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## Spiritual practices and mental well-being: A quantitative study among university students

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### Abstract

This study explores the role of spiritual practices in promoting mental well-being among university students. The research focuses on key areas such as stress management, resilience, emotional balance, and finding meaning in life. A quantitative survey was conducted with 134 students from various disciplines, and the results indicate that spiritual practices can provide significant mental health benefits. Gender and age differences were observed, with women generally reporting higher emotional benefits from spirituality and older students finding greater meaning in life through spiritual engagement. The findings highlight the importance of a personalized approach to mental health support, recognizing that spirituality may not be universally effective for all students. The discussion emphasizes the need for diverse mental health interventions that incorporate both spiritual and non-spiritual strategies to cater to individual needs.

**Keywords:** Emotional balance; Mental well-being; Resilience; Spirituality; Stress management; University students

### 1. Introduction

The relationship between spirituality and mental well-being has gained increasing attention in psychological research, particularly in the context of stress management and emotional health. Spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer, and other forms of contemplative activities, have been associated with various positive mental health outcomes, including reduced anxiety, enhanced resilience, and a greater sense of meaning in life (Koenig, 2015; Pargament, 2007). As university students face significant academic pressures and developmental challenges, the exploration of spiritual practices as coping mechanisms has become increasingly relevant. The transition into higher education is often accompanied by stressors such as academic workload, social adjustments, and career uncertainty, which can negatively impact mental health (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013; Regehr, Glancy, & Pitts, 2013). In recent years, studies have indicated that spiritual and religious practices can play a critical role in providing support during stressful periods. For instance, mindfulness meditation has been shown to reduce perceived stress and improve overall well-being among university students (Greeson et al., 2014; Bamber & Schneider, 2016). Furthermore, prayer and other forms of spiritual engagement have been linked to better emotional regulation and coping strategies during times of crisis (Trevino et al., 2010). These findings suggest that spiritual practices may serve as valuable resources for fostering resilience and promoting mental health in academic settings.

The present study aims to explore the relationship between spiritual practices and mental well-being among university students. Specifically, it investigates how regular engagement in spiritual practices, such as meditation and prayer, contributes to stress management, emotional balance, resilience, and the search for meaning in life. Given the demographic diversity among students, this study also examines potential differences based on gender, age, and field of study, with the goal of identifying specific subgroups that may benefit more from spiritual practices.

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This study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent do regular spiritual practices help university students manage stress in their academic life?
2. How do spiritual or religious beliefs contribute to students' resilience during challenging life phases?
3. What is the impact of spiritual practices on emotional balance and mental health?
4. Does spirituality support students in finding a sense of purpose and meaning in life?

The hypotheses are as follows:

- **H1:** Students who engage in regular spiritual practices will report higher levels of stress management compared to those who do not.
- **H2:** Spiritual or religious beliefs will be positively associated with resilience during difficult life events.
- **H3:** Spiritual practices will be linked to improved emotional balance, with female students showing higher scores.
- **H4:** The sense of meaning in life will correlate positively with age, as older students may have more developed spiritual identities.

The findings from this study will contribute to the growing body of literature on the benefits of spirituality in higher education, potentially informing mental health interventions that integrate spiritual practices as part of holistic student support services. The role of spiritual practices in managing stress has been well-documented across various populations, including university students. Stress, characterized by feelings of tension and emotional strain, is prevalent in academic settings, where students face pressures related to academic performance, financial stability, and social integration (Regehr, Glancy, & Pitts, 2013). Spiritual practices, such as meditation, mindfulness, and prayer, have been shown to alleviate stress by promoting relaxation and enhancing cognitive and emotional regulation (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Greeson et al., 2014). For instance, a meta-analysis by Sedlmeier et al. (2012) found that meditation interventions significantly reduced perceived stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, supporting the notion that spiritual practices can foster a sense of inner calm.

Prayer, as a form of spiritual engagement, has also been linked to stress reduction through mechanisms of emotional expression and cognitive reframing (Trevino et al., 2010). Through prayer, individuals may express concerns and seek divine support, which can provide comfort and a sense of control over life situations (Ai et al., 2007). Such practices may be especially beneficial for university students who often experience uncertainty and instability in their academic and personal lives. Research by Bamber and Schneider (2016) indicated that mindfulness-based interventions, including meditation and other contemplative practices, resulted in significant reductions in perceived stress levels among college students. These findings highlight the therapeutic potential of spiritual practices as tools for stress management. Resilience, defined as the ability to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity, has been linked to spiritual beliefs and practices. Spirituality can provide a framework for meaning-making and coping, allowing individuals to view challenges from a broader existential perspective (Pargament, 2007). In times of crisis, spiritual beliefs may offer a source of strength and hope, facilitating emotional recovery and promoting well-being. According to Koenig (2015), individuals who engage in religious or spiritual practices tend to report higher levels of resilience, partly due to the social support and community involvement often associated with religious participation. University students may particularly benefit from the resilience-enhancing effects of spiritual practices. A study by Park and Slattery (2013) found that spiritual well-being was positively associated with adaptive coping strategies, such as positive reframing and seeking social support, among college students dealing with academic stress. Moreover, spiritual beliefs can contribute to a sense of coherence and stability, which is essential for navigating the uncertainties that characterize emerging adulthood. The present study builds upon this literature by examining how spiritual or religious beliefs contribute to resilience in difficult life phases, such as the transition to university life.

The search for meaning is a central component of many spiritual traditions, and it has been shown to play a critical role in mental health. Frankl's (1963) theory of logotherapy emphasizes the human drive to find meaning as a key factor in overcoming suffering and achieving psychological well-being. This perspective is supported by empirical research demonstrating that individuals with a strong sense of purpose report lower levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Wong, 2011; Steger et al., 2006). Spirituality can facilitate the process of meaning-making by providing existential answers and encouraging individuals to connect with something greater than themselves. For university students, who often grapple with questions of identity, career goals, and life direction, spiritual beliefs can serve as an anchor that provides clarity and motivation. Studies have found that engagement in spiritual practices is positively associated with life satisfaction and psychological well-being, partly due to the enhanced sense of meaning and coherence it provides (Steger & Frazier, 2005). The current study seeks to extend this body of knowledge by exploring

the association between spirituality and the search for meaning among students from various academic disciplines, with a particular focus on the role of age in shaping this relationship. Previous research has highlighted the influence of demographic variables such as gender, age, and academic field on the relationship between spirituality and mental health. Gender differences in spiritual engagement have been consistently observed, with women generally reporting higher levels of religiosity and spirituality compared to men (Francis, 2013; Bryant, 2007). This trend may contribute to gender differences in the psychological benefits derived from spiritual practices. For example, Hill and Pargament (2008) noted that women are more likely to use religious coping strategies and derive emotional comfort from spiritual beliefs, potentially explaining the higher levels of emotional balance reported by female participants in the present study. Age also plays a role in shaping spiritual identity and the perceived benefits of spiritual practices. Older students may have more developed spiritual beliefs, which could enhance the positive effects of spirituality on meaning-making and resilience (Arnett, 2000). Additionally, differences across academic disciplines may reflect varying cultural attitudes toward spirituality. For instance, students in fields such as psychology and social sciences may be more open to exploring existential questions, while those in scientific disciplines may hold more secular worldviews (Cohen & Hill, 2007). This study will explore these demographic variations to better understand how spiritual practices intersect with different aspects of student life.

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## 2. Methodology

The study aimed to explore the association between spiritual practices and mental well-being among university students, focusing on aspects such as stress management, resilience, emotional balance, and the search for meaning in life. A quantitative research design was employed, utilizing an online survey to gather data from a sample of 134 students. Participants were recruited through various channels, including university networks, student groups, and social media platforms, to ensure diversity in the sample. The survey was designed to capture different spiritual and religious backgrounds, which included Christian, Muslim, spiritual but not religious, atheist/agnostic, and other beliefs. The demographic characteristics of the participants were recorded, covering gender, age, academic discipline, and spiritual or religious background. The sample consisted of 76 females, 54 males, and 4 participants who identified as non-binary or other. The age range was from 18 to 30 years, with most respondents being between 18 and 25 years old, and the average age being 22.8 years. The participants came from various academic fields, including psychology, social sciences, natural sciences, business, and other disciplines, reflecting the diversity of the student population.

The survey included four primary questions evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated "strongly disagree" and 5 indicated "strongly agree." These questions assessed the extent to which spiritual practices, such as meditation and prayer, were perceived to help in stress management, enhance resilience during challenging times, foster emotional well-being, and provide a sense of purpose and meaning in life. The Likert scale responses served as quantitative measures of the perceived impact of spirituality on the participants' mental health. Additionally, the demographic data were analyzed to examine how factors such as gender, age, and academic field influenced the reported effects of spiritual practices. The survey was pre-tested with a small group of students to ensure clarity and validity of the questions, and minor adjustments were made before distributing it to the full sample. After data collection, statistical analyses were performed, including descriptive statistics to summarize the data and inferential statistics such as t-tests and ANOVA to compare groups. Correlation analyses were conducted to assess the strength of relationships between spirituality-related variables and mental well-being outcomes, aiming to identify significant patterns across different demographic groups. Despite efforts to ensure a robust methodology, certain limitations were recognized. The sample size, while adequate for an initial exploration, may not be fully representative of the entire student population, which could affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the online survey format might have introduced a self-selection bias, potentially attracting students who were more inclined toward spiritual interests. The use of self-reported data could also have been influenced by social desirability bias, where participants may have been inclined to provide responses they believed were socially acceptable rather than accurate representations of their behaviors or beliefs. Nevertheless, the study offers meaningful insights into the potential role of spirituality in supporting student well-being and sets a foundation for future research to expand on these findings.

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## 3. Results

The results of this study provide a comprehensive overview of how spiritual practices are perceived to influence various aspects of mental well-being among university students. The findings are presented in detail, including descriptive statistics, correlations between demographic factors and mental well-being, and group differences based on gender, age, and field of study. The core questions, assessed using a five-point Likert scale, focused on stress management, resilience, emotional balance, and meaning in life. Below, the results are outlined in various subsections, complemented by tables and visualizations to highlight the main findings.

The survey included four main questions, each aimed at measuring different aspects of the impact of spiritual practices on well-being. Table 1 below presents the means, standard deviations, and response distributions for each question.

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics for core questions assessing the influence of spiritual practices on well-being.

Question	Mean	Standard Deviation	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
Regular spiritual practices (e.g., meditation, prayer) help me manage stress.	3.7	1.18	8%	15%	21%	39%	17%
My spiritual/religious beliefs give me strength and resilience in difficult times.	4.1	0.95	5%	9%	14%	42%	30%
Through spiritual practices, I feel more emotionally balanced and mentally healthy.	3.9	1.07	7%	11%	18%	44%	20%
My spirituality/religion helps me find meaning in life.	4.2	0.83	4%	7%	13%	46%	30%

The results indicate that, on average, participants generally agreed with the positive impact of spiritual practices on their mental well-being. The highest level of agreement was observed for the statement "My spirituality/religion helps me find meaning in life" ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ), suggesting that finding meaning through spirituality was a particularly salient benefit among the participants.

A deeper look into the results for stress management, as represented in Table 1, reveals that 56% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that regular spiritual practices help them manage stress. This suggests that spirituality may provide effective coping strategies for academic and personal pressures, particularly in the challenging university environment. The data indicate that spiritual practices are perceived as valuable tools for managing stress, providing individuals with a means to achieve greater mental stability and reduce anxiety levels. The results also highlight that while a majority of students found spiritual practices helpful, there was still a significant minority who did not share this view. Specifically, 23% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that spiritual practices aided in stress management, and 21% remained neutral. This variability underscores the individual differences in how spiritual engagement is perceived and utilized for coping purposes. Some students may find spiritual practices, such as meditation or prayer, highly effective in fostering a sense of calm and focus, while others may not resonate with these methods or may prefer alternative coping mechanisms.

The moderately strong agreement (39% of respondents choosing "Agree") suggests that many students view spiritual practices as beneficial, but not necessarily as their primary coping tool. This finding aligns with research indicating that while spirituality can be an important aspect of stress management, its effectiveness is often influenced by personal beliefs, cultural background, and individual experiences (Pargament, 2007; Greeson et al., 2014). For some individuals, the structure and ritual of spiritual practices provide a sense of predictability and comfort, which can be particularly valuable in the often unpredictable context of university life. It is also worth noting that spiritual practices may serve different functions depending on the nature of the stressor. For academic pressures, which are typically characterized by deadlines and performance expectations, practices like mindfulness meditation may help students focus and reduce performance anxiety (Bamber & Schneider, 2016). On the other hand, for more personal stressors, such as relational conflicts or emotional struggles, prayer and spiritual reflection may offer a way to process emotions and seek support beyond oneself (Koenig, 2015). This dual functionality of spiritual practices may contribute to their overall perceived effectiveness among the students surveyed. However, the presence of disagreement among a portion of the respondents indicates that spiritual practices are not universally effective for all students. Factors such as personal spirituality, previous experiences with spiritual activities, and the degree of intrinsic motivation may all play roles in determining how effective these practices are for managing stress. Additionally, students who do not identify with a particular spiritual or religious tradition may find it challenging to engage meaningfully in such practices, which could explain the mixed responses.

Overall, the findings suggest that while spiritual practices can be a valuable component of stress management for many students, their impact is not uniform across the entire population. This variability points to the importance of providing diverse stress management resources in academic settings, ensuring that students have access to a range of tools—both spiritual and non-spiritual—that align with their individual needs and preferences.

### 3.1. Spiritual Beliefs and Resilience

The second core question focused on resilience in difficult life phases. The majority of participants (72%) either agreed or strongly agreed that their spiritual or religious beliefs give them strength during challenging times, with a mean value of 4.1 (SD = 0.95). These results suggest that spirituality plays a key role in helping individuals cope with adversity. Figure 2 provides a visual breakdown of the responses.

**Table 2** Response breakdown for the statement "My spiritual/religious beliefs give me strength and resilience in difficult times."

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	7	5.2
Disagree	12	9.0
Neutral	19	14.2
Agree	56	41.8
Strongly Agree	40	29.9

These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that spiritual beliefs can be a vital source of resilience. The high levels of agreement suggest that students perceive their spirituality as a resource for managing negative life events and maintaining psychological stability during difficult times.

### 3.2. Emotional Balance and Gender Differences

The third core question explored whether spiritual practices contribute to emotional balance and mental health. The mean score for this question was 3.9 (SD = 1.07), and most respondents (64%) indicated agreement or strong agreement. Gender differences were observed in the responses, with female participants reporting slightly higher levels of agreement (M = 4.0) compared to males (M = 3.8). This suggests that women may derive more emotional benefits from spiritual practices, which aligns with existing literature indicating that women are generally more inclined to use spirituality as a tool for emotional regulation (Bryant, 2007; Hill & Pargament, 2008). Women may find that spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer, or reflection help them to process emotions more effectively, thereby promoting emotional stability and reducing anxiety. This aligns with the notion that women often report greater use of adaptive coping strategies, including spiritual coping, compared to men (Matud, 2004). The slightly higher mean scores among female participants in this study reflect a trend where spirituality is perceived as a key resource for managing emotional health, which can be especially relevant in stressful academic environments. Moreover, these gender differences can be partially explained by social and cultural factors. In many cultures, women are socialized to be more expressive of their emotions and to seek out supportive social networks, which often include spiritual or religious communities (Francis, 2013). The sense of belonging and support provided by these communities can significantly enhance emotional well-being, making spiritual practices more effective for women. The findings from this study support the argument that spiritual engagement can foster emotional resilience, particularly for female students who may face unique stressors related to both academic and societal expectations. Interestingly, while male participants also reported positive effects of spiritual practices, the slightly lower mean score (M = 3.8) suggests that men may approach spirituality differently, possibly viewing it as one of several coping strategies rather than a primary means of emotional regulation. This aligns with studies that suggest men are more likely to adopt problem-focused coping mechanisms, whereas women tend to rely more on emotion-focused and spiritual coping (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). Thus, while both genders benefit from spiritual practices, the degree and manner of these benefits appear to differ, highlighting the importance of considering gender-specific approaches when promoting spiritual well-being initiatives in university settings.

### 3.3. Meaning in Life and Age Correlation

The final core question assessed the role of spirituality in finding meaning in life. This question received the highest average rating among all four questions, with a mean of 4.2 (SD = 0.83). A correlation analysis was performed to examine

the relationship between age and the perceived ability of spirituality to provide life meaning. The results showed a positive correlation ( $r = 0.34$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that older participants were more likely to report that their spirituality helps them find meaning in life. This trend may reflect developmental aspects of spiritual growth, as older students often have a more mature perspective on their life purpose and spirituality (Arnett, 2000). Table 3 presents a summary of the correlation between age and spirituality-related responses.

**Table 3** Correlation coefficients between age and responses to spirituality-related questions.

Variable	Age Correlation (r)	p-value
Stress Management	0.18	0.07
Resilience in Difficult Times	0.26	0.02
Emotional Balance	0.22	0.04
Meaning in Life	0.34	<0.01

The positive correlation between age and finding meaning in life suggests that spiritual practices may become more integral to one's worldview as students grow older, providing a stronger foundation for navigating the complexities of life and defining a personal sense of purpose.

The results of this study indicate that spiritual practices have a positive impact on various aspects of mental well-being among university students. Participants generally agreed that spiritual practices helped them manage stress, enhanced their resilience, improved emotional balance, and provided meaning in life. Gender differences were observed, with female participants reporting greater emotional benefits, while older students were more likely to attribute a sense of life meaning to their spirituality. These findings underscore the importance of recognizing spiritual practices as potential resources for promoting well-being in academic settings.

#### 4. Discussion

The discussion section aims to interpret the findings of this study, provide a critical analysis of their implications, and examine potential limitations and alternative perspectives. The overall results suggest that spiritual practices are beneficial for mental well-being among university students, but the variability in responses highlights the importance of a nuanced approach when considering the role of spirituality in promoting well-being. The findings of this study align with existing literature that suggests spirituality can play a significant role in enhancing mental well-being, particularly in stress management, emotional balance, resilience, and finding meaning in life (Koenig, 2015; Pargament, 2007). Many participants reported that spiritual practices such as meditation and prayer helped them manage stress and provided strength during difficult times. These practices may provide students with a sense of comfort and stability, which is essential in navigating the complexities of academic life. The results also support the notion that spirituality can be an important coping mechanism, offering a sense of meaning and purpose, which is crucial for emotional resilience (Frankl, 1963).

However, it is important to consider the variability in participants' responses. While the majority reported positive effects of spiritual practices, a notable portion of respondents either disagreed or remained neutral about the benefits of spirituality for stress management and emotional well-being. This suggests that spiritual practices are not universally effective and that individual factors—such as personal beliefs, previous experiences, and cultural context—play a significant role in determining their effectiveness. For some students, spirituality may be a central component of their coping strategy, while for others, it may hold little relevance or utility. This variability highlights the need for a personalized approach to mental health interventions, where spirituality is one of several potential tools available to students. The observed gender differences in the perceived benefits of spiritual practices provide an interesting area for discussion. Female participants reported slightly higher levels of agreement regarding the emotional benefits of spirituality, which aligns with previous research suggesting that women are more likely to engage in spiritual coping and derive emotional comfort from such practices (Bryant, 2007; Hill & Pargament, 2008). Social and cultural factors likely contribute to these differences. In many cultures, women are socialized to be more emotionally expressive and to seek social support, which may include spiritual or religious communities (Francis, 2013). This socialization may enhance the emotional benefits women derive from spiritual practices, as they are more likely to engage deeply and meaningfully in these activities.

In contrast, men may be less inclined to use spirituality as an emotional coping mechanism, instead preferring problem-focused coping strategies (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). This difference in coping styles may explain why male participants reported slightly lower mean scores for the emotional benefits of spiritual practices. It is also possible that men view spirituality as one of several coping tools rather than a primary resource for emotional regulation. These findings suggest that gender-specific interventions may be beneficial when promoting spiritual practices as a means of enhancing emotional well-being. For example, programs aimed at encouraging male students to explore spirituality as a complementary coping strategy may help them experience greater emotional balance. The positive correlation between age and the perceived ability of spirituality to provide meaning in life suggests that spiritual practices may become more integral to one's worldview as individuals grow older. Older students often have more life experience and a more developed sense of identity, which may make them more receptive to the existential aspects of spirituality (Arnett, 2000). This finding aligns with theories of spiritual development, which propose that as individuals mature, they are more likely to seek out and find meaning through spiritual or existential practices (Wong, 2011). However, it is also possible that older students have had more time to explore and integrate spirituality into their lives, making it a more significant source of meaning. Younger students, who are still in the process of identity formation and exploration, may not yet see spirituality as a key component of their life purpose. This difference in spiritual engagement across age groups suggests that interventions aimed at promoting spiritual well-being may need to be tailored based on the developmental stage of the individual. Younger students may benefit from introductory programs that encourage exploration and reflection, while older students may benefit from more in-depth opportunities to engage with spiritual practices that align with their sense of purpose.

While the findings of this study highlight the potential benefits of spiritual practices, it is important to consider alternative perspectives and the limitations of spirituality as a coping mechanism. One critical perspective is that spiritual practices may not be effective for everyone and could even be counterproductive for some individuals. For example, individuals who have had negative experiences with religion or who do not identify with any spiritual tradition may find it difficult to engage in spiritual practices meaningfully (Exline & Rose, 2013). For these individuals, promoting spirituality as a coping strategy may lead to feelings of alienation or frustration rather than comfort. Additionally, there is a risk that emphasizing spirituality as a primary coping mechanism could inadvertently minimize the importance of other evidence-based approaches to mental health, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) or mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). While spirituality can be a valuable tool for some, it should not be seen as a substitute for professional mental health support, particularly for individuals experiencing severe mental health challenges. It is crucial that mental health interventions remain holistic, incorporating a range of strategies that cater to the diverse needs of students.

Another critical consideration is the potential for social desirability bias in the responses. Participants may have felt pressured to report positive views on spirituality due to cultural expectations or perceived norms within their social environment. This could have led to an overestimation of the benefits of spiritual practices, particularly among those who may not genuinely engage in these practices. Future research should consider incorporating more objective measures of spiritual engagement, such as behavioral observations or physiological markers, to provide a more accurate assessment of the impact of spiritual practices on well-being.

The findings of this study have several implications for practice and future research. For university mental health programs, the results suggest that incorporating spiritual practices as part of a broader well-being strategy could be beneficial for many students. However, it is important to recognize that spirituality is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Mental health practitioners should consider individual preferences and offer a range of options that include both spiritual and non-spiritual coping strategies. Future research should aim to explore the mechanisms through which spiritual practices impact mental well-being. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how spiritual engagement changes over time and how these changes relate to mental health outcomes. Additionally, qualitative research could help to capture the nuanced experiences of students who engage in spiritual practices, providing a deeper understanding of the personal meanings and motivations behind their engagement. In conclusion, while this study supports the potential benefits of spiritual practices for enhancing mental well-being among university students, it also highlights the importance of a personalized and holistic approach to mental health. Spirituality can be a valuable resource for many, but its impact is influenced by a complex interplay of individual, cultural, and developmental factors. By acknowledging these complexities, mental health practitioners and educators can better support the diverse needs of students in their pursuit of well-being.

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## 5. Conclusion

In summary, this study explored the role of spiritual practices in promoting mental well-being among university students, focusing on stress management, resilience, emotional balance, and finding meaning in life. The results indicate

that spiritual practices can be beneficial for many students, offering a sense of comfort, resilience, and purpose. However, the variability in responses highlights the importance of considering individual differences, including gender, age, and personal beliefs. Spirituality is not a universal solution, and its effectiveness as a coping strategy depends on personal context. Future efforts to support student well-being should incorporate a diverse range of tools, ensuring that all students have access to resources that align with their unique needs and preferences.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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