



The Effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Group Counseling in Reducing Academic Stress Among Students of MTsN 2 Bandung

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Abstract

Academic stress is a common psychological problem among Islamic junior high school (madrasah tsanawiyah) students due to the dual curriculum load, grade demands, and parental expectations. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of mindfulness-based group counseling in reducing the academic stress of students at MTsN 2 Bandung. A quantitative approach with a quasi-experimental *nonequivalent control group pretest-posttest* design was employed. The subjects were 24 eighth-grade students with moderate to high academic stress selected through *purposive* sampling and assigned to an experimental group (n = 12) and a control group (n = 12). The experimental group attended six sessions of mindfulness-based group counseling, while the control group received regular information services. Data were collected using a 30-item academic stress scale and analyzed using paired-samples t-tests, independent-samples t-tests on *gain scores*, and Cohen's *d* effect size. The results showed that the mean academic stress of the experimental group decreased from 107.67 to 91.33 ($t(11) = 6.65$; $p < 0.001$), whereas the control group showed no significant change ($p = 0.560$). The between-group difference in *gain scores* was significant ($t(22) = 4.24$; $p < 0.001$; $d = 1.73$). Thus, mindfulness-based group counseling is effective in reducing students' academic stress and is worth integrating into madrasah guidance and counseling programs.

INTRODUCTION

Early adolescence is a developmental period marked by rapid biological, cognitive, and social changes, while at the same time students face increasingly complex academic demands. When these demands are perceived as exceeding their abilities and resources, students experience academic stress, namely a psychological and physiological response to study pressure, workload, worry about grades, and

high self-expectations. A systematic review by Steare et al. (2023) of 52 studies found that 48 of them reported a positive association between academic pressure and at least one adolescent mental health problem, such as depressive symptoms, anxiety, and even self-harming behavior. These findings confirm that academic stress is not merely an achievement issue but a mental health risk factor that needs to be addressed systematically in schools.

In the context of Islamic junior high schools (madrasah tsanawiyah/MTs), the sources of academic stress are relatively more diverse because students pursue the general curriculum alongside the religious curriculum, such as Qur'an and Hadith, Islamic Creed and Morals, Islamic Jurisprudence (Fiqh), Islamic Cultural History, and Arabic, accompanied by worship habituation and memorization programs. Pane et al. (2023) identified that the academic stress of MTs students stems from task demands, role demands, and interpersonal demands; therefore, guidance and counseling (GC) teachers need to design planned stress management strategies. A preliminary study at MTsN 2 Bandung, administering an academic stress scale to 96 eighth-grade students, showed that 31.25% of students were in the high category and 52.08% in the moderate category. Interviews with GC teachers also revealed student complaints such as difficulty concentrating, anxiety before assessments, sleep disturbances, and a tendency to procrastinate on assignments. This condition calls for GC services that are not only informative but also train students' self-regulation skills.

Various group counseling interventions have been tested to reduce students' academic stress in Indonesia. Syam et al. (2026) reported the effectiveness of group counseling using the *assertive training* technique, while Larasmita et al. (2023) demonstrated a reduction in junior high school students' academic stress through behavioral group counseling with progressive muscle relaxation. Group counseling has the advantage that group dynamics allow students to realize that their stress experiences are shared by others, to support one another, and to practice new skills in a safe atmosphere. However, most of these interventions focus on behavioral change or physical relaxation and have rarely addressed how students relate to the thoughts and emotions that arise when facing academic pressure.

The mindfulness approach offers a promising alternative. Mindfulness is understood as the ability to intentionally bring attention to present-moment experience with an accepting and non-judgmental attitude. Through mindful breathing, *body scan*, and *decentering* techniques, individuals learn to observe anxious thoughts as mental events that come and go rather than as facts that must be followed. Empirical evidence shows that an online mindfulness meditation program significantly reduced university students' academic stress (Alvarado-García et al., 2023), group guidance with the mindfulness STOP technique was effective in managing the academic stress of final-year university students (Nisa,

2025), and group counseling with a mindfulness technique improved the academic flow of Islamic senior high school (madrasah aliyah) students (Sartika et al., 2026). Among junior high school students, mindfulness has a positive effect on resilience (Sari & Munawaroh, 2022). A meta-analysis by Mawarni et al. (2024) also found a large effect of mindfulness-based cognitive behavioral interventions on *academic buoyancy*, while Ostermann et al. (2022) reported a moderate effect of mindfulness interventions on academic achievement ($d = 0.42$). Mindfulness has also been reported to reduce academic burnout (Al Hadi et al., 2025) and stress among university students in Indonesia (Agustina, 2024).

Nevertheless, the evidence on school-based mindfulness programs is not entirely consistent. The large-scale MYRIAD cluster trial in the United Kingdom found that a universal mindfulness program delivered to all students was not superior to regular teaching in preventing depression risk and improving well-being (Kuyken et al., 2022). A meta-analysis by Dunning et al. (2022) showed that the effects of mindfulness programs on children and adolescents weaken when compared with active control groups, and a reanalysis by Galla et al. (2024) concluded that universal school-based interventions provide no meaningful benefit. Fulambarkar et al. (2023) also cautioned that care is needed because of heterogeneity in study design and quality. These criticisms suggest that mindfulness may be more beneficial when delivered in a *targeted* manner to students who are actually experiencing stress, facilitated by a counselor in a small-group format, and adapted to participants' cultural values, including religious values relevant to the coping of madrasah students (Koto & Lahmuddin, 2026).

Based on the above, there is a research gap in the limited number of quasi-experimental studies with a control group that test targeted mindfulness-based group counseling for MTs students experiencing academic stress, particularly those integrating Islamic reflective practices such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and *muhasabah* (self-reflection). Therefore, this study aimed to examine the effectiveness of mindfulness-based group counseling in reducing the academic stress of students at MTsN 2 Bandung. The research hypothesis was that students who participated in mindfulness-based group counseling would experience a greater reduction in academic stress than students who received regular information services.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative approach with a quasi-experimental *nonequivalent control group pretest-posttest design* (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This design was chosen because fully random assignment of subjects to groups was not possible without disrupting the madrasah's learning schedule; thus, the comparison was made between an experimental group receiving mindfulness-based

group counseling and a control group receiving regular information services. Both groups were measured before (*pretest*) and after (*posttest*) the treatment using the same instrument.

The study was conducted at MTsN 2 Bandung during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The population comprised eighth-grade students. Subjects were selected *purposively* based on the following criteria: (1) obtaining an academic stress *pretest* score in the upper-moderate to high category (score ≥ 95); (2) being willing to attend all sessions; (3) obtaining written consent from parents/guardians; and (4) not currently receiving other counseling services. The screening yielded 24 students, who were then assigned to the experimental group ($n = 12$) and the control group ($n = 12$) based on their classes. The study was approved by the head of the madrasah, and all participants were informed about the objectives, procedures, data confidentiality, and their right to withdraw.

Academic stress was measured using an Academic Stress Scale consisting of 30 items with five response options (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The scale was developed by adapting the dimensions of the *Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents* (ESSA), as used by Larasmita et al. (2023), which include study pressure, workload, worry about grades, self-expectation, and despondency, with items adjusted to the madrasah learning context. Total scores range from 30 to 150, categorized as low (30–69), moderate (70–109), and high (110–150). Content validity was reviewed by two guidance and counseling experts, while a trial with 40 students outside the sample yielded item-total correlation coefficients of 0.32–0.71 and a Cronbach's alpha reliability of $\alpha = 0.89$.

The mindfulness-based group counseling intervention was delivered in six sessions, twice a week, lasting 60–75 minutes per session. Counseling was led by the researcher with a GC teacher as co-facilitator. Each session followed the stages of group counseling, namely forming, transition, working, and termination, and ended with an independent practice assignment (*home practice*) of 5–10 minutes per day. The session design is presented in Table 1. The control group received regular classroom information services on time management and study habits with an equivalent number of meetings and duration.

Table 1. Design of the mindfulness-based group counseling sessions

Session	Theme	Core Activities
1	Orientation and group formation	Introductions, group contract, psychoeducation on academic stress, 3-minute mindful breathing
2	Recognizing stress in the body	<i>Body scan</i> practice, identifying academic stress triggers through a daily stress journal
3	Thoughts are not facts	"Thought clouds" <i>decentering</i> exercise, recognizing automatic thoughts about grades and exams

Session	Theme	Core Activities
4	The STOP technique under study pressure	<i>Stop, Take a breath, Observe, Proceed</i> ; simulations of facing tests and assignment deadlines
5	Acceptance and self-compassion	<i>Self-compassion break</i> , mindful <i>dhikr</i> , and <i>muhasabah</i> on learning experiences
6	<i>Mindful learning</i> and termination	Single-task focus practice, independent practice plan, evaluation, and termination

Source: developed by the researcher, adapted from Nisa (2025) and Sartika et al. (2026)

Implementation fidelity was monitored using session implementation observation sheets and participants' reflection journals. Attendance in the experimental group reached 95.83%, and all participants completed the *posttest*. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and category distribution) and inferential statistics. Assumption tests included the Shapiro-Wilk normality test and Levene's homogeneity test. Within-group changes were tested using paired-samples t-tests, while between-group differences were tested using independent-samples t-tests on *posttest* scores and *gain scores* (the difference between *pretest* and *posttest*). Effect size was calculated using Cohen's *d* with the criteria small (0.20), medium (0.50), and large (0.80). All tests used a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ with the aid of SPSS software.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Academic Stress Before and After the Intervention

Descriptive statistics of the academic stress scores of both groups are presented in Table 2. Before the intervention, the mean scores of the experimental and control groups were relatively equivalent and both were in the moderate category approaching high. After the intervention, the mean score of the experimental group decreased by 16.33 points (15.17%), whereas the control group decreased by only 1.50 points (1.41%).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and category distribution of academic stress

Group	Test	Mean	SD	Min	Max	L / M / H
Experimental	Pretest	107.67	7.90	96	120	0 / 7 / 5
	Posttest	91.33	13.03	67	111	1 / 10 / 1
Control	Pretest	106.50	10.79	88	125	0 / 8 / 4
	Posttest	105.00	15.24	74	131	0 / 7 / 5

Note: n = 12 per group; L = low, M = moderate, H = high. Source: research data

In terms of categories, the number of experimental group students in the high category decreased from five to one, and one student shifted to the low category. In contrast, the category distribution of the control group remained relatively

unchanged, with the number of students in the high category remaining at five at *posttest*. This pattern provides an initial indication that the reduction in academic stress was more evident among students who participated in mindfulness-based group counseling.

2. Results of the Assumption Tests

The Shapiro-Wilk test showed that the *pretest*, *posttest*, and *gain score* data in both groups were normally distributed ($p > 0.05$). Levene's test also indicated homogeneous variances for the *pretest* ($F = 0.82$; $p = 0.376$), *posttest* ($F = 0.12$; $p = 0.733$), and *gain scores* ($F = 0.03$; $p = 0.873$), as summarized in Table 3. With these assumptions met, the analysis proceeded using parametric statistics.

Table 3. Results of the normality and homogeneity tests

Data	Shapiro-Wilk (W)	p	Remarks
Experimental pretest	0.940	0.504	Normal
Experimental posttest	0.962	0.814	Normal
Control pretest	0.976	0.960	Normal
Control posttest	0.977	0.969	Normal
Experimental <i>gain score</i>	0.963	0.826	Normal
Control <i>gain score</i>	0.961	0.800	Normal
Levene (<i>gain score</i>)	F = 0.026	0.873	Homogeneous

Source: research data

3. Results of Hypothesis Testing

The t-test results are presented in Table 4. The independent-samples t-test on *pretest* scores showed no significant difference between the two groups ($t(22) = 0.30$; $p = 0.765$), indicating that both groups had equivalent initial conditions. The paired-samples t-test showed a significant reduction in academic stress in the experimental group ($t(11) = 6.65$; $p < 0.001$; $d = 1.92$), whereas the change in the control group was not significant ($t(11) = 0.60$; $p = 0.560$; $d = 0.17$).

Table 4. Summary of t-test results

Analysis	Mean Difference	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Between-group pretest (independent)	1.17	0.30	22	0.765	–
Experimental pretest–posttest (paired)	16.33	6.65	11	< 0.001	1.92
Control pretest–posttest (paired)	1.50	0.60	11	0.560	0.17
Between-group posttest (independent)	13.67	2.36	22	0.028	0.96

Analysis	Mean Difference	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Between-group <i>gain score</i> (independent)	14.83	4.24	22	< 0.001	1.73

Source: research data

The main hypothesis was tested on the *gain scores*. The mean score reduction in the experimental group ($M = 16.33$; $SD = 8.51$) was significantly greater than in the control group ($M = 1.50$; $SD = 8.65$), with $t(22) = 4.24$; $p < 0.001$, a mean difference of 14.83 (95% CI: 7.57–22.10), and an effect size of $d = 1.73$, which is classified as large. At *posttest*, the academic stress scores of the experimental group were also significantly lower than those of the control group ($t(22) = 2.36$; $p = 0.028$). Thus, the research hypothesis was accepted: mindfulness-based group counseling is effective in reducing the academic stress of students at MTsN 2 Bandung. A comparison of the *pretest* and *posttest* means of both groups is visualized in Figure 1.

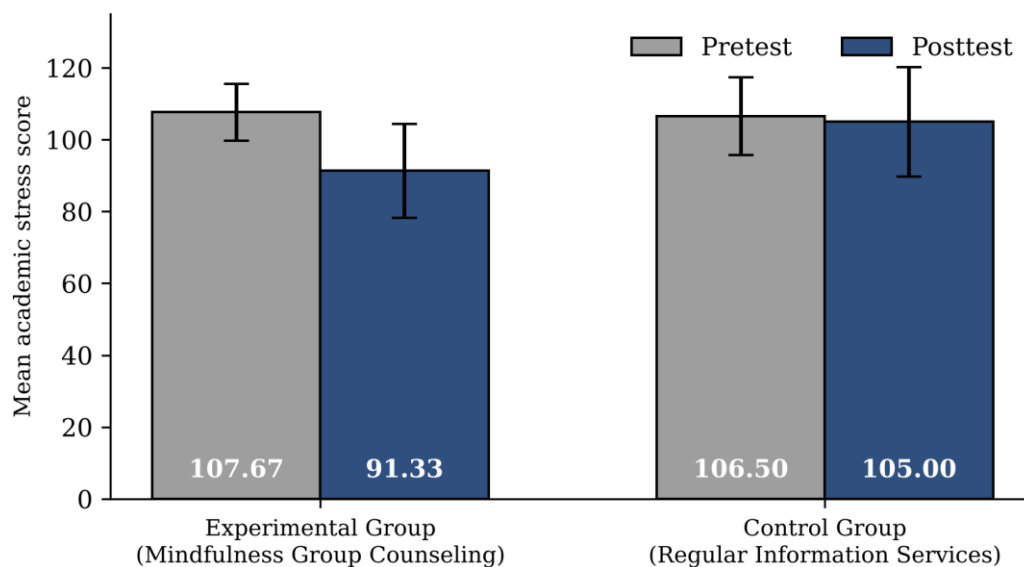


Figure 1. Mean academic stress scores at *pretest* and *posttest* for the experimental and control groups (error bars = standard deviation)

Source: research data

4. Discussion

The findings of this study show that mindfulness-based group counseling significantly reduced students' academic stress, with a large effect compared with regular information services. This result is consistent with Alvarado-García et al. (2023), who reported a reduction in academic stress after a mindfulness meditation program, and Nisa (2025), who found that group guidance with the STOP technique

reduced academic stress more than ordinary group discussion. These findings also extend the results of Sartika et al. (2026) in Islamic senior high schools by showing that a similar approach can be applied to MTs students in early adolescence.

In terms of mechanism, the reduction in academic stress can be explained through three processes practiced during the sessions. First, mindful breathing and *body scan* exercises helped students recognize physiological signs of stress earlier, such as muscle tension and shallow breathing, so that they could calm themselves before stress escalated. Second, *decentering* exercises helped students distance themselves from negative automatic thoughts, such as “I will definitely fail the test,” and view them as mental events rather than absolute truths. Third, the STOP technique gave students a practical strategy to pause and choose a more adaptive response when facing assignment deadlines or exams. These processes are consistent with the findings of Mawarni et al. (2024) that mindfulness-based interventions strengthen emotion regulation, attention, and decision-making that underpin academic buoyancy, as well as with Sari and Munawaroh (2022), who demonstrated the role of mindfulness in the resilience of junior high school students.

The group format also strengthened the effect of the intervention. In experience-sharing sessions, students realized that anxiety about grades and memorization loads was also experienced by their peers, fostering a sense of togetherness and reducing feelings of isolation. This is in line with findings that group counseling effectively reduces academic stress through mutual support among members, whether using the *assertive training* technique (Syam et al., 2026) or progressive muscle relaxation (Larasmita et al., 2023). The integration of mindful *dhikr* and *muhasabah* in the fifth session also brought mindfulness practice closer to the religious experience of madrasah students. Koto and Lahmuddin (2026) showed that counseling approaches combining psychological and spiritual aspects help students interpret academic pressure as a trial that can be faced with patience and effort, thereby improving emotional stability and adaptive coping.

The results of this study should be read alongside trials of universal mindfulness programs that showed no advantage over regular teaching (Kuyken et al., 2022; Galla et al., 2024). This difference is likely related to the nature of the intervention. Universal programs are delivered to all students, including those without problems, leaving limited room for improvement. In contrast, this study applied a targeted intervention to students with moderate to high academic stress, in small groups, and with counselor facilitation that allowed personal feedback. Dunning et al. (2022) also noted that the effects of mindfulness tend to be clearer on measures of stress and well-being than on the general prevention of disorders. Thus, these findings support the view that school-based mindfulness is better positioned

as a responsive or curative-preventive service for specific target groups rather than as a single program for all students.

For GC practice in madrasahs, these findings provide a basis for including mindfulness-based group counseling in responsive service programs, particularly ahead of mid-semester and end-of-semester assessment periods. GC teachers can use the relatively brief and easily replicable six-session design and combine it with religious practices that are already part of madrasah culture. However, this study has several limitations. The number of subjects was relatively small and group assignment was not randomized, so the results should be generalized with caution, as Fulambarkar et al. (2023) have warned. The control group received information services with a lower intensity of interaction than group counseling, so part of the effect may have been influenced by attention and group support. In addition, this study did not conduct *follow-up* measurements to determine the sustainability of the intervention's effects.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mindfulness-based group counseling proved effective in reducing the academic stress of students at MTsN 2 Bandung. Students who attended the six counseling sessions experienced a significant reduction in academic stress that was greater than that of students who received regular information services, with a large effect size. The effectiveness of the intervention is presumed to stem from students' increased awareness of their stress reactions, the ability to distance themselves from negative thoughts, the strategy of pausing before responding to pressure, mutual support among group members, and the integration of Islamic reflective practices. GC teachers are advised to integrate mindfulness-based group counseling into the madrasah's responsive service programs. Future research is recommended to use larger samples with random assignment, equivalent active control groups, follow-up measurements, and process variables such as mindfulness level and emotion regulation to test the mechanisms of change more directly.

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