From Stress to Serenity: The Use of Yoga to Promote Mental Well-being of University Students and Faculty Members

จากความเครียดสู่สมดุล: การใช้โยคะพัฒนาสุขภาพจิตของนักศึกษาและอาจารย์

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Abstract

The mental health crisis in higher education has reached unprecedented levels, with doctoral students and early- career faculty experiencing severe stress that undermines both academic productivity and personal well- being. This article synthesizes emerging evidence on the transformative potential of Eastern contemplative practices, especially yoga, in addressing mental health challenges in academia. Key Findings: Modern academic stress manifests differently across groups; doctoral students face a cascade of academic, financial, and career pressures, while early-career faculty juggle demands from research evaluation, teaching, and administrative duties. Evidence shows that structured yoga programs can lower anxiety scores by nearly 20 points and reduce overall stress by 28%. Morning sessions are most effective for boosting daily productivity. Theoretical Contributions: This analysis introduces a revolutionary three-part wellness model that combines individual cognitive restructuring, organizational reforms, and mind- body synergy interventions. The model challenges traditional Western views of academic stress by incorporating Eastern wisdom traditions that target both physiological and psychological well- being. Practical Implications: Universities can adopt cost- effective “ fragmented yoga” routines tailored to academic schedules, develop diverse evaluation systems to lessen competitive pressures, and set up early warning systems for stress intervention. Integrating contemplative practices signifies a shift toward sustainable academic ecosystems that

ได้รับบทความ: 14 สิงหาคม 2568; **แก้ไขบทความ:** 30 กันยายน 2568; **ตอบรับตีพิมพ์:** 4 ตุลาคม 2568
Received: August 14, 2025; **Revised:** September 30, 2025; **Accepted:** October 4, 2025

emphasize human well-being alongside scholarly success. Significance: This work offers vital guidance for transforming academic cultures through evidence-based contemplative solutions, paving the way for more human-centered and sustainable higher education environments.

Keywords: Stress, Serenity, Yoga Intervention, Mental Well-being

บทคัดย่อ

วิกฤตสุขภาพจิตในการศึกษาระดับสูงได้ถึงระดับขั้นที่ไม่เคยมีมาก่อน นักศึกษาปริญญาเอกและอาจารย์รุ่นใหม่กำลังเผชิญความเครียดที่ส่งผลเสียต่อทั้งการทำงานและคุณภาพชีวิต บทความนี้สังเคราะห์หลักฐานเชิงประจักษ์เกี่ยวกับประสิทธิภาพของโยคะและการฝึกสมาธิแบบตะวันออกในการช่วยแก้ปัญหาสุขภาพจิตของกลุ่มคนในมหาวิทยาลัย ผลการค้นพบสำคัญ คือ ความเครียดในแวดวงการศึกษามีรูปแบบที่แตกต่างกันในแต่ละกลุ่ม นักศึกษาปริญญาเอกประสบปัญหาเรื่องการเงิน การศึกษา และอนาคตการงานที่เชื่อมโยงกัน ขณะที่อาจารย์รุ่นใหม่ต้องรับภาระสามด้าน คือ งานวิจัย การสอน และงานบริหาร การศึกษา พบว่า การฝึกโยคะอย่างมีระบบสามารถลดความวิตกกังวลได้เกือบร้อยละ 20 และลดความเครียดโดยรวม ร้อยละ 28 โดยการฝึกในตอนเช้าให้ผลดีที่สุดในการเพิ่มประสิทธิภาพการทำงานประจำวัน การสร้างองค์ความรู้ การศึกษานี้นำเสนอแนวคิดใหม่ที่รวมการดูแลสุขภาพจิตในสามระดับ ได้แก่ การพัฒนาตนเอง การปรับปรุงระบบองค์กร และการรวมการดูแลร่างกายกับจิตใจ แนวคิดนี้เป็นทางเลือกใหม่แทนวิธีการแบบตะวันตกที่มักจัดการแค่อาการที่พบ โดยนำเอาภูมิปัญญาตะวันออกมาช่วยดูแลทั้งร่างกายและจิตใจไปพร้อมกัน ข้อเสนอแนะเชิงปฏิบัติ มหาวิทยาลัยสามารถนำ “โยคะแบบสั้น” มาใช้ให้เข้ากับตารางงานได้ง่าย สร้างระบบประเมินผลงานที่หลากหลายเพื่อลดการแข่งขัน และจัดทำระบบเตือนภัยเพื่อช่วยเหลือผู้ที่มีปัญหาความเครียดทันท่วงที การนำโยคะและการฝึกสมาธิมาใช้แสดงให้เห็นการเปลี่ยนแปลงที่สำคัญจากสภาพแวดล้อมที่สร้างความเครียดไปสู่ระบบที่ดูแลทั้งความก้าวหน้าทางวิชาการและความเป็นอยู่ที่ดีของคน คุณค่าของงานวิชาการนี้ได้ให้แนวทางที่จำเป็นสำหรับการเปลี่ยนแปลงวัฒนธรรม การทำงานในสถาบันการศึกษาด้วยวิธีการที่มีหลักฐานรองรับ และเปิดเส้นทางสู่สภาพแวดล้อมการศึกษาที่ใส่ใจในความเป็นมนุษย์ และยั่งยืนมากขึ้น

คำสำคัญ: ความเครียด, ความสงบ, การใช้โยคะ, สุขภาพจิต

1. Introduction

The mental health crisis in higher education has reached unprecedented levels, fundamentally weakening academic productivity and

institutional sustainability. Recent data shows that 36% of doctoral students seek professional help for anxiety or depression, while 62% of early-career faculty work over 60 hours a week under chronic stress (Ministry of Education, 2024; Faculty Development Center of Tsinghua University, 2022). This widespread psychological distress directly impairs cognitive function, creativity, and research productivity, creating a vicious cycle where lower performance increases stress levels (Evans et al., 2018; Satinsky et al., 2021).

The link between emotional well-being and academic performance is a key factor in scholarly success. Chronic stress hampers essential cognitive skills needed for deep thinking, problem-solving, and innovation, while also decreasing teaching effectiveness and research quality (Kinman & Wray, 2013). When mental energy is drained by anxiety and emotional turmoil, the mental discipline required for academic excellence is greatly diminished.

Academic stress manifests through distinct patterns across scholarly populations. Doctoral students face cascading pressures, including academic uncertainties (such as publishing demands and research projects), economic vulnerabilities (like reduced income and housing issues), and career anxieties (such as employment prospects and professional ranking) (Sun & Wang, 2021). This creates what researchers call a "transmission characteristic," where difficulties in one area amplify challenges in others. Early-career faculty navigate a "triple pressure paradigm" involving research evaluation demands, teaching innovation expectations, and administrative duties (Li & Bao, 2017). The modern "publish or perish" culture, along with competitive funding environments, has fostered unsustainable performance expectations across multiple domains.

Traditional Western methods for managing academic stress, which include individual resilience training, cognitive-behavioral interventions, and pharmaceutical treatments, often address symptoms instead of root causes, offering temporary relief rather than lasting change (Goyal et al., 2014). These segmented approaches ignore the deep connection between mind, body, and environment that Eastern philosophical traditions have recognized for thousands of years.

The rise of contemplative practices, especially yoga- based interventions, marks a fundamental shift toward integrated approaches that address academic stress through multiple pathways at once. Unlike traditional methods that focus on cognitive or behavioral symptoms, yoga interventions operate through dual mechanisms. Tripathi et al. (2018) found that physiological regulation (lowering cortisol levels and improving heart rate variability) and psychological change (boosting emotional regulation, self- awareness, and resilience) happen simultaneously. Evidence shows that structured yoga programs can cut anxiety by 28% , boost cognitive performance by 23, and significantly improve life satisfaction among university students.

The urgency of addressing academic mental health goes beyond individual well- being to include the sustainability of higher education. When scholars face psychological distress that leads to decreased productivity, early career departures, or lower research quality, entire academic institutions are impacted. On the other hand, institutions that incorporate contemplative practices report better faculty retention, increased research productivity, and a more positive campus environment (Health Center of Tsinghua University, 2023).

This article synthesizes emerging evidence on Eastern contemplative practices in academic mental health. By examining stress patterns across groups of doctoral students and early- career faculty, we propose a comprehensive, three- dimensional framework that includes individual transformation, organizational reform, and mind– body synergy. Our analysis challenges traditional assumptions about academic excellence, presenting evidence-based pathways toward sustainable, human- centered models of scholarly success that emphasize both intellectual rigor and psychological well-being.

2. Manifestations of Academic Stress in Academic Populations

2.1 Doctoral Students: The Cascade Effect

The doctoral experience is one of the most psychologically demanding stages of academic life, characterized by what research describes as a unique “transmission characteristic” pattern of stress (Sun & Wang, 2021). Unlike other professional training programs with clear timelines and expectations,

doctoral education creates a perfect storm of academic, financial, and career pressures that escalate exponentially over time.

A detailed analysis of 938 doctoral students from five universities in Jiangsu Province uncovered concerning patterns of psychological distress that demand urgent attention. The study revealed that 51.17% of participants were not depressed, but a worrying 16.31% exhibited moderate to severe depressive symptoms requiring professional help (Sun & Wang, 2021). Notably, the Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS) mean score was 52.37, dangerously close to the clinical cutoff of 53 for depression diagnosis. The hierarchical structure of stress sources for doctoral students presents a compelling picture of modern academic pressures. Academic concerns dominated the stress landscape, with a frequency of 69.94 % and a mean impact of 3.03, including the constant demands of publishing papers, managing research projects, and collecting thesis data (Sun & Wang, 2021). However, the data present a sobering reality: while economic factors ranked fourth in frequency (53.91 %), their impact severity was the second highest (2.82), highlighting how financial vulnerabilities such as income reduction from leaving employment to pursue doctoral studies, housing purchase preparations, and general financial constraints generate significant psychological burdens that extend well beyond campus boundaries.

Career development stress, experienced by 57.58 % of participants, is directly linked to "unfavorable employment prospects," which reflects the increasingly competitive academic job market where traditional tenure-track roles have become rare commodities (Sun & Wang, 2021). This economic situation forces many doctoral students to face the possibility that their significant educational investment may not provide proportional career benefits, leading to existential worries about their future viability.

Gender and disciplinary differences revealed additional layers of complexity. Female doctoral students consistently scored higher on depression measures (53.23 %) compared to their male counterparts (51.68 %), potentially reflecting societal role expectations and unequal family responsibilities (Sun & Wang, 2021). Medical doctoral students had the highest depression scores (55.79 %), significantly surpassing those in humanities (49.99 %) and science/ engineering (52.34 %), which may be linked to longer academic

timelines, rigorous clinical training demands, and the emotional burden of doctor-patient relationships.

In conclusion, doctoral students face significant stress from academics, finances, and career prospects. Although more than half are not depressed, 16.31% experience moderate to severe depression. Female and medical students tend to have higher depression scores than their peers in other fields.

2.2 Early-Career Faculty: The Triple Pressure Dynamics

Early-career faculty members face what researchers call a "triple pressure paradigm" an unprecedented convergence of research assessment demands, teaching innovation expectations, and administrative responsibilities that creates unsustainable performance requirements (Li & Bao, 2017). This multi-dimensional stress profile differs fundamentally from the experiences of doctoral students, reflecting the institutional pressures inherent in modern university employment structures.

Research assessment pressure manifests through highly competitive metrics: project application success rates below 5%, implicit journal exclusions for authors below associate professor rank, and the stark reality that only 16% of young faculty in western universities independently manage research projects (Li & Bao, 2017). These statistics highlight a system where academic survival depends on achieving extraordinary success rates that would be considered unrealistic in nearly any other professional setting. Teaching responsibilities increase these pressures through quantification management systems requiring annual loads of over 300 class hours, with 44% of young faculty trapped in the 200–400-hour range, which suppresses innovation through repetitive workload demands (Li & Bao, 2017). This creates a pedagogical paradox where those responsible for inspiring the next generation of scholars are constrained by administrative requirements that prevent meaningful educational engagement.

Administrative affairs take up about 30% of work time through various tasks such as student management, institutional service duties, and academic committee obligations that break up already limited time resources (Li & Bao, 2017). A revealing time allocation study from a provincial university showed that only 28% of young faculty members' work hours supported core

academic research, while administrative duties required 2. 3 times more attention than similar roles in developed countries.

The structural contradictions within contemporary evaluation systems worsen these pressures through research-focused promotion criteria that fundamentally misalign with institutional needs. Requiring faculty to complete two national-level projects within five years and publish at least three high-impact papers for associate professor promotion forces them to dedicate over 60% of their energy to research output, while teaching quality evaluation remains superficial, emphasizing student ratings rather than meaningful pedagogical innovation (Li & Bao, 2017).

Organizational support deficiencies further increase stress: 72% of young faculty lack systematic teaching training, 83% report inadequate research team support, and only 12% of universities provide specialized psychological counseling services for faculty, with coverage below 30% (Li & Bao, 2017). This support gap leads to reliance on unhealthy coping mechanisms, with an average workweek of 64 hours, 22% sleeping less than six hours per night, and 68% developing occupational health issues, including cervical and lumbar spine problems.

In conclusion, early-career faculty face overwhelming triple pressures from research, teaching, and administrative duties. Limited institutional support, heavy workloads, and health risks worsen their challenges, highlighting the urgent need for systemic reform to support sustainable academic careers and well-being.

2.3 Cross-Group Vulnerabilities and Patterns

Despite different stress profiles, doctoral students and early career faculty share core vulnerabilities that suggest common intervention opportunities. Both groups face what can be called “temporal displacement anxiety,” which is uncertainty about future security that affects their present effectiveness. For doctoral students, this appears as fears of graduation delays (with 37.50 % depression rates among sixth-year students), while faculty deal with promotion assessment pressures that lead to ongoing job insecurity (Sun & Wang, 2021; Li & Bao, 2017).

Economic pressures cause parallel stress cascades in both groups. Doctoral students earning less than 2,000 yuan per month have depression rates seven times higher than those making over 20,000 yuan, while young faculty face promotion requirements that effectively require unpaid overtime to meet research productivity standards (Sun & Wang, 2021; Li & Bao, 2017). These financial stressors go beyond personal hardship to highlight systemic undervaluation of intellectual labor characteristic of modern higher education economics.

Most significantly, both populations experience what researchers identify as "cognitive overload syndrome": the psychological impossibility of excelling across multiple demanding domains while maintaining personal well-being. This syndrome suggests that traditional approaches focusing on individual resilience training may be fundamentally inadequate for addressing systemic pressures that exceed normal human adaptive capacity.

In conclusion, both doctoral students and early-career faculty face issues like temporal displacement anxiety, financial stress, and cognitive overload. These common vulnerabilities expose systemic flaws in higher education, emphasizing the need for structural reforms beyond relying on individual resilience.

3. Eastern Contemplative Practices for Academic Well-being

3.1 Mind-Body Integration Paradigm

Eastern contemplative practices, especially yoga-based interventions, provide a groundbreaking alternative to traditional Western stress management methods by addressing the core connection between mental, physical, and spiritual health. Unlike typical therapeutic approaches that often treat psychological symptoms separately from physical ones, yoga works through what researchers call "dual mechanisms" of holistic human transformation (Tripathi et al., 2018).

The physiological pathway shows impressive accuracy in targeting academic stress at its biological source. Pranayama breathing training can lower cortisol levels by 56%, directly preventing the overactivation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis that is typical of chronic academic stress (Tripathi et al., 2018). This hormonal balance creates ripple effects across various body systems, providing long-lasting relief rather than just temporary symptom relief.

Inverted postures, such as shoulder stands (Sarvangasana), boost cerebrospinal fluid circulation, aiding in the removal of amyloid proteins and improving neurocognitive function, which is especially important for academic populations whose work requires sustained mental clarity and innovative thinking (Tripathi et al., 2018). These practices essentially act as biological "reset" mechanisms that restore optimal brain function affected by chronic stress.

The psychological transformation pathway operates through prefrontal cortex activation during Surya Namaskar practice, enhancing emotional regulation skills and reducing anxiety scale scores by 28% (Tripathi et al., 2018). Neuroimaging studies indicate that eight weeks of consistent yoga training can decrease amygdala volume by 10%, which is directly associated with lower stress-related emotional responses. This finding suggests that yoga changes brain structure to improve resilience.

In conclusion, yoga-based practices offer dual mechanisms of physiological and psychological transformation that reduce academic stress, build resilience, and reshape brain function, showing their effectiveness as a holistic alternative to traditional stress management methods in higher education settings.

3.2 Evidence-Based Academic Yoga Programs

The development of tailored yoga programs for academics marks a major step forward in contemplative intervention design. The "22-minute golden combination" program, validated through randomized controlled trials with 200 college students, offers a repeatable framework that fits the specific time limits and stress patterns typical of academic life (Tripathi et al., 2018).

This evidence-based protocol incorporates six core practices carefully ordered for optimal effect. Kapalbhati Kriya involves three minutes of quick abdominal breathing that energizes the nervous system and significantly enhances focus, addressing attention issues often seen during stressful academic times. Tadasana includes two minutes of basic standing exercises that boost body awareness and correct postural misalignments caused by long hours at a desk, providing physical stability to support mental balance.

Bhujangasana involves two minutes of gentle backbending that specifically targets neck and shoulder tension accumulated during extended

reading and computer work, while opening the chest to facilitate deeper breathing. Ardha Matsyendrasana requires two minutes of seated rotation that releases muscular tension throughout the back and supports digestive health, addressing gastrointestinal issues common among stress-affected academic populations. Balasana provides three minutes of restorative forward folding that offers deep relaxation and anxiety relief, creating a safe space for nervous system recovery.

Nadi Shodhana concludes with ten minutes of advanced breath regulation that balances the left and right brain hemispheres while regulating autonomic nervous system function, creating optimal conditions for both analytical thinking and creative insight. The program's effectiveness shows remarkable accuracy in targeting academic stress patterns. State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) scores dropped by 19.7 points among participants, with disadvantaged students experiencing greater stress reduction (27.3%) compared to non-disadvantaged groups (18.6%) (Tripathi et al., 2018).

Research on temporal optimization shows that morning practice sessions produce the best results, boosting daily work efficiency by 23%. This aligns well with academic schedules where early-day cognitive clarity helps maintain strong intellectual performance (Tripathi et al., 2018).

3.3 Fragmented Yoga Implementation

The development of "fragmented yoga" strategies marks a groundbreaking adaptation of traditional contemplative practices to the specific needs of academic professional life. Instead of requiring lengthy practice sessions that interfere with faculty schedules, this approach incorporates short but effective interventions throughout the workday, maximizing stress relief with minimal time commitment.

Research break interventions involve three-minute Bhramari Pranayama sessions during research activities that can boost heart rate variability by 32%, quickly restoring cognitive resources depleted by intensive mental effort (Li & Bao, 2017). This technique offers immediate nervous system recalibration, allowing sustained focus without the cumulative fatigue typical of long research sessions.

Teaching transition practices include ten-minute spinal twist routines between classes, effectively relieving physical tension from prolonged sitting and reducing electromyography levels by 24%, while also refreshing mental alertness for upcoming teaching duties (Li & Bao, 2017). These short breaks turn potentially draining teaching hours into chances for ongoing physical and mental rejuvenation.

Evening recovery protocols combine Savasana with guided meditation before bedtime to cut sleep onset time by 50% while greatly enhancing sleep quality, addressing insomnia patterns common among academically stressed faculty (Li & Bao, 2017). Quality sleep restoration is especially critical for faculty managing the complex cognitive demands of research, teaching, and service responsibilities.

A pilot project at one university showed the powerful impact of partial yoga integration. Faculty participants saw an 18.5% drop in job burnout scores and a 22% rise in job satisfaction, indicating that short contemplative practices can lead to significant improvements in overall professional well-being (Li & Bao, 2017).

In conclusion, the "22-minute golden combination" yoga program effectively reduces academic stress, improves focus, and supports physical and mental well-being. Its structured, evidence-based practices provide significant anxiety relief, especially helping disadvantaged students and enhancing cognitive performance in morning sessions.

3.4 Neuroplasticity and Improving Performance

The connection between contemplative practice and improved academic performance occurs through various neuroplasticity mechanisms that directly address the cognitive challenges faced by modern students. Consistent yoga practice promotes neurogenesis in the hippocampus, a brain region vital for learning and memory, while also decreasing inflammation markers that hinder cognitive function.

The default mode network, a brain system linked to mind-wandering and self-referential thinking, shows decreased activation after contemplative training. This allows for greater focus on the present moment and reduces rumination patterns that often trouble anxious academics. This neurological

change supports sustained attention needed for in-depth scholarly work while lowering mental chatter that can interfere with creative problem-solving.

Executive function improvements from yoga training include enhanced working memory, better cognitive flexibility, and stronger inhibitory control. These cognitive skills directly lead to improved research abilities, more effective teaching, and better stress management under pressure. These neurological changes suggest that contemplative practices do not just provide stress relief but also boost the core cognitive skills needed for academic success.

In conclusion, contemplative practices like yoga boost academic performance by enhancing neuroplasticity, strengthening executive functions, and decreasing mind-wandering. These neurological benefits improve focus, creativity, teaching, research skills, and stress management, highlighting their value beyond just stress relief.

4. Conclusion

This analysis shows that Eastern contemplative practices, especially yoga-based interventions, provide transformative solutions to the mental health crisis in higher education. In this setting, 16.31% of doctoral students need immediate psychological help, and early-career faculty work 64-hour weeks under unsustainable stress (Sun & Wang, 2021; Li & Bao, 2017). Evidence indicates that structured yoga protocols can reduce anxiety scores by 19.7 points, boost work efficiency by 23%, and lower faculty burnout by 18.5%, while increasing job satisfaction by 22% (Tripathi et al., 2018; Li & Bao, 2017). These findings challenge core assumptions about academic excellence, showing that contemplative practices improve rather than hinder scholarly performance through integrated mind-body approaches that address both physiological stress and cognitive function. Implementing "fragmented yoga" strategies and institutional reforms such as diversified evaluation systems, early-warning mechanisms, and comprehensive wellness support marks a paradigm shift away from stress-driven academic cultures toward sustainable models that value both intellectual rigor and human well-being. Higher education institutions must urgently adopt this evidence-based approach, recognizing that supporting scholar wellness is not just a humanitarian duty but a strategic move

to stay competitive in the global knowledge economy. Ultimately, this will foster environments where outstanding research and teaching flourish by nurturing whole human beings rather than sacrificing well- being for productivity.

5. New body of knowledge

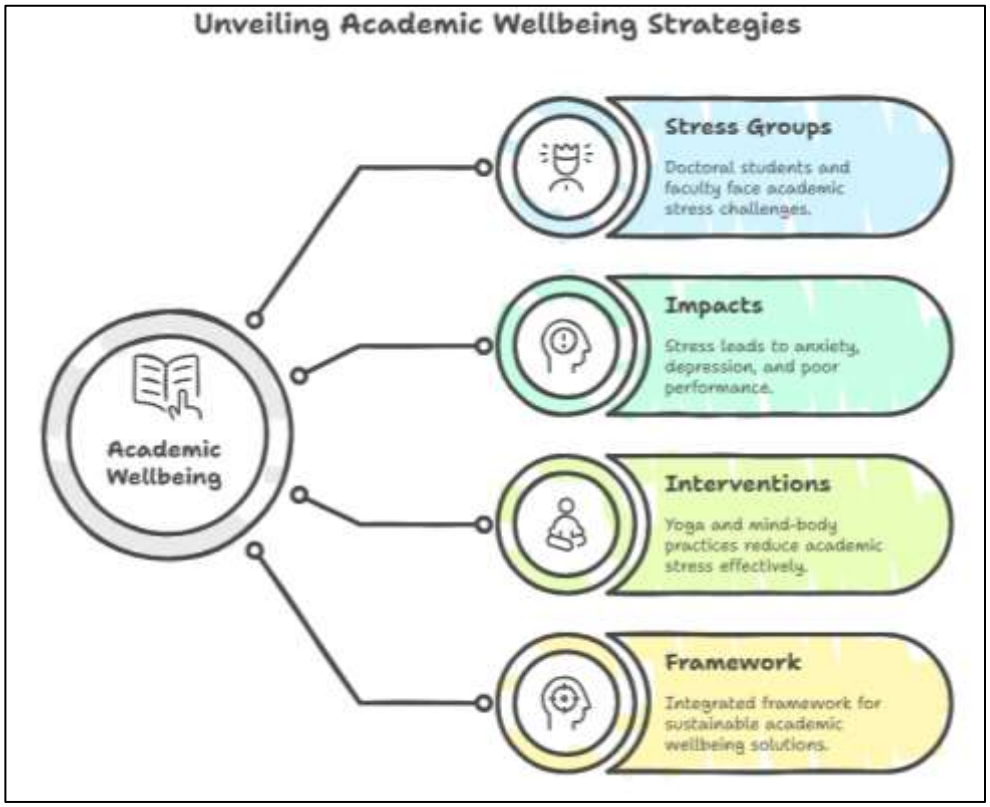


Figure 1 Unveiling Academic Wellbeing Strategies

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