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The Psychological Impact of High-Stakes Testing: Investigating the Effects of NEET/JEE Pressure on Students; Mental Health and Well-Being

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Abstract

Stress in the classroom is becoming more common among students appearing for high-stakes exams such as NEET and JEE, which directly affects students' mental health and self-esteem. This study explores the relationship between AS and psychological well-being and focuses on the effect of stress on both mental health outcomes and SE among students. For this study, a survey conducted among 385 students from Jammu City, J&K, has been taken as the fundamental data collection tool in standardized scales based on a quantitative research design. This study used statistical tools such as SPSS and Excel, as well as regression and correlation as a technique for analysis of data. It is found that academic stress affects mental health directly because stress depicts 31.1% of the variance. Furthermore, there is also a moderate positive correlation between AS and SE In other words, greater stress overlaps with higher self-esteem. It was also seen that the males and younger age group, that is, the 18–19-year-olds, face more stress with poorer mental health outcomes. However, these results are restricted to an urban sample, and the cross-sectional design limits their generalizability; therefore, more future research is needed to involve different populations and long-term effects. There is a need for focused interventions to deal with academic stress to improve their mental well-being.

Keywords: High-Stakes Testing, Academic Stress (AS) National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET), JEE (Joint Entrance Exam), Self-Esteem (SE), Mental Health, Psychological Well-being

1. Introduction

The Indian education system, as such, remains with a lot of developments but with issues in accessibility and quality. Tests such as JEE in India serve an important transition into university studies after high school and thus present ethical issues when affecting the students (Kishan et al., 2023). The NEET for medical college admissions was conducted solely in Hindi and English, which serves as a limiting issue for students from various linguistic diversities (Shanbhag, 2016). These, however, are not matters of any lesser significance for education for India's economic and social development. With a population crossing over 1.2 billion and a Gross Enrolment Ratio of merely 12.4%, this is also a challenge for India to transform demographic dividend into an opportunity through education and training (Swapna, 2018). The government has made various efforts such as the National Education Policy 2020, bringing about changes to make it better, more inclusive, and effective in addressing the challenges that often arise (S. Bhargavi, et al., 2023).

The importance of competitive exams in education is on the rise day by day across countries because students are competing for fewer seats in some top colleges. Such examinations, like the JEE in India, EVAU in Spain, and others, sway students' academic and career options, but it is unethical like its influence on the students themselves (Banerjee & Dey, 2024). In countries where the environment is developing, university entry is very competitive coupled with financial burdens worsened by the costs of tutoring. Contributing factors to competitiveness include unemployment and population growth; higher education is scarce. Despite all these challenges, competitive exams have been seen as an egalitarian method to select deserving candidates for prestigious institutions and job positions. Academic competitions are probably one of the most outstanding, wide-ranging parts of education as well as student life that prepare them to face future challenges in a competitive global environment (Joshi et al., 2017).

NEET and JEE exams are highly important in student academic and professional development and outcomes in India. Most often, these competitive exams cause high levels of stress and resultant psychological disorders in adolescents; thus, these situations demand proper coping and support mechanisms. Indeed, the implementation of NEET has produced positive impacts on outcomes and general performance among students taking dental education. Studies at Saveetha Dental College revealed that NEET-admitted students performed better than the students from the pre-NEET batches at the first-year level (Kachhara et al., 2020). This may suggest NEET will improve the quality of intake to dental programs. In the IIT-JEE case, there seems to be no satisfactory resolution of whether parental socioeconomic background impacts the students' performance as there exists conflicting evidence that may be taken by assuming students from lower

socio-economic backgrounds are at a drawback (Kumar, 2016).

Several research have established positive correlations of academic stress with different mental health conditions such as suicidal thoughts, anxiety, and sadness among students (Steare, et al., 2023). High parental expectations for excellence in academics happen to be the principal cause of this stress since over two-thirds of the student's report having had the pressure. Academic achievement is negatively correlated with both academic stress and mental health, although academic achievement is positively associated with mental health. Academic pressures are caused by a variety of determinants, such as competitive environments, hectic schedules, and very high expectations (Dewangan et al., 2023). The prevalence of academic stress is alarming because, in some studies, it reaches nearly two-thirds among senior high school students (Deb et al., 2015).

Studies related to competitive exams in India indicate a high level of mental health disorders among teenagers and young adults. According to research, candidates appearing for UPSC have poor mental health emotional distress, and sleep disorders (Shandilya, 2023). Students who are preparing for entrance exams such as JEE and NEET have stress at very high levels, and it may lead to depression and anxiety. The psychological impact extends to even the younger learners, where anxiety and even fright are experienced by those attempting to prepare for entry-level professional teaching exams at the primary level (Bouziani, 2022). To counter these effects, coping techniques developed through maintaining a healthy study schedule, practicing relaxation, and ensuring quality sleep time. However, support from friends, family, and teachers can prove invaluable in alleviating emotional conditions and lifting their energies and morale (Chelackoden et al., 2024). These results indicate the need for mental health services, counseling resources, and awareness programs among students who will sit for competitive exams in the future, as stated by Shandilya (2023).

The study focuses on the aims of determining the psychological impact that competitive and high-stakes NEET and JEE have on students' mental health and overall well-being. This is to be achieved by identifying typical stressors associated with these tests, performance pressure, intense competition, and high preparation demands, in investigating how these aspects affect students' psychological states, including their levels of self-esteem, the state of overall well-being, and levels of stress.

Aside from the introduction, the rest of the study is organized as follows: section 2 consists of the literature reviews by different scholars, section 3 outlays the aim or problem of the study, section 4 reviews research methods used for the study, section 5 includes research results & findings, section 6 gives the discussion & section 7 gives the conclusion with recommendations for Further Studies: research limitations, theoretical and practical implications. Finally, there are references.

2. Literature Review

(i) Impact Of Academic Stress on The Psychological Well-Being of Students Preparing for High-Stakes Tests Like NEET/JEE

Among the most typical kinds of stress that academics experience is significant threats to students' psychosocial well-being, especially during the college and adolescence stages. It may result from various types of academic pressure such as heavy workloads, strict teacher or family expectations, and dissatisfaction with grades. Poor Anxiety, sadness, and thoughts of suicide are among the mental health consequences that have been strongly associated with AS (Barbayannis et al., 2022). There is a close relationship with these issues in terms of mental health. These issues are very common among students, and the stress level often tends to intensify as a student matures into college and is required to take up challenging academics.

The already existing stressors have been widened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The stress created by remote learning, social isolation, and uncertainties about the future has been amplified in the minds of students, with some being affected more than others. For instance, non-binary people and females had increased academic pressure during the pandemic, further degenerating their mental health (Sun et al., 2012). This would imply that academic stress does not primarily impact the students but rather hits the most vulnerable ones who are marginalized. Besides the students, academic pressure negatively impacts instructors and scholars. They face limited time, too much work, and not being able to balance between work and life. This job-related pressure compromises their psychological well-being, culminating in burnout, low productivity, and effectiveness in teaching. A study by Salimzadeh et al., (2017) identified that stress is at high levels among educators; thus, it underlines the significance of the necessity to teach and promote stress management and mental health support for both the students and teaching faculty members.

High-stakes testing is the other significant cause of stress in school. These standardized tests are very stressful to students, especially from diverse backgrounds, disabled students, and ELLs. Indeed, African American students claim that the study for the test often limits the curriculum to the content of the test rather than providing the student with an authentic educational experience (Hopfenbeck, 2017). This model alienates learners from learning

and raises their stress levels. The ethical implications of the high-stakes tests are critical as well. They impact students of colour, students with special needs, and ELLs unduly to disadvantage them in important ways. Test scores are informative but not particularly useful for key decisions regarding student progression or graduation, research suggests (Tagher & Robinson, 2016). Those scores would, in the long term, hurt the learning experience of the student. Stress and anxiety would be added, as such assessments alone could cause undue stress.

Academic stress should be approached multidisciplinary by the policymakers and the educators. Test-taking strategies that would minimize anxiety or methods of assessment more conducive should be explored for use in exams, especially because all students are unique and have different needs (Poots & Cassidy, 2020). Project-based assessments, and portfolios, to say but a few, may present a better portrayal of the student's capacities. Educational institutions should also offer targeted support for boosting mental health and well-being, particularly to vulnerable groups (Mudi, 2024). Overall, academic stress affects the students as much as it affects the educator; mental conditions of seriousness are very seriously experienced. By making their support systems better, alternative assessment methods, and curriculum, the issues could be brought under control, so that the impact of AS could psychologically be mitigated (Tovar Cardozo, 2024)

(ii) Relation between academic stress and self-esteem among students in the context of NEET/JEE preparation

The interaction of stress at the academic level and self-esteem is very crucial in influencing the overall well-being and performance of students. Research proved that there exists a robust inverse relation between these two issues. For example, a study with higher secondary students and nursing students illustrated that with the rising level of academic stress, self-esteem tends to decline (Nikitha et al., 2014). This translates to an academic struggle as a relationship that undermines confidence in the shortest time over abilities and worthiness, pushing students into a destructive cycle that may impact their performance and emotional well-being.

However, a study on Pakistani private university students is quite contrastive. Farhan (2015) also finds that academic stress had no discernible impact, and self-esteem on academic performance. Such a contradiction highlights the variability with which relationships between these two variables may or may not be shown by different student populations; therefore, such contextual factors determine those relationships. Understanding these differences is essential for developing targeted interventions. Several factors contribute to high AS and low SE among the students. The factors identified are derived from the study conducted by Pandey and Chalise (2017). Lower age, lower level of education, and perceived less supportive family are found to be the factors. Anxiety among the students might be more resultant because of the inexperience and developmental factors among younger students or those at a more initial stage of their study.

In addition, inadequate family support or lack of support can enhance these feelings of loneliness and inadequacy further contributing to stress and poor self-esteem. It is noteworthy that studies have also shown that generally, students of medicine have higher self-esteem and lesser stress levels in academics than students in any other field, including dental hygiene (Kang et al., 2013). This might be partly because the medical curriculum is generally strong in resources and allows for the actual use of knowledge in practice. The results underscored that the promotion of self-esteem environments along with minimizing academic stress are needed.

The levels of stress and psychological distress are outstandingly sharp when students are in preparation for competitive exams. Illustratively, one study in Chennai showed alarming statistics: the depressive symptoms reported among the NEET aspirants were at an alarming rate of 59.2%, and there was an overwhelming prevalence of anxiety at 100% (Premkumar et al., 2022). Pressure to perform, coupled with the general threat of failure and intense parental expectations, has been a contributor to stress in all these cases.

Coping strategies become essential in controlling such academic pressure. Balancing study routines, practicing relaxation methods, and support from family and friends can be very helpful in countering the adverse effects of stress (Chelackoden et al., 2024). Therefore, individual differences in how failure affects self-esteem are important in explaining the general implications of academic stress. HSE individuals have been observed to bounce back from failure more effectively, retaining even higher resilience and academic goals together. In contrast, they have been known to quit and abstain from any activity concerning competency once some failure has taken place.

The existing research into AS and SE highlights the need to provide mental health support and intense intervention, with priority to students who are sitting in high-stakes exams (Banks & Smyth 2015).

Developing resilience, building self-confidence, and giving students tools to handle pressure will dramatically impact the student's emotional and academic well-being. A holistic approach such as this facilitates the development of healthy, empowered students but also a much healthier educational environment.

3. Objectives of the Study

Obj1- To evaluate the impact of AS on the mental well-being of students preparing for high-stakes tests like NEET/JEE.

Obj2- To analyze the relationship between academic stress and SE among students in the context of NEET/JEE preparation.

Obj3-To identify if gender influences academic stress and mental health in NEET/JEE aspirants.

4. Hypothesis of the Study

H1 : There is a significant impact of academic stress on the mental well-being of students preparing for high-stakes tests like NEET/JEE.

H2 : There is a significant relationship between AS and SE among students in the context of NEET/JEE preparation.

H3 : Gender significantly influence the relationship between AS and MH among NEET/JEE aspirants.

5. Research Methodology

The present study employs the quantitative approach in examining the psychological pressures of NEET/JEE aspirants. This research is conducted among students who are preparing for competitive exams and samples have been drawn from various coaching institutions in Jammu City, J&K. The use of a descriptive research design makes the study select 385 students through a structured sampling method based on Cochran's formula. Data collection is sourced directly from primary sources using standardized scales, including the Adult Well-Being Scale for general mental health, "the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to quantify self-esteem, and the Academic Stress Scale for measurements of academic stress levels." SPSS and Excel tools have been used in the analysis, and Regression and Correlation techniques have been applied to analyze the relationship between AS, SE and mental health among NEET/JEE aspirants.

6. Results

The data interpretation is included in this part of the study. The goals, demographic traits, and hypotheses have all been taken into consideration while classifying the results. The objectives and hypotheses include a table showing the outcomes along with an explanation of them.

Table 1: The Respondents' Demographic Profile

Sr. No.	Demographic Characteristics	Category	N	%
1	Gender	Female	186	48.3
		Male	199	51.7
2	Age Group	18–19 Years	137	35.6
		19–20 Years	192	49.9
		Above 20 Years	56	14.5
3	Type of NEET/JEE Preparation	Full-Time	310	80.5
		Part-Time	75	19.5
4	Duration of Preparation	Less than 1 Year	87	22.6
		1–2 Years	198	51.4
		More than 2 Years	100	26.0

Table 1 presents the "Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents" regarding their gender, age group, type of NEET/JEE preparation, and duration of preparation. As per Table 1, Out of 385 respondents, 48.3% were female, and 51.7% were male, indicating nearly equal gender distribution. Most respondents were among the ages of 19–20 years i.e. 49.9% of the total. The majority of respondents are doing full-time NEET/JEE preparation i.e. 80.5% of the total. The majority of students have been preparing for 1–2 years i.e. 51.4% of the total, this implies a significant commitment to preparation for an exam over a longer period.

O1: To evaluate the impact of AS on the mental well-being of students preparing for high-stakes tests like NEET/JEE.

H1: There is a significant impact of AS on the mental well-being of students preparing for high-stakes tests like NEET/JEE.

Table 2: Regression Analysis

Hypothesis	Regression Weights	Beta Coefficient	R	R^2	F	t-value	p-value	Hypotheses Result
H1	Academic Stress-> Mental Health	0.558	0.558	0.311	173.259	13.163	0.000	**Supported**

Table 2 The table summarizes a regression analysis testing the hypothesis that academic stress affects mental health (H1). Key findings include:

- **Regression Weights/Beta Coefficient**: Both are 0.558, indicating a moderate positive relationship between academic stress and mental health.
- **R**: The correlation coefficient is 0.311, suggesting a weak to moderate correlation.
- **R^2**:approximately 9.7% of the variation in mental health can be explained by academic stress.
- **F**: The F-statistic is 173.259, showing the model is statistically significant.
- **t-value**: The t-value is 13.163, indicating strong evidence of a relationship.
- **p-value**: The p-value is 0.000, confirming statistical significance.

Overall, the hypothesis is supported, indicating that academic stress significantly influences mental health.

O2: To analyze the relationship between academic stress and SE among students in the context of NEET/JEE preparation.

H2: There is a significant relationship between AS and SE among students in the context of NEET/JEE preparation.

Table 3: Correlation

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Academic Stress	Self-Esteem
Academic Stress	Pearson Correlation	115.0805	14.46570	1	.505**
	Sig. (2-tailed)				.000
	N			385	385
Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	25.6182	5.02257	.505**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.000	
	N			385	385
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).					

Table 3 The table shows the correlation between academic stress and self-esteem among 385 students. The mean academic stress score is 115.08 (SD = 14.47), while the mean self-esteem score is 25.62 (SD = 5.02). There is a moderate positive correlation of 0.505 between the two variables, indicating that as academic stress increases, self-esteem may tend to increase. The correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level, with a p-value of 0.000.

O3: To identify demographic factors (age and gender) that influence academic stress and mental health outcomes in NEET/JEE aspirants.

H3: Demographic factors (age and gender) significantly influence the relationship between AS and mental health outcomes among NEET/JEE aspirants.

- **Gender**

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics and Multivariate Tests

Variable	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Academic Stress	Female	112.85	13.62	8.732	0.003
	Male	117.17	14.95		
	Total	115.08	14.47		
Mental Health	Female	32.13	6.2	4.434	0.036
	Male	30.74	6.72		
	Total	31.41	6.5		
Multivariate Tests	Gender			15.462	0
	Intercept			12374.14	0

Table 4 The table summarizes the results of a comparison of academic stress and mental health by gender, along with multivariate tests. Here's a brief overview:

Academic Stress:
Mean score for females is 112.85 (SD = 13.62) while for males is 117.17 (SD = 14.95). Total mean score is 115.08 (SD = 14.47). F-value **is** 8.732, with a significance (Sig.) of 0.003, indicating a statistically significant difference in academic stress between genders.
Mental Health:
Mean score for females is 32.13(SD = 6.2) while for males is 30.74 (SD = 6.72). Total mean score is 31.41(SD = 6.5). F-value **is** 4.434732, with a significance (Sig.) of 0.036, indicating a statistically significant difference in mental health between genders.
Multivariate Tests
Gender**:** F-value is 15.462 with a significance of 0, showing a highly significant effect of gender on the dependent variables.
Intercept**:** F-value is 12374.14 with a significance of 0, indicating a highly significant model overall.
The analysis indicates significant differences in both academic stress and mental health between female and male participants, with males showing higher academic stress and females showing slightly better mental health scores. Additionally, the multivariate tests confirm that gender significantly influences these outcomes.

Table 5: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	Academic Stress	1791.191[a]	1	1791.191	8.732	.003
	Mental Health	185.843[b]	1	185.843	4.434	.036
Intercept	Academic Stress	5086496.022	1	5086496.022	24796.917	.000
	Mental Health	379980.046	1	379980.046	9065.564	.000
Gender	Academic Stress	1791.191	1	1791.191	8.732	.003
	Mental Health	185.843	1	185.843	4.434	.036
Error	Academic Stress	78563.313	383	205.126		
	Mental Health	16053.315	383	41.915		
Total	Academic Stress	5179112.000	385			
	Mental Health	396085.000	385			
Corrected Total	Academic Stress	80354.504	384			
	Mental Health	16239.158	384			

Table 5 shows a significant effect of gender on academic stress (F = 8.732, p = 0.003) with type III sum of squares is 1791.191, indicating that there exists a difference in academic levels between males & females and in mental health (F = 4.434, p = 0.036) with type III sum of squares as high as 185.843, depicting how gender-based reasons may give rise to differences in outcomes related to mental health. Overall, the model is highly significant for both variables, with a highly significant intercept at (p = 0.000 i.e. < .001), whereby the latter could have been anticipated, as the gender coefficient showed the differences between the variables for males and females.

- **Age Group**

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics and Multivariate Tests

Variable	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Academic Stress	18–19 Years	117.5328	15.44728	5.082	0.007
	19–20 Years	114.6979	13.89498		
	Above 20 Years	110.3929	12.75173		
	Total	115.0805	14.46570		
Mental Health	18–19 Years	32.2409	6.36803	3.584	0.029
	19–20 Years	31.3750	6.36787		
	Above 20 Years	29.5000	6.98049		
	Total	31.4104	6.50304		
Multivariate Tests	Age Group			2.847	0
	Intercept			9447.967	0

Table 6 shows descriptive statistics and multivariate test results between academic stress and mental health based on age differences. Students from 18 to 19 years attained the highest academic stress with a mean score of 117.5328 in comparison to those from 19 to 20 years with a mean of 114.6979 and above 20 years with a mean of 110.3929 and also with a significant effect of age group (F = 5.082, p = 0.007). The scores for mental health were the highest in the 18–19 age group, whereas the other age groups recorded lower scores with large differences (F = 3.584, p = 0.029). Overall, the effect of age is confirmed to be significant (F = 2.847) through multivariate tests, thereby confirming the reliability of the results.

Table 7: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects						
Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	Academic Stress	2082.565[a]	2	1041.283	5.082	.007
	Mental Health	299.107[b]	2	149.554	3.584	.029
Intercept	Academic Stress	3866027.541	1	3866027.541	18867.841	.000
	Mental Health	285547.137	1	285547.137	6843.078	.000
Age Group	Academic Stress	2082.565	2	1041.283	5.082	.007
	Mental Health	299.107	2	149.554	3.584	.029
Error	Academic Stress	78271.938	382	204.900		
	Mental Health	15940.051	382	41.728		
Total	Academic Stress	5179112.000	385			
	Mental Health	396085.000	385			
Corrected Total	Academic Stress	80354.504	384			
	Mental Health	16239.158	384			

Table 7 shows a significant effect of age group on AS with Type III Sum of Squares of (2082.565) with an F-value of (5.082) and a p-value of (0.007), which states that participants aged 18–19 years have remarkably more stress than students in the age bracket of 19–20 and above 20. For the case of mental health, the adjusted model indicates a Sum of Squares Type III of (299.107), an F-value of (3.584), & a p-value of (0.029), showing that youngsters (18–19 years) had better mental health scores than the older ones. Highly significant intercepts for both variables reassure that the model holds good, with the requirement for support strategies to be targeted at different age groups for improving student outcomes.

7. Discussion

Academic stress has a highly significant effect on students studying under the pressure of high-stakes tests like NEET/JEE. Literature shows a very strong association between academic stress and poor mental health outcomes like suicidal thoughts among students (Yadav & Srivastava, 2020). Several factors such as performance pressure, parental expectations, and competitive environments contribute to this stress. COVID-19 added to the already rising academic stress levels. Some of the groups are susceptible to a higher level of academic stress, and these are non-binary, and women compared to men. To overcome these challenges, it is essential to lay out a balanced study routine, practice relaxation techniques, and also get enough sleep (Rawal, 2021).

Moreover, SE and AS are very interrelated in aspirants who prepare for entrance exams like NEET and JEE. Intra-personal research studies have reported that there is a negative correlation between AS and SE (Pinki et al., 2020) in addition to low college student confidence. Exams can place psychological stress that may propagate depression and even suicidal thoughts. This pressure of academics develops from pressure from parents, personal relations, and a competitive atmosphere. These support systems include friends, family members, and teachers who emotionally support the student at such hard times (Kaur, 2020).

In addition, the academic stress on students appearing for competitive exams such as NEET and JEE is highly significant because of long syllabi, apprehensions of failure, or lack of emotional support, elevating stress levels (Pushparaj & Vidya, 2024). Researchers found a substantial association between the indicated instances of academic stress and suicidal ideation in these students. There are gender differences whereby female respondents complained of more academic stress and suicidal thoughts than their male counterparts, and between candidates offering medical exams and those

offering engineering, the medical candidates were stressed more. Helping skills for managing academic stress include balancing the study schedule, relaxing skills, and enough rest (Waseem, 2023). Social support in the context of friends, family, and teachers motivates people to still carry on despite trying times. These findings draw the attention of targeted interventions in reducing academic pressure and augmenting psychological well-being in high-achieving students.

8. Conclusion

Academic stress has a strong connection with poor mental health outcomes for more than 31% of the students. More importantly, this study underlines the psychological impacts of high-stakes exams on students' psychosocial well-being. Academic stress correlates with more than 31% positive impact on the self-esteem of students, even if there was a modest positive correlation among academic stress & self-esteem in this study. Gender and age disparities, including some of the noted disparities whereby the males and students aged 18-19 reported higher stress and worse mental health compared with their peers, indicate the need for immediate interventions concerning managing stress by providing counseling services, appropriately balanced study routines, and mental health programs suited for specific needs. Such support systems during the preparatory phase are parents, teachers, and peers. The crisis of academic stress requires a multi-dimensional response that is attuned to the differential effects of gender, age, and socio-environmental factors on the students' experience.

However, the limitation of the study-including an urban-based sample, quantitative approach, and cross-sectional design -highlights further areas of research, incorporating diverse backgrounds across geography and socio-economic sectors, moving into qualitative dimensions of stress, and evaluation of the long-term impact. Along with individualized interventions for mental health, the role of technology in reducing stress can be a great potential in providing better ameliorative solutions to students who are undergoing high-stakes exams. It thus implies that a well-balanced and supportive learning setting translates to great value in the protection of student mental health.

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