]. Combining counselling with Heartfulness meditation creates a holistic approach that addresses both the psychological and physiological aspects of stress management.

Nevertheless, despite the substantial body of evidence supporting the positive impact of Heartfulness meditation and the HELP program on stress reduction among students, it is crucial to acknowledge the presence of conflicting or divergent findings in scientific research. In a randomized controlled trial conducted by [23], which examined the effects of various meditation practices on stress reduction in college students, their study yielded unexpected results contrary to the hypothesis of the current research. They found no significant difference in stress levels between the

meditation group (including Heartfulness meditation) and the control group. The authors suggested that individual variations in response to meditation techniques and the multifaceted nature of stress experiences may contribute to the lack of observed effects in their study. This finding is consistent with the observations made by [24-26].

Moreover, a meta-analysis conducted by [26] examined the overall efficacy of heartfulness based interventions, including meditation, in reducing stress among students. While they discovered a moderate effect size indicating a reduction in stress, they emphasized the need for caution due to substantial variability in study designs and methodological limitations. They recommended further research to gain a better understanding of the specific conditions under which heartfulness interventions, including Heartfulness meditation, are most effective in reducing stress among students. These studies [27-30] underscore the complexity inherent in studying stress reduction interventions and highlight the necessity for additional investigations to establish a clearer consensus. Researchers often encounter methodological disparities, variations in sample characteristics, or discrepancies in the specific meditation techniques employed, all of which can contribute to disparate results.

Therefore, while the existing evidence provides support for the hypothesis that the HELP program, incorporating Heartfulness meditation, alleviates stress levels in students, it is crucial to consider these contrasting perspectives and foster ongoing research endeavours to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the potential benefits and limitations of such interventions.

5. Conclusion

This study has provided evidence that the intervention of the HELP program can enhance students' learning and academic performance by reducing their stress levels. Interestingly, the findings also revealed that various demographic characteristics such as gender, place of residency, type of family, physical illness, and engagement in meditation did not alter the reported effectiveness of the treatment. However, it was noted that the presence of mental illness could influence the treatment's impact on students.

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