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## Zen Your College Experience

Anna Sharshon

When college students transition from life at home to life at school, they may be faced with a variety of stressors such as navigating a more rigorous academic environment or an overload of new commitments and responsibilities. Struggling with the change in environment is one of the major problems faced among college students and often leads to more stress and anxiety, lack of sleep hygiene, and poor eating habits. Fortunately, mindful meditation has been proven to help with these issues. Mindful meditation is the practice of focusing or clearing the mind by using certain mental and physical techniques. It has a role in helping students transition into college and improve their learning which in turn, decreases stress and anxiety. Meditation also promotes relaxation and prepares the body for sleep, allowing a more restful night with fewer sleep disturbances. Lastly, meditation can promote healthy eating and physical activity. Implementing meditation into a college student's daily life is a quick and easy way to improve overall health and well-being.

**Keywords:** college students, stress, anxiety, meditation

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**T**he Transitioning from living at home to living at school and navigating the more rigorous academic environment can cause college students to experience stress and lose sight of their mental well-being. This new overload of responsibilities, commitments, and time management can be overwhelming and difficult to juggle. Struggling with the change in environment is one of the major problems faced among college students and often leads to more stress and anxiety, lack of sleep hygiene, and poor eating habits. This poor way of living can have many negative outcomes in a student's life and can put a strain on mental health, social relationships, physical health, performance, productivity, and sleep. These negative outcomes can be quite detrimental to college students. Fortunately, one coping mechanism that can be helpful in managing anxiety and stress is meditation. Meditation is described as a practice involving focusing or clearing the mind by using certain mental and physical techniques.<sup>1</sup> Not only does meditation lessen stress and anxiety for college students, but it offers additional positive health benefits.

As previously mentioned, many college students deal with anxiety whether it be from school, work, or personal life. According to the *American Psychological Association*, 61% of college students seek counseling because of anxiety.<sup>2</sup> Since the human brain is not fully developed by the time a student enters college, young adults are at a greater risk of developing anxiety. Transitioning from home to college can cause an overwhelming amount of stress and anxiety because of new expectations, a new environment, and a new lifestyle. Navigating through rigorous academics and striving for high grades may also induce a great amount of stress in college students.<sup>3</sup> However, stress and anxiety can impact academic performance in a negative way. Experiencing overwhelming stress and anxiety can

lead to a lack of focus and a lack of motivation in performing tasks. A 2021 study conducted by Sabiha and colleagues examined the relationship between stress levels of college students and their educational performance.<sup>4</sup> A survey of almost 300 students found a strong negative correlation between academic achievement and physical or psychological stress. This study concluded that stress lowers the academic performance of university students. In addition, those who are unable to cope with stress are not able to perform well in school.<sup>4</sup>

Meditation is a great way to help cope with anxiety and manage stress. Meditation not only helps clear the mind but also improves memory, attention span, focus, and concentration which provides a positive impact on academics.<sup>5</sup> Bamber and Schneider compared multiple studies analyzing the efficacy of mindfulness meditation on stress and anxiety in college students.<sup>6</sup> Of those reviewed, 78% reported a reduction in stress and 77% a decrease in anxiety with mindfulness meditation interventions. This study also suggests that mindfulness-based interventions can be used to help first-year students transition into college and aid in learning. Overall, mindfulness meditation can decrease the academic stressors associated with the new college environment.<sup>6</sup>

Another problem faced greatly among college students is lack of sleep. It is concluded every adult between the ages of 18-60 should have at least 7 hours of sleep each night.<sup>7</sup> However, most college students report that they sleep less than 7 hours and frequently pull "all-nighters" meaning they stay up all night without sleeping.<sup>8</sup> Some reasons that college students have trouble reaching this 7-hour sleep goal include academic pressure, irregular schedules, technology use, alcohol, and caffeine consumption, or a combination of these. This poor sleep

hygiene can impact a student's learning, memory, and performance in a negative way. Studies have shown that the quality of sleep that a young adult receives per night plays a role in memory consolidation and performance at school because of the important brain activity that occurs during sleep to enhance cognitive functioning.<sup>8</sup> For these reasons, sleep should be a top priority for all college students.

A way to achieve a better quality of sleep is through mindfulness meditation. Meditation suppresses stress and anxiety to promote relaxation and prepares the body for sleep. A study conducted in 2021 by Ding and colleagues reviewed the effect of mindfulness-based cognitive training on the sleep quality of college students.<sup>9</sup> Two hundred ninety college freshmen with poor sleep quality volunteered for this mindfulness-based training study. During the training, sleep quality and cognitive level were assessed. The study confirmed that those students who practiced mindfulness had a higher level of quality sleep compared to the control group who did not meditate. Specifically, the group who practiced mindfulness had longer sleep duration, fewer sleep disturbances, and less daytime dysfunction. In addition, the cognitive level of the college students in the experimental group improved significantly from the mindfulness training. The reason why mindfulness is so important in improving sleep is that students can address bothersome emotions which then reduces stress and increases calm feelings. By focusing less on stressors, students were able to focus more on sleep.<sup>9</sup> Practicing meditation on a regular basis can help students enhance sleep hygiene and improve their academic performance.<sup>10</sup>

Lastly, college students are unfortunately at a high risk for weight gain, commonly known as the "freshman 15." Not only do college students gain about 3 to 4 kg during their freshman year, but they often continue to gain weight throughout their time in college.<sup>11</sup> College students are prone to adopting an unhealthy lifestyle as they transition from living at home to being on their own. These habits include unhealthy dietary intake, such as eating fast food and not enough fruits or vegetables, low physical activity, and high alcohol consumption. Some of the reasons college students adopt this unhealthy lifestyle include poor time management, lack of motivation, lack of accessibility and knowledge, peer pressure, or prioritizing studies and academics over their own health. A study by Tomy and colleagues evaluated the barriers to a healthy lifestyle among college students.<sup>11</sup> They found that tight schedules and exams were major factors that played into unhealthy lifestyle patterns. Furthermore, students reported a perceived lack of time for physical activity and a preference for other activities during their free time.<sup>11</sup> Sadly, these unhealthy habits can be detrimental to a college student's academic performance as well as their overall well-being. A correlation between eating habits and students' GPA was found in a study by Rueter and colleagues in which fast food consumption had a negative impact on GPA.<sup>12</sup> Fortunately, there is

evidence to show that mindfulness meditation plays a role in controlling weight and eating behaviors. In 2018, Lyzwinski and colleagues analyzed the relationship between mindfulness and dietary intake, physical activity, and weight in college students.<sup>13</sup> They concluded that mindfulness meditation promoted an increase in fruit and vegetable intake as well as a decrease in fat intake. In addition, mindfulness proved to decrease binge eating and emotional eating in college students. Mindfulness meditation also has a positive relationship with physical activity. Not only did it increase activity levels, but it also created time for exercise. This positive relationship between mindfulness, eating and physical activity led to an overall weight reduction in college students.<sup>13</sup> By practicing mindfulness meditation on a regular basis, students can change their destructive lifestyle habits into positive ones, which can then enhance their academic experience and overall quality of life.

Implementing meditation into a college student's daily life is a quick and easy way to improve their overall health and well-being. Students who practice meditation have a better chance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle by alleviating many of the stressors that come with living in a college environment such as anxiety, poor sleep hygiene, and unhealthy eating habits. Improving these lifestyle factors, in turn, leads to better academic performance and mentality. Incorporating mindfulness meditation into a student's daily routine can make a worthwhile impact on their lives, even beyond their college experience.

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