

# MEDITATION – AN APPROACH TOWARDS MAXIMIZING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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**Abstract :** Meditation is making its strong hold with changed outlook in psychology where emphasis is now on cultivation of positive emotions as a preventive factor instead of concentrating on plainly curative measures. Hence, the present study has been designed to study the impact of Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM) intervention on adolescents' level of positive and negative affect and its relationship with their pro-social behavior. A total of 100 students of grade VII and VIII were randomly assigned to experimental (n=50) and to wait- list control group (n=50). LKM intervention for a period of eight weeks was given, five times a week for duration of 15 minutes. Positive and negative affect and Pro-social behavior was measured twice (prior and post intervention or post non-intervention) using Positive and Negative Affect Schedule and Pro-social Personality Battery. The data was analyzed using Mean, Standard deviation, t- test and Correlation. Results revealed significant impact on positive affect ( $p < 0.05$ ) and reduction in negative affect ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, no strong directional relationship was revealed between positive and negative affect and pro-social behavior amongst adolescents. The study aims to implicate that LKM results in inculcation of positive attributes and thus, helps in bridging the gap amongst adolescents making them more compassionate and connected towards self and others.

**IndexTerms - Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM), adolescents, positive & negative affect, pro-social relationships.**

## I.INTRODUCTION

Contemporary studies suggest that there is upsurge of students undergoing innumerable problems in social, emotional and behavioral domains like stress, anxiety, conduct disorders etc. which might interfere in their future development of a wholesome personality (Greenberg 2000, Napoli, 2005). Educationalist and researchers are therefore, redirecting their investments more on inner development (like emotional well- being and social development) in contrast to previous approach of concentrating merely on advancements of scientific or academic competencies (Astin, 2004; Greenberg et al., 2003).

Moreover, adolescents are at a stage of transition from childhood to adulthood and all the experiences encountered during this phase plays a major role in consolidating and shaping of their future personalities. Also at this stage, they are extremely impressionable along with enough developed maturity to understand different perspectives. Thus, making it a fertile period for cultivation of positive values and wholesome development of personality (Hertz & Power, 2006; Schonert & Lawlor, 2010).

A school setting seems to be the ideal ground for promoting this wholesome development and fostering stress resilience in a very efficient and cost effective manner as a major time period of the day is spent here.

Hence, there is a growing substantiation for school-based program that aims to promote well-being, support emotional and social learning and avert mental health problems in adulthood (Cuijpers et al., 2008). Around the world, lot of mainstream schools are now actively implementing programs that recognize the importance of fostering a child's social, emotional, mental, spiritual and cognitive well-being (Garrison Institute Report, 2005; Tregenza, 2008; Yager, 2009). Student well-being has become a key agenda for schools, and many now consider it an educational outcome that is of equal significance to academic achievement in formal education (Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2011). However, most of the programs are centered on identification and management of mental health problems like bullying and antisocial behavior within school environment, and have proved to be successful (e.g. Weissberg &

Kumpfer, 2003; Vreeman& Carroll, 2007), but for the complete well- being of a child, one needs to go beyond fixing the problem behavior and consider approaches which is beneficial for all.

However, even while dealing with holistic approach among students, the paradigm of social well- being particularly, hasn't been probed much.

Although Social intelligence is a very crucial aspect predominantly during adolescence, yet, it is overlooked easily. However, if a child is well prepared in this dimension, it becomes very easy to experience belongingness, be more receptive to exchange of emotions, making him more open, available and approachable in relationships (Fredrickson, 2002; Harvey, Pauwels, & Zickmund, 2002). Additionally it prepares a person to learn self- disclosure aptly, become responsible and forgiving to self and others and experience gratitude and happiness (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002; Emmons & Shelton, 2002). It also promotes empathetic responding; evoking sense of mutually reinforcing trust and cooperation, making people more successful in their relationships (Glaeser, Laibson, Scheinkman, & Soutter, 2000 ; Fehr & Rothenbach, 2003).

Meditation, in recent decade has been explored and provided multifarious positive scientific evidence of fulfilling the growing requirement of holistic wellness. Studies have reported practice of mindfulness improves attention, creativity and emotional intelligence (Garrison Institute Report, 2005; Shapiro et al., 2011; Meiklejohn et al., 2012) also results in calm mind and reduction of distracting thoughts leading enhanced sense of happiness and contentment (Barnes et al., 2007; Slagter& Dunne, 2008; Lutz et al., 2008).

### 1.1 Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM)

Mindfulness meditation is a thoughtful practice where the training of attention to nurture a state of present moment awareness is done. Loving Kindness Meditation is the training to inculcate a state of kindness and love along with nurturing of attention. While the approaches are different, the results complement each other. Mindfulness meditation creates a "still quiet place", LKM enriches it with warmth and love; enabling one to stay longer. The core of these practices lies in, enhancement of attention at one end and alteration and regulation of emotions at other end (Germer& Siegel, 2012).

Loving kindness is an unconditional open-heart wish for self/others to be happy and should not be confused with self-centered love, which has the quality of attachment. In Buddhist traditions, it is closely connected with compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity towards self and others.

Hence, the present study has been designed to explore the impact of meditation directing love and kindness towards self and others on prosocial behavior of selected non- clinical school going population. It attempts to bridge the lacunae where existing literature focuses more on antisocial behavior or negative impact of prejudiced conduct on others (Rudman, Ashmore & Gary, 2001; Dasgupta& Greenwald, 2001). The present study has a pro social orientation where it attempts to study the effect of fostering positive affirmations and emotions for self and others and cultivate positive state of mind overall.

### 1.2 Objectives of the study

- To assess the level of positive and negative affect and prosocial behavior of adolescents prior to intervention (Pre testing Phase).
- To provide Loving Kindness Meditation training program as an interventional technique to the experimental group (Intervention).
- To assess the effectiveness of LKM training program as an intervention on positive and negative affect and prosocial behavior of adolescents (Post testing Phase).
- To assess correlation, if any, among all the aforementioned variables.

## II. METHOD

**2.1 Recruitment:** Before the program started, a letter was sent by the school, informing parents about the program. The letter described the program and provided the investigator's contact details to allow clarification of any questions they might have. A consent form was attached for parents to enroll their children into this program. Parents were informed children could opt out anytime.

**2.2 Participants:** A total of 100 students of grade VII and VIII were randomly assigned to experimental (n=50; boys= 27 & girls= 23) and to wait- list control group (n=50; boys= 32 & girls= 18). The overall academic performance of these children fell in average category and they had no behavioral problems or undergoing any clinical treatment.

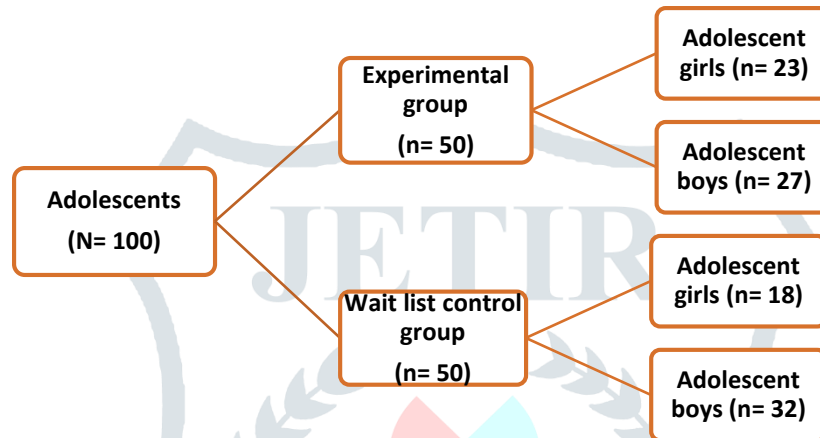


Figure 1- Sample distribution

### 2.3 Measures

Following measures were used for the study:

#### Baseline assessment

A self-made Proforma was used to study all the background information related to participants i.e. name, age, type of family, parent's qualification, their profession, income, family type etc.

#### The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)

To assess affective component PANAS, developed by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen, (1988). It comprises of two mood scales, one measuring positive affect (PA) and the other measuring negative affect (NA). Ten descriptors are used for each PA scale and NA to define their meanings and participants are required to respond to a 20-item test using 5-point scale that ranges from very slightly or not at all (1) to extremely (5). Reliability and Validity is moderately good where for the Positive Affect Scale, the Cronbach alpha coefficient is 0.86 to 0.90; for the Negative Affect Scale, 0.84 to 0.87.

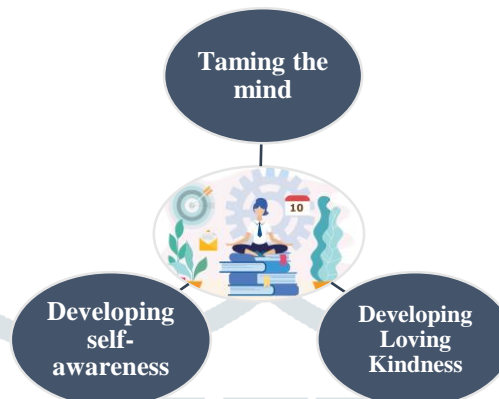
#### Prosocial Personality battery

The psychometric measure is developed by Penner et al., (1995) where pro-social personality orientation is defined as an enduring dispositional tendency of an individual who inclines to think about the rights and well-being of others, feels empathy and worries for others, and behaves in a manner that benefits others. The measure is made up of two factors: 1.) Other-Oriented Empathy – tendency to feel empathy and concern for others. 2.) Helpfulness – tendency (based on past experiences) to perform helpful acts. The scale is made up of 56 total items. It uses a Likert-type scale with 5 answer-choices. Reliability and validity have been reported well where Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.75 to 0.88.

## 2.4 Program Description

The intervention was an eight-week program which was incorporated into the classroom utilizing practice of loving kindness mindfulness meditation which equips children with the strategies of ‘coming back’ and attending to their experiences with love and care and also provided opportunity for practice of the positive skills in a classroom setting.

It consisted of following key components as illustrated in the following figure:



**Figure 2: Intervention Protocol**

- (1) **Taming the mind:** Students were taught to be mindful of their breathing; using breath as an anchor, to calm their mind.
- (2) **Developing self-awareness:** Students were taught to be attentive of their feelings, thoughts and emotions in various situations.
- (3) **Developing Loving Kindness:** Students were taught to cultivate a positive intra and inter personal relationship through the practice of loving kindness meditation.

## 2.5 Procedure

The intervention was provided for eight weeks for fifteen minutes duration, five days per week. Experimental group was randomly assigned to participate in LKM. The guided meditation was conducted by a resource person who started with asking participants to close their eyes and relax for centering their mind using breath as an anchor. Further, LKM was delivered where the guided meditation practice was divided in three phases:

In the first phase, it starts with softening or breaking down barriers towards self. Any mental blockage, self judgement is dissolved with positive attitude towards self and embracing all the emotions with love and kindness. Further, in second phase, these feelings of unconditional love and kindness are directed towards someone who immediately elicits feelings of care or respect or reverence. Now, students are directed to inculcate positive emotions towards a neutral person; someone for whom no explicit feelings arise. And lastly, when the participants feel comfortable, they are suggested to direct feeling of tenderness or loving care towards someone they have hostile feeling or resentment. The practice is repeated till the point participant start feeling at ease and can generate understanding and positivity towards everybody.

Meditation script which emphasized on self -focused positive development like confidence, self -esteem and affirmation was used. Further, when directed towards others, stress was laid on social focused positive emotions like friendliness, affection, empathy and gratitude. At the end of every session, ten minutes group discussion was held to assess and assimilate the learning of the day and resolve their queries.

Subsequent figure illustrates the research design of the study:

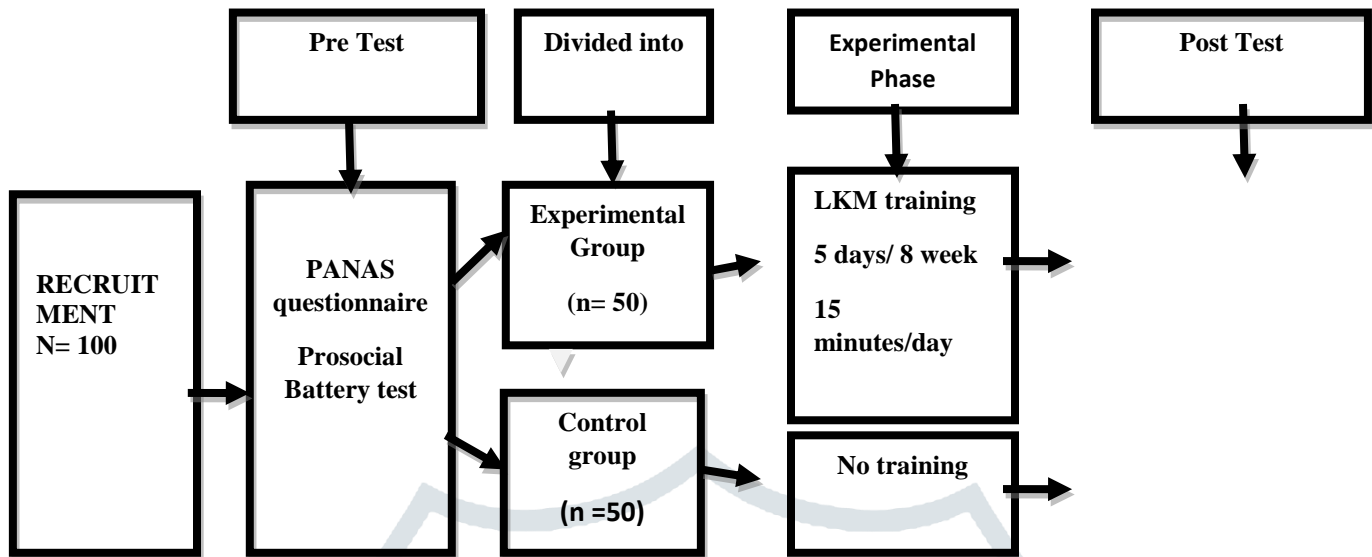
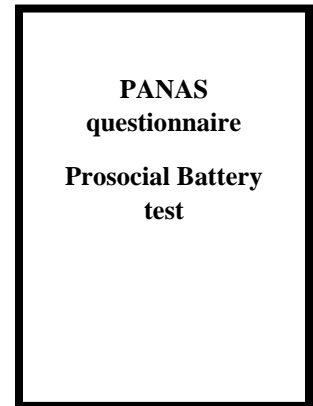


Figure 3: Flow chart depiction of Pre-post test control group research design



### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are discussed in accordance with the stated objectives:

- Level of positive and negative affect and pro-social behavior of adolescents prior to intervention (Pre testing Phase).

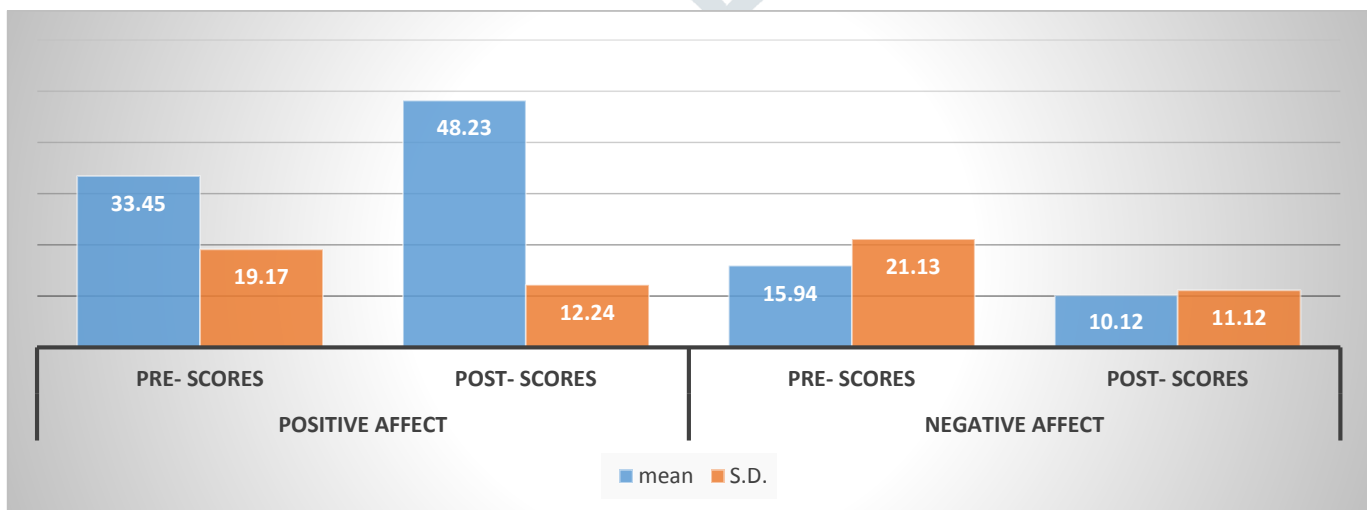
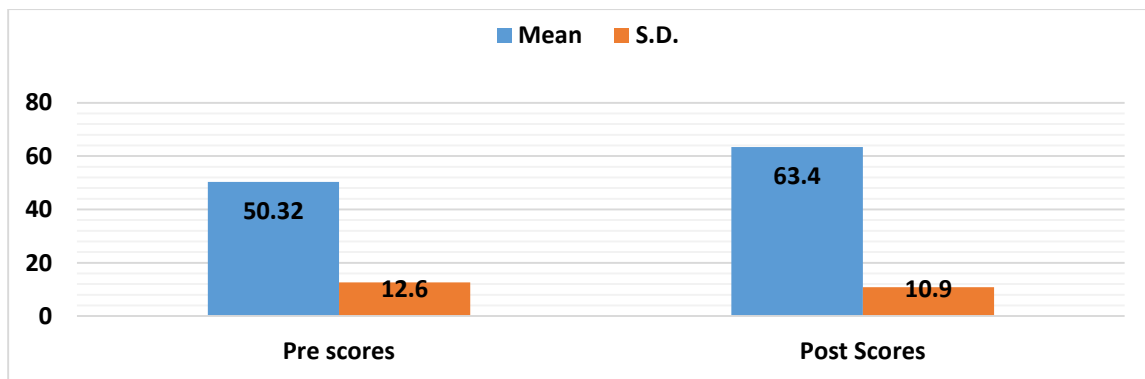


Figure 3.1 – Graphical representation of affect mean scores & S.D.

The above figure (3.1) suggests that there was increase in mean scores of positive affect and reduction in negative affect post intervention, which was also significant ( $t=5.74^*$ ,  $p < 0.01$  for positive affect and  $t= 4.59^*$ ,  $p < 0.01$  for negative affect). Various other studies have reported comparable findings where LKM helps in generating positive emotions (Carson et al. 2005; Fredrickson et al., 2008; Hutcherson et al, 2008; Seppala, 2008), increased empathy and compassion (Weibel, 2007; Lutz et al., 2008) and reduction in negative emotions among experimental group.

One possible mechanism accounting for the change can be due to cultivation of even slightest of positive intention for self and others through meditation has been related with generalization of these emotions into life experiences. LKM studies indicate that such rationalizing leads to changes in enduring personality traits itself, ensuing upward spiral of positive emotions and counter spiral of negative ones (Garland et al., 2010).

- **3.2- Level of positive and negative affect and pro-social behavior of adolescents (Post testing Phase).**



**Figure 3.2-Graphical representation of Mean sores & S.D. of Pro-social behavior among adolescents**

Te above figure (3.2) illustrates significant changes in prosocial scores of adolescents post intervention ( $t=5.55^*$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Similar trends have been observed wherein LKM has been substantiated in promoting social connectedness or thriving of perceived social support (Fredrickson et al., 2008) leading to greater harmony intra and interpersonally.

Following are few mechanisms that are speculated to result in this relationship:

- **Activated areas of Empathic Processing in brain:** Neuroscientific researchers have linked regular practice of LKM with strengthening and activation of anterior insular cortex; areas related to Empathy and Emotional Intelligence in brain (Hoffmann, Grossman & Hinton, 2011; Hutcherson, Seppala& Gross, 2014)
- **Enhanced Attention Regulation:** Evidence suggest that meditation has been liked with attention regulation capacity (Slagter et al., 2007; Tang et al., 2007; Lutz et al., 2008). This enhanced attentive capacity might result in ability to attend to need of others, increasing interoceptive awareness, making individual more empathetic and willing to help others.
- **Dereification:** It is the degree to which thoughts, emotions and feelings are taken to be real i.e. increased present moment awareness (Lutz et al., 2015). This leads to heightened emotional awareness wherein emotions are perceived as mere representation of mental events instead of being tinged with past experiences. This objective reasoning leads to reduction in usual automatic reactive response and in turn makes an individual more compassionate, understanding and helpful (Krishnakumar& Robinson, 2015).

However, the exact correlate underlying this relationship is still under investigation.



### 3.3- Affect and Pro-social behavior of Experimental And Control Group

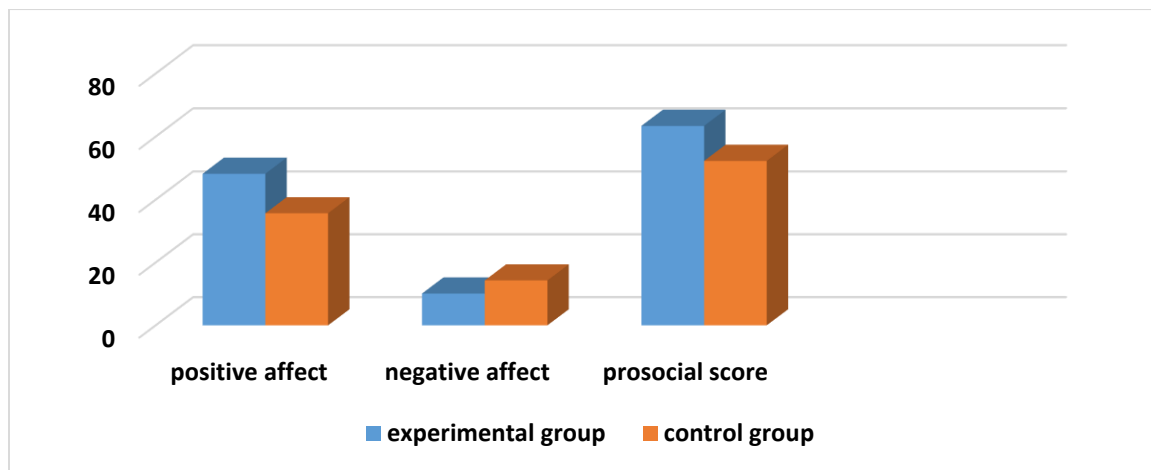


Figure 3.3- Scores of Experimental and Control group post intervention and post non- intervention.

The above figure (3.3) evidences that Experimental Group benefitted post intervention and scored higher on positive affect and prosocial scale and lower on negative affect which is also statistically significant when compared with Control Group scores on the same variables.

### 3.4- Correlation among studied Variables

Table 3.4- Correlation score of Affect scale and prosocial behavior of adolescents.

	Positive affect	Negative Affect	Prosocial score
Positive affect	1	-0.66*	0.45
Negative affect		1	-0.32
Prosocial Score			1

The table(3.4) demonstrates correlation scores indicating a weak but positive relationship (0.45) between positive affect and prosocial scores and weak negative relationship (-0.32) between negative affect and prosocial scores. However, a strong negative correlation exists between positive affect and negative affect (-0.66\*).

This implies that with increase in experience of positive emotions and reduction in labelling of negative ones, person's tendency to be empathetic and supportive towards others increases almost automatically. When self- appraisal becomes constructive instead of critical and also mental state is deliberately focused towards positivity, it becomes easier to develop harmonious relationship with self and society (Kok et al.,2013) which is said to be a crucial preventive factor in onset of any psychological diseases in future (Fredrickson et al., 2008; Corcoran, 2007). Further, a strong negative relationship between positive and negative affect indicates that practice of meditation upshots experience of positive emotions like joy, contentment, gratitude, hope which implicitly results in reduction of negative emotions and up scaling of pro-social tendencies (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, &Finkel, 2008).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Given the state of stress, isolation and maladaptive functioning being accounted incessantly amongst adolescents today, it becomes a vital need to address the underlying issue and equip them with techniques that are preventive in nature. Hence the present study utilized Loving kindness Meditation as a technique to balance the affective domain and also increase social connections amongst themselves making harmony and positivity spontaneous (Todorov & Uleman, 2003). However, majority of the studies have clinical population or students with low academic performance. This pilot study is an early step to investigate the impact of meditational intervention on normal school going adolescents.

Current study evidences a promising avenue of inculcating meditation in school based setting for adolescents to promote positive emotions and prosocial tendencies which has a capacity to put the trail of life on growth, self- satisfaction, happiness and moreover,of equipping them with abilities to thwart off signs of any upcoming psychological turbulences (Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008). Further it also implicates that students can take deliberate actions to inculcate positivity in their day to day lives making them approach life in more fulfilling ways for self and others and snowballing their odds of thriving. Furthermore, the findings of study can be of use for educators, administrators, policy makers, counsellors and even parents who can utilize meditation as a preventive technique to not only curb upcoming stress and anxieties of adolescent world but also in promoting good overall emotional and mental health.

#### V. Recommendations

Though, it reports exiting avenues for promoting emotional well- being yet, further refining of the training program is suggested for future studies. Following are few pointers on the basis of findings of the study:

- Sample Universe should be bigger encompassing more schools as limited sample puts question on generalizability of the research.
- Detailed investigation utilizing both subjective and objective measures to study outcome of the intervention is suggested.
- Moreover, important questions like mechanism of eliciting positive emotions and prosocial behavior needs to be addressed.
- Comparative study between impact of meditation on simply inducing positive emotions with effect of counteracting reflexive negative feeling towards competitors or person of dislike might give improved insight on the topic.
- Further, a long term follow up to assess if meditation can have effect on decision making behavior in daily life or endure beyond few months of intervention is also suggested.
- Finally, it can be stated that more qualitative and detailed assessment along with rigorous methodological process is required to make generalizations of the findings further.

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