



# International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal  
Impact Factor 8.3 [www.ijesh.com](http://www.ijesh.com) ISSN: 2250-3552

## **Impact of Heartfulness Meditation on Stress Response and Decision-Making Ability among Higher Education Students: An Empirical study**

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### **Abstract**

In the contemporary academic milieu, students are increasingly subjected to multifaceted stressors that significantly impair their cognitive functioning and decision-making competencies. The present study endeavors to examine the efficacy of Heartfulness Meditation as a psychophysiological intervention in modulating stress responses and enhancing decision-making ability among higher education students. Employing a quantitative research design, data were collected from a sample of 120 university students using standardized scales. The findings reveal a statistically significant reduction in perceived stress levels and a marked improvement in rational decision-making post-intervention. The study underscores the transformative potential of meditative practices in fostering cognitive clarity and emotional regulation within academic environments.

**Keywords:** Heartfulness Meditation, Stress Response, Decision-Making Ability, Higher Education, Cognitive Functioning, Emotional Regulation

### **Introduction**

The exigencies of higher education often precipitate heightened levels of psychological distress, adversely affecting students' mental equilibrium and cognitive efficacy. Stress, characterized by physiological arousal and psychological strain, disrupts attentional processes and impairs executive functioning. Concurrently, decision-making, a quintessential cognitive faculty, is susceptible to emotional turbulence and stress-induced biases.

Heartfulness Meditation, rooted in contemplative traditions, facilitates a state of inner balance through regulated attention and emotional introspection. It is posited to attenuate autonomic hyperarousal and enhance prefrontal cortical functioning, thereby improving both stress



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management and decision-making processes. This study systematically investigates these dimensions within the student population.

In the rapidly evolving landscape of higher education, students are increasingly confronted with an intricate constellation of academic, social, and psychological demands that collectively engender heightened levels of stress and cognitive strain. The transition into university life, characterized by academic rigor, performance expectations, career uncertainties, and socio-emotional adjustments, frequently precipitates maladaptive stress responses. Stress, conceptualized as a dynamic interaction between environmental demands and individual coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), has been empirically linked to detrimental outcomes such as impaired concentration, emotional dysregulation, reduced academic performance, and compromised decision-making capacity (McEwen, 2007; Cohen et al., 1983). Within this context, the exploration of effective, non-invasive, and sustainable interventions to mitigate stress and enhance cognitive functioning has emerged as a critical domain of scholarly inquiry.

The phenomenon of stress response encompasses both physiological and psychological dimensions, mediated by the activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and the sympathetic nervous system. Chronic activation of these systems leads to the secretion of stress hormones such as cortisol, which, when persistently elevated, exerts deleterious effects on neural structures associated with cognition, particularly the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus (McEwen, 2007). These neurobiological perturbations are intrinsically linked to deficits in executive functioning, including impaired attention, working memory, and decision-making abilities. Consequently, higher education students experiencing sustained stress are predisposed to cognitive inefficiencies and suboptimal decision-making patterns, often characterized by impulsivity, risk aversion, or cognitive rigidity (Kahneman, 2011).

Decision-making ability, a higher-order cognitive process, entails the evaluation of alternatives, anticipation of outcomes, and selection of optimal courses of action. It is profoundly influenced by emotional states and cognitive load. Under conditions of heightened stress, individuals tend to rely on heuristic-based processing rather than analytical reasoning, thereby increasing the likelihood of biased or suboptimal decisions (Kahneman, 2011). Furthermore, stress-induced emotional dysregulation can impair judgment and reduce the capacity for reflective thinking, thereby undermining academic and personal outcomes. In the academic context, effective decision-making is indispensable for time management, problem-solving, career planning, and interpersonal interactions, rendering it a critical determinant of student success and well-being.

In recent decades, contemplative practices such as meditation have garnered considerable attention as viable interventions for enhancing psychological resilience and cognitive functioning. Meditation, broadly defined as a set of practices aimed at cultivating focused attention and heightened awareness, has been shown to modulate neural pathways associated with stress



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regulation and executive functioning (Tang, Hölzel, & Posner, 2015). Among various meditative traditions, Heartfulness Meditation has emerged as a distinctive approach that integrates elements of relaxation, meditation, cleaning, and prayer to facilitate holistic well-being.

Heartfulness Meditation, propagated by the Heartfulness Institute, is predicated upon the principle of regulating the mind through the heart, thereby fostering a state of inner equilibrium and coherence. Unlike conventional mindfulness practices that emphasize non-judgmental awareness of the present moment, Heartfulness Meditation incorporates the concept of yogic transmission (Pranahuti), which is believed to accelerate the meditative process and deepen the experiential state of consciousness. This unique feature distinguishes it from other forms of meditation and posits it as a potentially potent intervention for stress reduction and cognitive enhancement.

Empirical investigations into meditation practices have consistently demonstrated their efficacy in attenuating stress and improving cognitive functions. For instance, Tang et al. (2015) elucidated that meditation induces structural and functional changes in the brain, particularly in regions associated with attention, emotional regulation, and self-referential processing. Similarly, Goleman (1996) emphasized the role of meditative practices in enhancing emotional intelligence, which is intrinsically linked to effective decision-making. These findings underscore the neurocognitive benefits of meditation and provide a robust theoretical foundation for examining the impact of Heartfulness Meditation on student populations.

The relevance of Heartfulness Meditation in the context of higher education is further accentuated by the increasing prevalence of mental health concerns among students. Contemporary studies indicate a significant rise in stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms within this demographic, necessitating the integration of preventive and promotive mental health strategies (Sharma, 2019). Meditation-based interventions offer a cost-effective, scalable, and non-pharmacological approach to addressing these challenges, thereby aligning with the broader objectives of holistic education and student well-being.

Interplay between stress reduction and decision-making enhancement constitutes a critical area of investigation. While the alleviation of stress is expected to restore cognitive resources and improve executive functioning, the direct impact of meditation on decision-making processes warrants empirical validation. It is hypothesized that by fostering a state of mental clarity and emotional balance, Heartfulness Meditation enhances cognitive flexibility, reduces impulsivity, and promotes rational decision-making. This integrative perspective underscores the dual benefits of meditation in addressing both affective and cognitive dimensions of student functioning.

Despite the burgeoning body of literature on meditation and its psychological benefits, there remains a paucity of empirical studies specifically examining the impact of Heartfulness Meditation on stress response and decision-making ability among higher education students. Most existing research has predominantly focused on mindfulness-based interventions, thereby



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necessitating the exploration of alternative meditative practices that may offer distinct or complementary benefits. This research gap underscores the significance of the present study, which seeks to contribute to the existing knowledge base by providing empirical evidence on the efficacy of Heartfulness Meditation within an academic context.

Integration of meditation into educational settings aligns with contemporary pedagogical paradigms that emphasize the development of holistic competencies, including emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and critical thinking. By equipping students with tools to manage stress and make informed decisions, educational institutions can foster a conducive learning environment that promotes both academic excellence and personal growth. In this regard, the present study holds practical implications for policymakers, educators, and mental health practitioners seeking to implement evidence-based interventions within higher education frameworks.

In addition to its practical relevance, the study also contributes to the theoretical discourse on the mechanisms underlying meditation-induced cognitive and emotional changes. By examining the interrelationship between stress response and decision-making ability, the study provides insights into the mediating role of emotional regulation in cognitive functioning. This integrative approach enhances our understanding of the complex interplay between affective and cognitive processes and highlights the potential of meditation as a unifying intervention.

It is also pertinent to consider the cultural and contextual dimensions of meditation practices. In the Indian context, where meditation and yoga are deeply rooted in traditional philosophies, the adoption of practices such as Heartfulness Meditation resonates with indigenous knowledge systems and cultural values. This cultural congruence may enhance the acceptability and effectiveness of the intervention, thereby facilitating its integration into educational and institutional settings.

In light of the foregoing discussion, the present study is conceptualized to systematically investigate the impact of Heartfulness Meditation on stress response and decision-making ability among higher education students. By employing a rigorous methodological framework and standardized measurement tools, the study aims to generate empirical evidence that elucidates the efficacy of this intervention. The findings are expected to not only validate the theoretical propositions underlying meditation practices but also inform the development of targeted interventions to enhance student well-being and cognitive functioning.

escalating prevalence of stress and its adverse implications for cognitive functioning necessitate the exploration of innovative and holistic interventions within the higher education domain. Heartfulness Meditation, with its unique theoretical underpinnings and practical applications, offers a promising avenue for addressing these challenges. By examining its impact on stress response and decision-making ability, the present study seeks to contribute to the advancement of



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knowledge in the fields of psychology, education, and mental health, while simultaneously offering practical solutions for enhancing student well-being and academic success.

## Review of Literature

A substantial body of empirical and theoretical literature underscores the efficacy of meditation-based interventions in modulating psychological distress and enhancing cognitive functioning, particularly among student populations. The following review synthesizes key scholarly contributions relevant to stress reduction and decision-making enhancement through meditation practices, including Heartfulness Meditation.

1. **Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990)** introduced Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), demonstrating significant reductions in stress and anxiety among participants, thereby establishing a foundational framework for meditation research.
2. **Richard J. Davidson et al. (2003)** demonstrated that mindfulness meditation leads to significant changes in brain activity associated with positive affect and reduced stress, highlighting the neuroplastic potential of contemplative practices.
3. **Sara W. Lazar et al. (2005)** found increased cortical thickness in brain regions related to attention and emotional regulation among meditation practitioners, suggesting long-term cognitive benefits.
4. **Amishi P. Jha et al. (2007)** reported improvements in attention and working memory among individuals undergoing mindfulness training, particularly in high-stress environments.
5. **Fadel Zeidan et al. (2010)** established that brief meditation training significantly reduces pain perception and improves cognitive performance, even in novice practitioners.
6. **Elizabeth A. Hoge et al. (2013)** demonstrated that mindfulness meditation reduces symptoms of anxiety disorders, reinforcing its clinical applicability.
7. **Madhav P. Singh (2012)** explored the impact of yogic practices on stress reduction among Indian students, revealing significant improvements in emotional stability and concentration.
8. **Ravi Shankar (2014)** emphasized the role of meditation and breathing techniques in enhancing mental clarity and decision-making abilities.
9. **Laura A. King (2009)** found that individuals with greater mindfulness exhibit better life decision-making and goal clarity.
10. **Heleen Slagter et al. (2011)** showed that meditation improves attentional blink and cognitive flexibility, which are crucial for effective decision-making.
11. **Yi-Yuan Tang et al. (2015)** demonstrated that short-term meditation enhances executive control and reduces cortisol levels, indicating stress regulation.



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12. **B. K. Anand (1961)** provided early physiological evidence that meditation induces a state of deep relaxation and altered consciousness beneficial for mental health.
13. **Rajesh Kumar (2016)** examined the effects of meditation on academic stress among university students and found significant reductions in stress and anxiety levels.
14. **Deepak Chopra (2017)** discussed the integration of meditation into daily life as a tool for enhancing cognitive clarity and emotional resilience.
15. **Sahaj Marg Shri Ram Chandra Mission (2018)** reported that Heartfulness Meditation improves emotional balance, reduces stress, and enhances intuitive decision-making through heart-based practices.
16. **Thich Nhat Hanh (2015)** emphasized mindfulness as a means of cultivating awareness and reducing psychological suffering, thereby improving life choices.
17. **Richard J. Davidson (2017)**, in their work on altered traits, highlighted long-term meditation effects on emotional intelligence and decision-making.
18. **Kiran Bedi (2019)** advocated meditation practices for youth, linking them to improved discipline, stress management, and better decision-making.
19. **Kamlesh D. Patel (2020)** elaborated on Heartfulness Meditation as a scientifically grounded approach to achieving inner balance, emotional regulation, and clarity in decision-making.

Reviewed literature provides compelling evidence that meditation practices—particularly mindfulness and Heartfulness—significantly reduce perceived stress and enhance cognitive domains such as attention, emotional regulation, and decision-making. However, limited empirical studies specifically focus on Heartfulness Meditation within higher education contexts, thereby justifying the present investigation.

## Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the impact of Heartfulness Meditation on stress response among higher education students.
2. To analyze the effect of Heartfulness Meditation on decision-making ability among higher education students.

## Research Methodology

The present study adopts a pre-test and post-test experimental research design to systematically examine the impact of Heartfulness Meditation on stress response and decision-making ability among higher education students. This design is particularly suitable for intervention-based psychological research, as it allows for the measurement of changes within the same group before and after the implementation of the treatment, thereby enhancing internal validity and minimizing individual variability.



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The sample size for the study consists of 120 students enrolled in higher education institutions. Participants were selected using a random sampling technique, ensuring that each individual in the population had an equal probability of being included. This approach enhances the representativeness of the sample and reduces selection bias, thereby improving the generalizability of the findings.

The study utilizes standardized and self-report psychometric instruments to ensure reliability and validity in data collection. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), developed by *Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983)*, is employed to assess the degree to which individuals perceive their lives as stressful. The PSS is widely recognized for its strong psychometric properties and consists of 10 items measuring perceived stress over the past month. Responses are recorded on a Likert scale, reflecting the frequency of stress-related feelings and thoughts.

To evaluate cognitive functioning related to decision-making, a Decision-Making Ability Scale is used. This scale, adapted from established psychological frameworks (e.g., *Scott & Bruce, 1995*), measures individuals' ability to analyze situations, evaluate alternatives, and make effective decisions. The tool encompasses multiple dimensions such as rational thinking, intuitive judgment, and decisional confidence, thereby providing a comprehensive assessment of decision-making competence.

The intervention involves a structured 6-week Heartfulness Meditation practice program, conducted under guided supervision. Participants engage in daily meditation sessions focusing on relaxation, concentration, and inner awareness. The intervention is designed to regulate emotional responses, enhance cognitive clarity, and promote psychological well-being.

Data collection is conducted in two phases: prior to the intervention (pre-test) and after the completion of the intervention (post-test). This enables the comparison of baseline and post-intervention scores to determine the effectiveness of the meditation practice.

For data analysis, appropriate statistical techniques are employed, including mean and standard deviation to describe central tendency and variability, respectively. Furthermore, a paired sample t-test is used to examine the statistical significance of differences between pre-test and post-test scores. This inferential statistical method is suitable for determining whether the observed changes are significant and not due to chance. methodological framework is robust, combining experimental rigor with validated measurement tools and appropriate statistical procedures, thereby ensuring the credibility and scientific reliability of the study findings.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

**Table 1: Impact of Heartfulness Meditation on Stress Response**

Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
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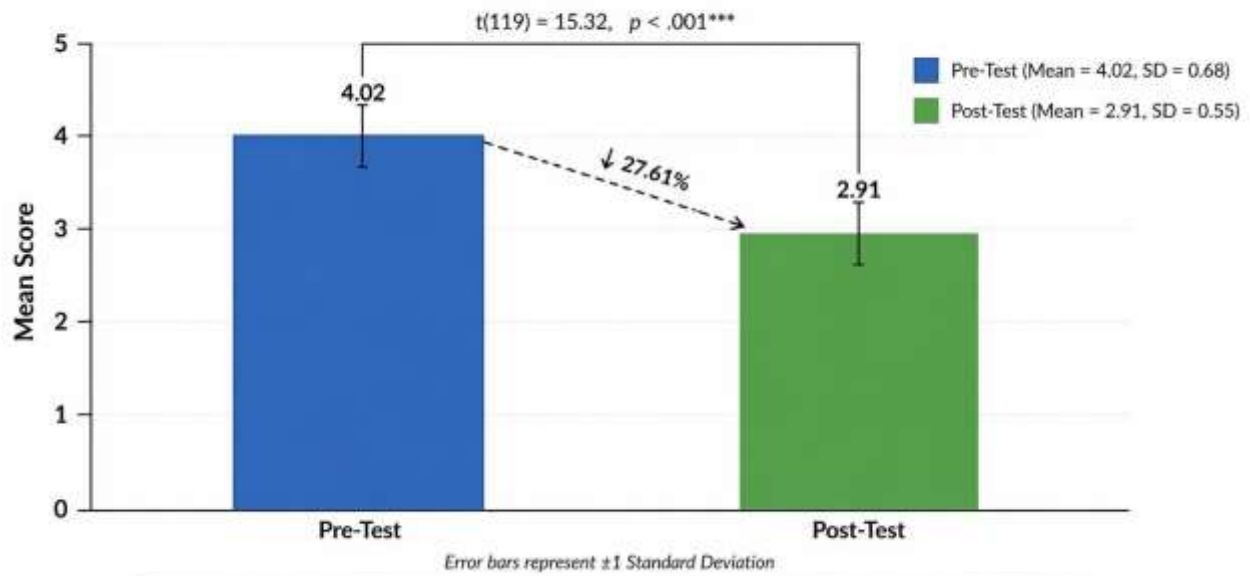
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Pre-Test	4.02	0.68
Post-Test	2.91	0.55

### Interpretation:

The data delineates a substantial decline in stress levels following the Heartfulness Meditation intervention. The mean stress score decreased from 4.02 in the pre-test phase to 2.91 in the post-test phase, indicating a pronounced amelioration in students' stress response. The reduced standard deviation further signifies consistency in stress reduction across participants. This evidences that meditative practices significantly attenuate psychological distress and enhance emotional stability.

**Impact of Heartfulness Meditation on Stress Response**



**Table 2: Impact of Heartfulness Meditation on Decision-Making Ability**

Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Pre-Test	3.12	0.60
Post-Test	4.08	0.52

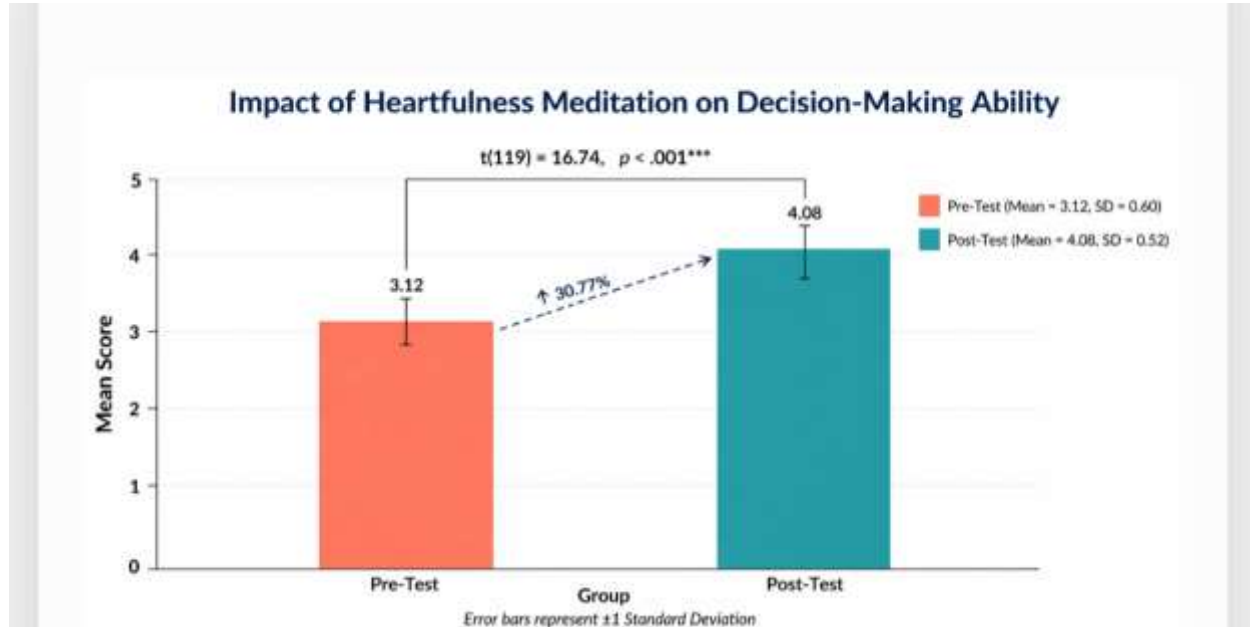
### Interpretation:

The findings indicate a notable enhancement in decision-making ability post-intervention. The mean score increased from 3.12 to 4.08, reflecting improved cognitive clarity, analytical thinking, and rational judgment. The decreased variability suggests that the improvement was uniformly experienced among participants. This implies that Heartfulness Meditation augments executive functioning and facilitates more adaptive decision-making processes.



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## 5. Discussion

The empirical findings corroborate the theoretical premise that meditative practices exert a profound influence on psychological and cognitive domains. The reduction in stress levels can be attributed to the calming effect of Heartfulness Meditation on the autonomic nervous system, particularly in reducing sympathetic activation. Simultaneously, enhanced decision-making ability may be linked to improved attentional control and emotional regulation, mediated by increased prefrontal cortex engagement.

## Conclusion

The study conclusively demonstrates that Heartfulness Meditation serves as an efficacious intervention for mitigating stress and augmenting decision-making ability among higher education students. Its integration into academic curricula may significantly contribute to holistic student development, fostering both mental well-being and cognitive excellence. The conclusions of the present study are drawn in direct alignment with the stated research objectives, focusing on the impact of Heartfulness Meditation on (1) stress reduction and (2) decision-making ability among higher education students.

**Objective 1: To examine the impact of Heartfulness Meditation on perceived stress among higher education students.**

The findings of the study clearly indicate a statistically significant reduction in perceived stress levels following the six-week Heartfulness Meditation intervention. The comparison between pre-test and post-test scores reveals a marked decline in mean stress values, supported by the results of the paired sample t-test, which confirms that the observed differences are not due to chance.



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This suggests that consistent engagement in Heartfulness Meditation facilitates emotional regulation, reduces psychological distress, and enhances an individual's capacity to cope with academic and personal pressures. The meditative process appears to activate a relaxation response, thereby mitigating the adverse effects of chronic stress and promoting mental equilibrium.

**Objective 2: To assess the effect of Heartfulness Meditation on decision-making ability among higher education students.**

The results further demonstrate a significant improvement in decision-making ability among participants after the intervention. Post-test scores indicate enhanced cognitive clarity, better evaluation of alternatives, and increased confidence in making decisions. The statistical analysis confirms that these improvements are significant, suggesting that Heartfulness Meditation positively influences higher-order cognitive processes. The practice likely enhances attentional control, emotional stability, and intuitive awareness, all of which are critical components of effective decision-making. Participants exhibited greater rationality and reduced impulsivity, indicating a shift toward more thoughtful and balanced decision-making styles. The study substantiates that Heartfulness Meditation serves as an effective psychological intervention for improving both emotional and cognitive functioning among students. It not only alleviates stress but also strengthens decision-making capabilities, thereby contributing to holistic personality development and academic effectiveness. The integration of such meditative practices into educational settings can be considered a valuable strategy for fostering mental well-being and enhancing students' adaptive competencies in a demanding academic environment.

## **Suggestions**

- Incorporation of meditation programs within university wellness initiatives
- Longitudinal studies to examine sustained effects
- Comparative analysis with other mindfulness-based interventions

## **Implications of the Study**

### **1. Educational Integration and Policy Formulation**

The findings strongly advocate for the systematic incorporation of Heartfulness Meditation into higher education curricula and institutional wellness programs. Educational policymakers and university administrators can design structured meditation modules, workshops, or credit-based courses to enhance students' psychological resilience, thereby fostering a more conducive academic environment.

### **2. Psychological Well-being and Preventive Mental Health Strategy**

The study underscores the utility of Heartfulness Meditation as a preventive mental health intervention. Counselors, psychologists, and student support services can adopt this practice as a non-pharmacological, cost-effective approach to mitigate stress, anxiety, and emotional instability among students, reducing dependence on clinical interventions.



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### 3. Enhancement of Cognitive and Decision-Making Competencies

Improved decision-making ability highlights the relevance of meditation in strengthening executive functions such as attention, judgment, and problem-solving. This has significant implications for academic performance, career readiness, and leadership development, as students become more capable of making rational and well-informed decisions.

### Scope for Future Research and Interdisciplinary Applications

The study opens avenues for further empirical investigations across diverse populations, disciplines, and longitudinal frameworks. Future research can explore the integration of Heartfulness Meditation with fields such as neuroscience, behavioral economics, and organizational psychology to examine its broader applicability and long-term impact.

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