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MINDFULNESS APPROACH TO COPE WITH STRESS: GENDER PERCEPTION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected various lives in various ways and this can be stressful for a big share of this population (almost for everyone). A person's work performance, family life and physical and mental health can be affected badly by stress. Stress is body's natural response towards situations such as threat which causes physiological changes in the body. This prepares us for coping with the stressful situations. Stress response is also known as "flight or fight response"... During this time of pandemic it is important to cope with our anxiety and fear to come out of this day to day stressful situation. The study aimed at understanding the techniques in the form of yoga, physical exercise or any other practiced by females and males to reduce the level of stress and the perceived barriers to practice yoga in their life.

KEYWORDS: *Stress Management, Yoga, Meditation, Physical Exercise*

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INTRODUCTION

A 21 days lockdown was announced by the honorable Prime Minister in India on 24th March, 2020. This lockdown lead to very limited movement of 1.3 million people in India to prevent spread of COVID infection. The lockdown was announced just after the country faced a 14 hours voluntary public curfew, again as a preventive measure against spread of COVID-19. This public curfew was enforced in regions where number of affected individuals was quite high. The lockdown was announced in India when number of COVID positive cases reached approximately to 500. The first lockdown was announced till 14th April, 2020 and three more lockdowns were announced since then. People were restricted to go out of their homes. This lockdown and above that fear of catching the COVID infection, traumatized people in these days of crisis. In a survey done by mental health provider Ginger (2020) it was found that this lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic has proven most stressful time for nearly 7 out of 10 employees in their entire professional career. This stressful situation strikingly enhanced the usage and prescriptions of anti-depressants and anti-insomniac medications.

Negative thoughts about the uncertain future that is to come, created stressful situation and a lot of sleepless nights that further lead to daytime fatigue leading to a vicious cycle of stress. To get rid of this stress people tried to relax and sleep forcibly that further lead to more

On 1 May, the Government of India extended the nationwide lockdown further by two weeks until 17 May. The lockdown restricts people from stepping out of their homes. Excluding essential services all services were suspended. With this, Educational institutions were also closed. However, this time of crisis is generating stress throughout the population. Nearly 7 in 10 employees indicated in a survey by mental health provider Ginger (2020) that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is the most stressful time of their entire professional career, which has aligned with stark increases in new prescriptions of antidepressant, anti-anxiety, and anti-insomnia medications. A mind running with negative thoughts over the uncertain future results, often results in sleepless nights which cause daytime fatigue. Most people are not able to relax and forcibly try to relax which results in greater stress.

Mindfulness is described by Bishop et al as “an approach for increasing awareness and responding skilfully to mental processes that contribute to emotional distress and maladaptive behaviour”. Germer et al (2005) stated that “To be mindful is to wake up, to recognize what is happening in the present moment”. One approach to mindfulness is practicing yoga to keep the attention focused on breathing. It has been shown by various studies that yoga and meditation helps enhancing overall sense of well being and improves mood by helping in reducing stress and anxiety (Cramer H et al., (2018); Deshpande, R., (2012) & Pascoe MC, Bauer IE., (2015). Yoga is one of the best mindfulness based approaches that can be practiced during this quarantine period. Practicing Yoga can help in wholesome improvement in physiological and mental health problems. Yoga is considered as an all-round exercise as it comprises physical and stretching exercises, breathing exercises and mindfulness based techniques that can help in improvement in body, mind and soul. Keeping in view this crisis, an effort has been made to explore the yoga and other practices followed by the people from educational sector to reduce the level of stress and what are the perceived barriers to practice yoga in their routine.

OBJECTIVES

The present study was designed to achieve the following objectives during Covid19 lockdown period:

1. To compare the gender difference in the level of stress
2. To identify the difference in the males and females perception for physical activity to reduce the level of stress
3. To compare the stress management techniques used by males and females
4. To compare the level of yoga practice employed by males and females
5. To identify the barriers perceived by males and females
6. To identify the perceived practices to be followed by educational institutions to make stress-free campus

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study is descriptive in nature. The data was collected from 276 subjects residing in different part of Punjab, Chandigarh and Haryana region. Those subjects who are part of educational institutions are selected for the study. A questionnaire

was designed to explore the type of physical exercise practiced by the individuals to reduce the level of stress. The questionnaire was divided into three parts:

1. First part covered demographic profile of the individuals i.e. Age, Gender and profession
2. Second part covered the health related components which included Self-perceived health, Diet Awareness and loneliness level
3. Third part of the questionnaire was related to stress management techniques practiced by the individuals.

The data was collected during Lock down 2 of Covid-19 through electronic mode. The questionnaire was mailed to the subjects who belonged to educational institutions situated in Punjab. The purpose of the study was clearly stated in the beginning of the form along with the formal consent to participate in the study was taken by adding question related to their consent to participate.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

The raw collected data was converted into percentages. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the participants with regard to age, gender and profession. The pictorial representation of the data is given in Figure1, Figure 2 and Figure 3 related to age, gender and profession respectively.

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

		Percentage	Frequency
Age	15 to < 30	53%	142
	30 to < 40	34%	91
	40 to < 50	10%	26
	50 to < 60	3%	8
Gender	Male	30%	80
	Female	70%	187
Profession	Teacher	55.4%	148
	Student	41%	109
	Any other	4%	10

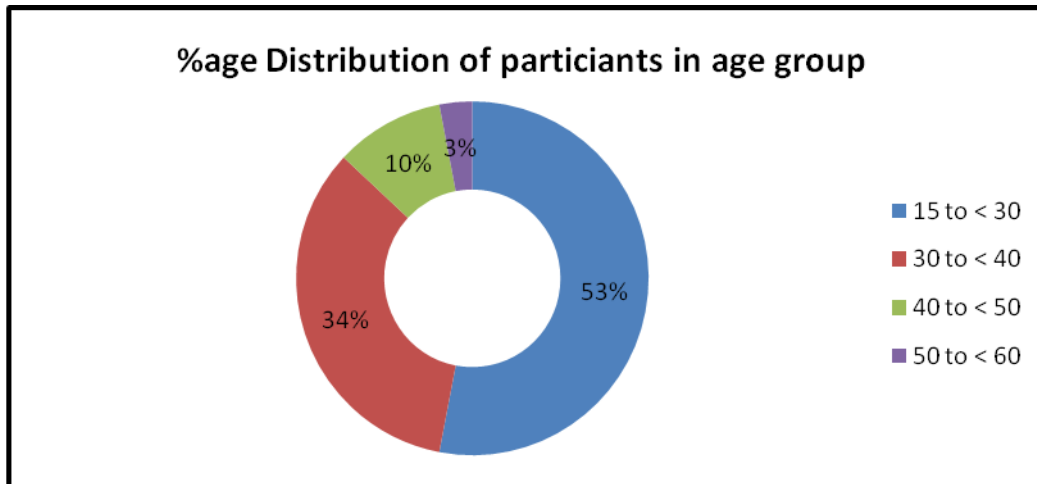


FIGURE 1

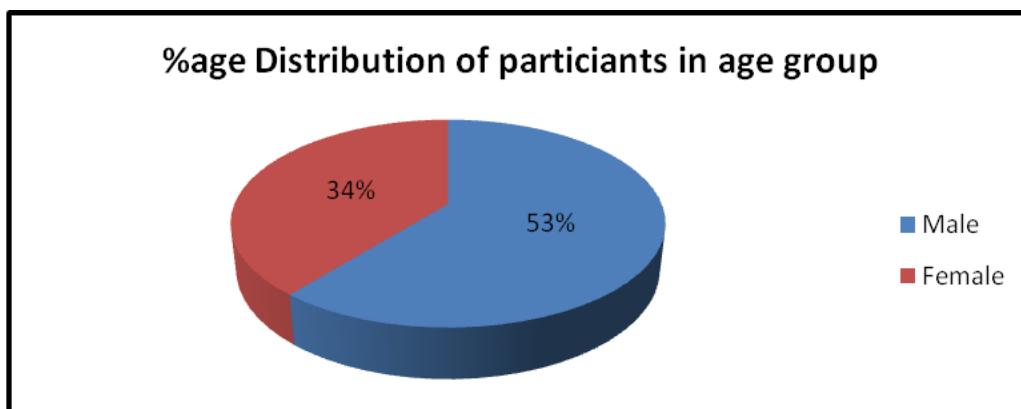


FIGURE 2

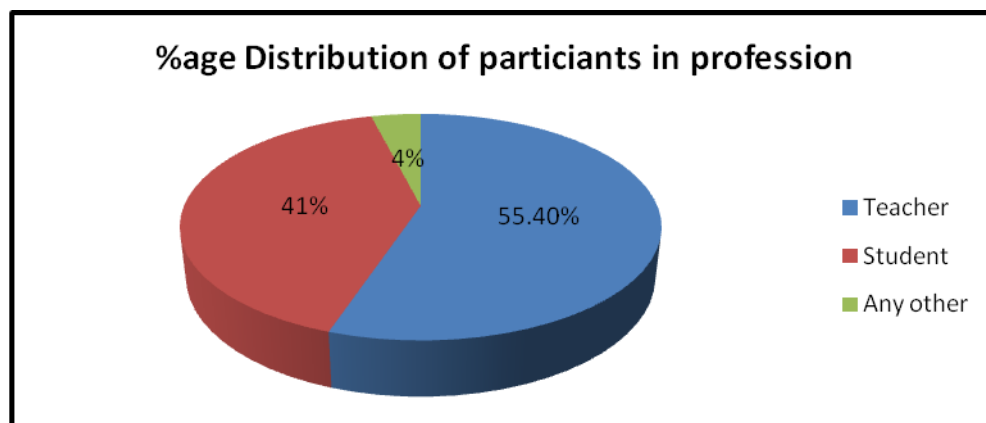


FIGURE 3

2. HEALTH RELATED COMPONENTS

Table 2 represents the health related components of the participants which covered self-perceived health, diet awareness and loneliness help. Pictorial representation of the health related components are also given in figure 4, 5 and 6.

TABLE 2: HEALTH RELATED COMPONENTS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

		%age	Frequency
Self-perceived health	Very good	34%	90
	Good	54%	145
	Fair	12%	31
	Poor	4%	1
	Very poor	0%	0
Diet Awareness	yes	94%	248
	No	6%	17
Loneliness	Never	37%	98
	Occasionally	26%	69
	Sometimes	32%	85
	Often	5%	12
	Always	1%	3

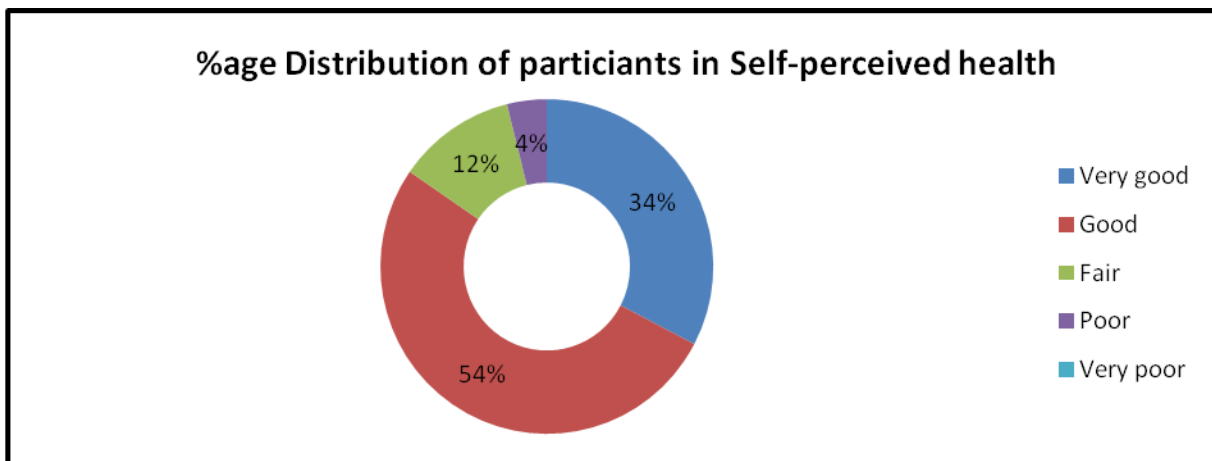


FIGURE 4

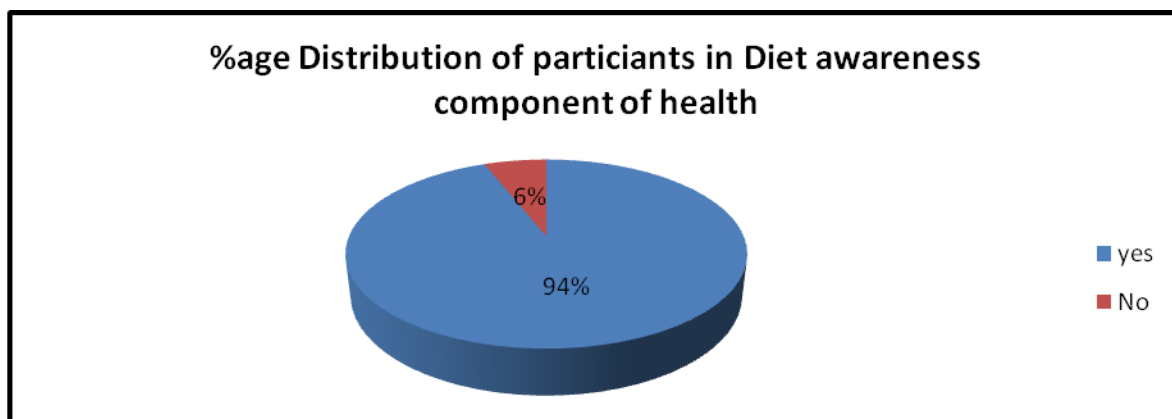


FIGURE 5

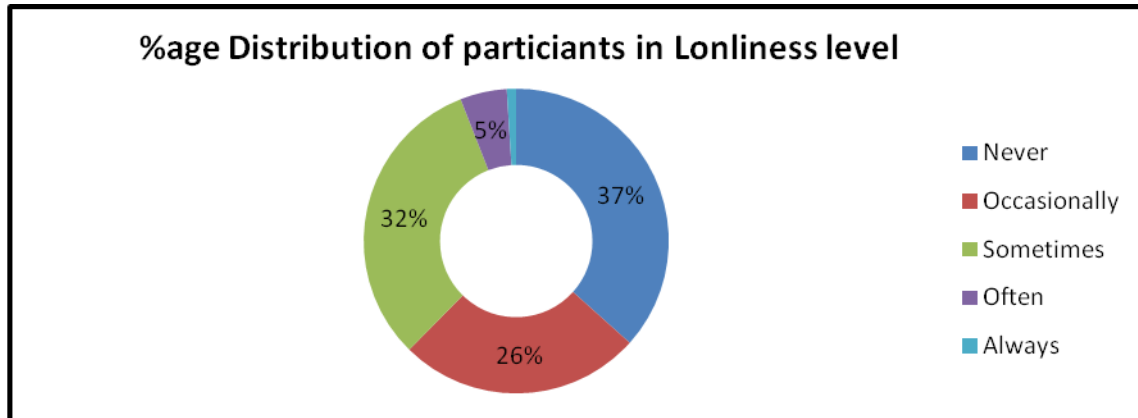


FIGURE 6

3. PERCEPTION AND PRACTICES TO REDUCE STRESS LEVEL

3.1. STRESS LEVEL AMONG MALES AND FEMALE

From table 3 it is clear that 32.6% of female and 22.5% of male felt stressed during Covid-19 crisis. However, 67.4% of the females did not feel stressed and 77.5% of males did not feel stress during the crisis. From the responses it is clear that females feel more stressed than male during this situation.

TABLE 3: GENDER WISE %AGE OF STRESS LEVEL

Gender	%age of Yes	%age of No
Female (n= 187)	32.6	67.4
Male (n=80)	22.5	77.5

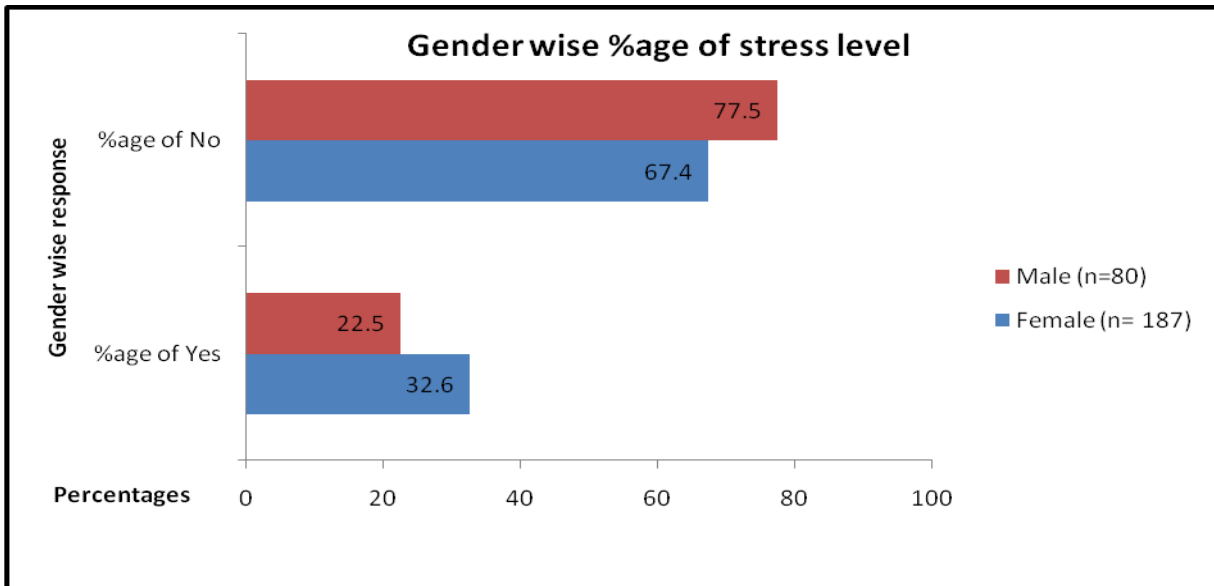


FIGURE 7

3.2. PERCEPTION OF PRACTICE FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TO RELIEVE STRESS

The data presented in Table 4 depicts the responses given by males and females with regard to perception of practice for physical activity to relieve stress. The table shows that 36% of the females strongly agree that physical activity is required to relieve stress whereas 40% of the males strongly agree with this. Further, the table depicts that 56%, 6% and 3% of the females responded agree, disagree and strongly disagree respectively with this component whereas 41%, 11% and 8% of the males responded agree, disagree and strongly disagree respectively with this component. It can be concluded from the results that comparatively higher number of males does not believe that physical activity is required to relieve stress than females.

TABLE 4: GENDER-WISE PERCENTAGE ON PERCEPTION OF PRACTICE FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TO RELIEVE STRESS

Gender	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Female	36%	56%	6%	3%
Male	40%	41%	11%	8%

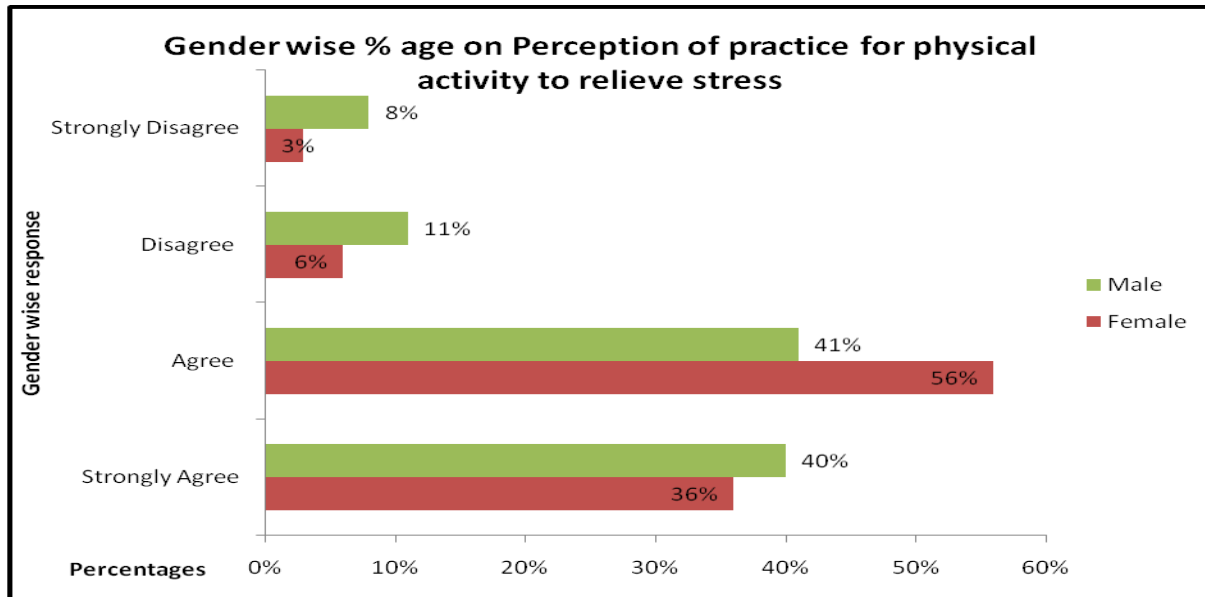


FIGURE 8

3.3. PERCEPTION OF BEST TECHNIQUES FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT

Table 5 represents the perception regarding best techniques for stress management among males and females. Table 5 shows that 35.8% of female and 32.5% of males perceived yoga as a best technique for stress management, 55.6% of females believed that psychological counselling is best stress management technique compared to 5% of males. 5.8% of female agreed that restructuring thoughts are best technique for stress management however 26.2% of males perceived this technique as best for stress management. Only 2.6% of females perceived meditation as the best technique for stress management conversely 36.2% of males believed in this technique. From the results it is clear that females perceived psychological counselling as the best technique for stress management whereas on the other hand, males believed meditation as the best stress management technique during Covid-19 lockdown period.

TABLE 5: GENDER WISE % ON PERCEPTION OF BEST TECHNIQUE FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT

DIMENSIONS	FEMALE	MALE
Yoga	35.8	32.5
Psychological counselling	55.6	5
Restructuring thoughts	5.8	26.2
Meditation	2.6	36.2

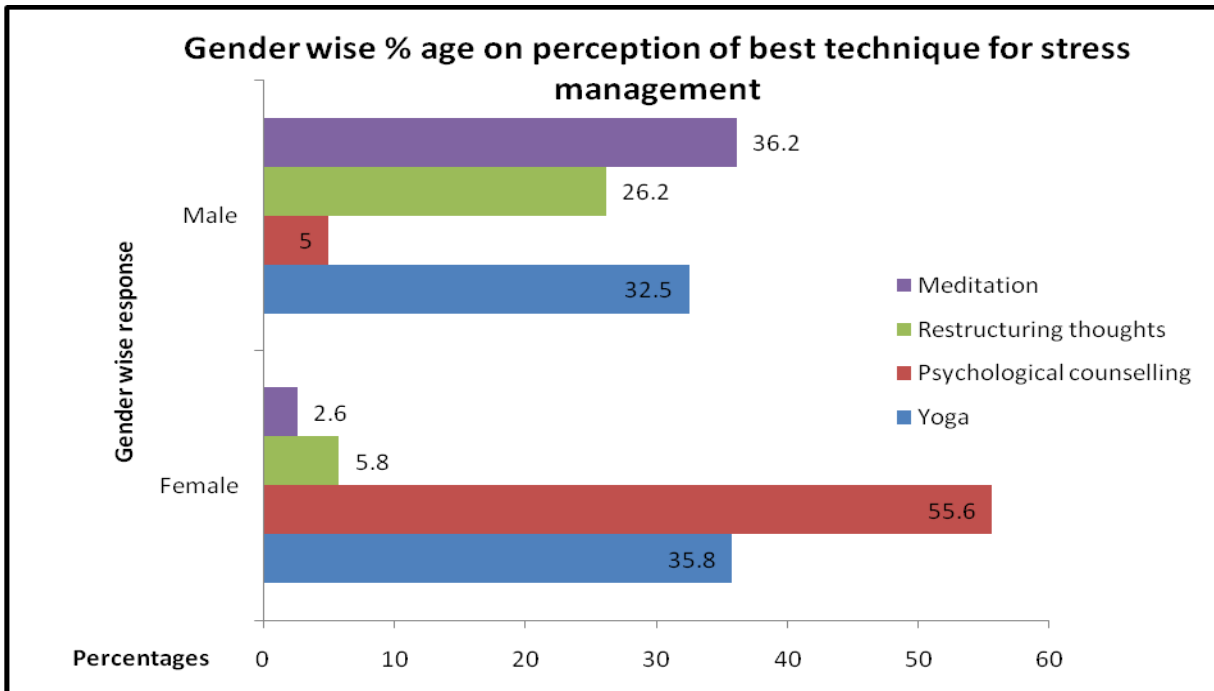


FIGURE 9

3.4. PRACTICING YOGA IN LIFE

Table 6 shows the frequency percentage of males and females practicing yoga in life. Table 6 represents that 11.7% of females responded that they practice/ do yoga always however 52.9% of female responded that they practice yoga sometimes, 21.3% of females responded that rarely they do yoga and 13.9% responded that they never do yoga. On the other hand, 11.2% of males responded that they do yoga always with 55% sometimes, 11/2% rarely and 22.5% responded they never do yoga. From the results it can be concluded that males practice yoga higher than their counterpart i.e. females.

TABLE 6: GENDER WISE PERCENTAGE OF INDIVIDUAL PRACTICING YOGA IN LIFE

Dimensions	Female	Male
Always	11.7%	11.2%
Sometimes	52.9%	55%
Rarely	21.3%	11.2%
Never	13.9%	22.5%

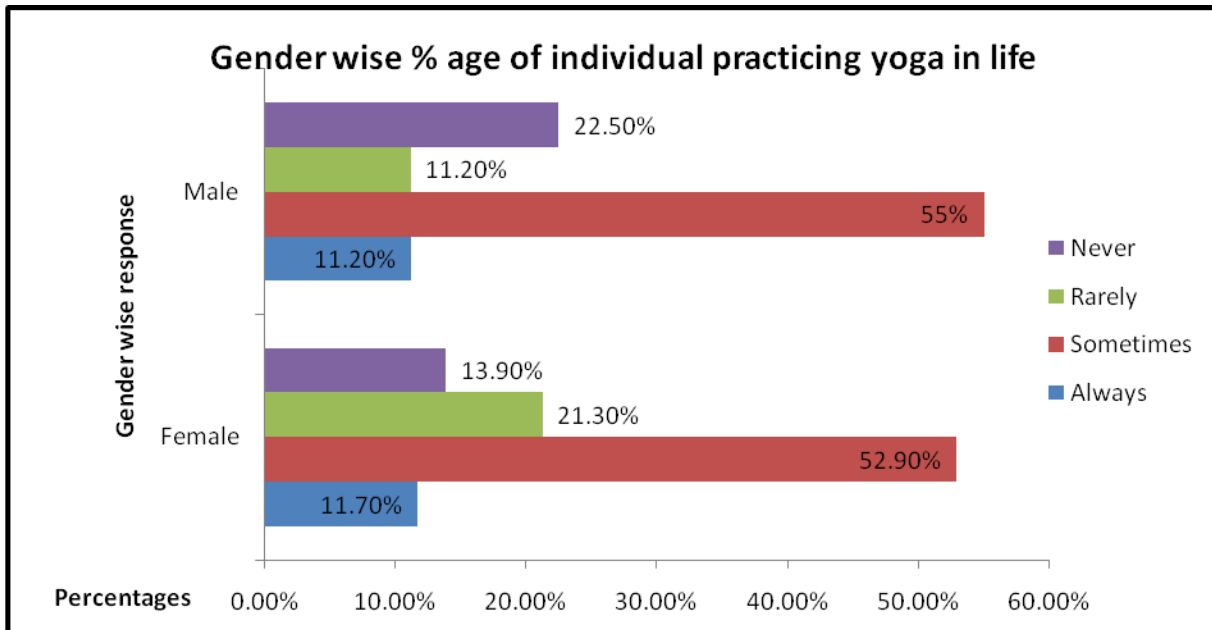


FIGURE 10

3.5. BARRIERS IN PRACTICING YOGA

Table 7 depicts the perception of males and females on the types of barriers perceived in practicing yoga. The table states that 51.3% of females perceived lack of time, 3.74% perceived insufficient facilities, 13.3% of females perceived lack of company as a barrier and 31.5% perceived lack of interest as a barrier to yoga. Conversely, 32.5% of males perceived lack of time as a barrier, 7.5% perceived insufficient facilities, 16.25% perceived lack of company and 41.25% of males perceived lack of interest as a barrier to practice yoga. The above results depict that majority of females perceived lack of time as a major barrier to practice yoga whereas majority of males perceived lack of interest as a major barrier to practice yoga.

TABLE 7: GENDER WISE PERCENTAGE ON THE PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO YOGA

Dimensions	Female	Male
Lack of time	51.3	32.5
Insufficient facilities	3.74	7.5
Lack of company	13.3	16.25
Lack of interest	31.5	41.25

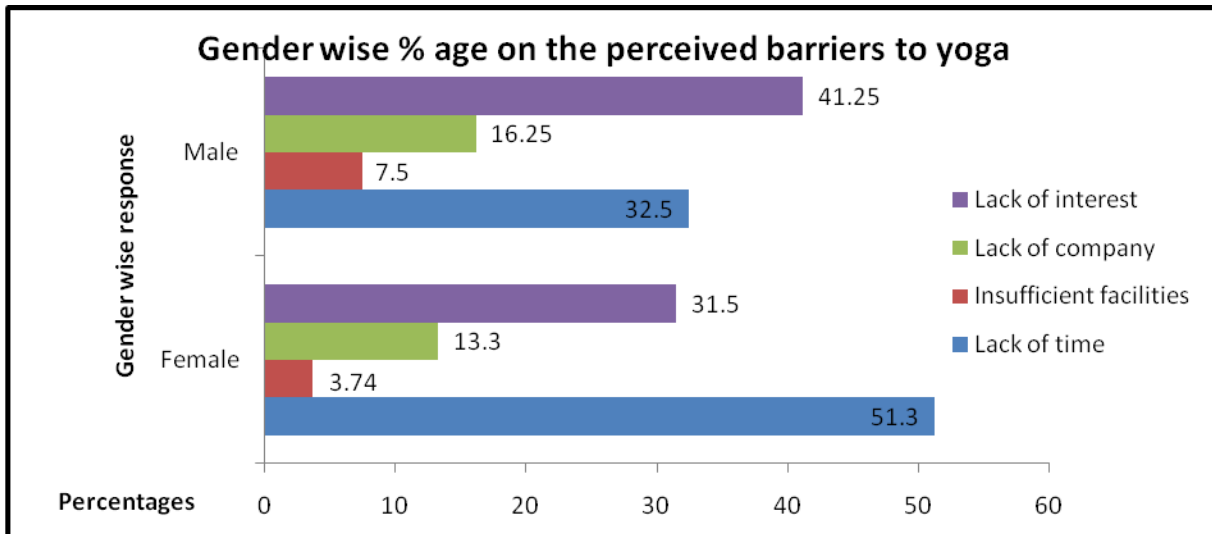


FIGURE 11

SUGGESTIONS

From the findings of the present study the followings suggestions are recommended:

1. Females feel more stressed than males and this could be possibly due to the multiple roles played by the females. Females manage both household work and other responsibilities also either it's at work place or academic studies. It is recommended that strong family support shall be provided to females. Strong family relationships also are a source of comfort, guidance, and strength that helps females to cope up with the stress.
2. Exercise can be an effective component of a stress management program, and all types of mindfulness strategies can be beneficial for stress management. Strategies consistent with yoga and meditation can improve health and helps to manage the stress.
3. It is recommended that females and males shall include yoga as a part of their life so that they require less external support in the form of psychological counselling. Yoga was developed several thousand years ago as a mind-body technique. It comprises not only physical exercises but breathing exercises, mindfulness techniques and stretching techniques that leads to wholesome development of the body viz. strength and flexibility of bones and muscles, oxygen uptake and blood circulation to various important body parts and hormonal balance of the body.

4. Women can manage stress by practicing yoga and meditation for coping with stress. Yoga has come up as an effective stress relieving strategy as it does not only provides physical benefits but also enhances mindfulness and peace. Yoga give a goof feeling of self compassion and encourages good mood.
5. Yoga requires a time commitment, it is recommended that females shall manage time effectively and learn the time management skills to practice yoga in life.

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