

Mindfulness in Your Pocket: Learning to Manage Stress Before It Builds Up

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The Challenge: Before Stress Becomes Too Heavy

It is midnight during finals week. The laptop is glowing, and a quiet panic begins to settle in. For many students, pressure does not arrive as one dramatic moment. It builds slowly, until booking a counselling appointment can feel like a large and intimidating move.

This is the challenge *MindfulCityU* hopes to address. Developed under CityUHK's Learning: Experience, Achieve, and Develop (LEAD) Scheme, which supports student-led projects that enhance learning experience and campus life, *MindfulCityU* gives students an earlier way to begin: learning how to notice, understand, and manage stress before it becomes too heavy.



"We often hear a lot of voices from our peers," said Yahui, the *MindfulCityU* team leader. "They feel so stressed, especially during deadlines or exam periods. But they are hesitating to walk into some counselling centre."

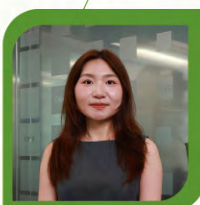
The Team: Turning Experience into a Platform

MindfulCityU was created by three PhD students from the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, with support from the project advisor, Professor Daniel Young Kim Wan, Associate Professor in the Department of Social and Behavioural Sciences. Ms Wang Yahui led the project "*MindfulCityU*: The Implementation of a Mindfulness Mobile Application for Promoting University Students' Mental Health", Ms Gloria Lin Jiahui worked on Cantonese materials and marketing, and Ms Dai Shuting created Mandarin content and helped with participant-related work. Together, they tried to turn psychological knowledge into something students would actually use.

Professor Daniel
Young Kim Wan



Ms Wang Yahui



Ms Dai Shuting



Ms Gloria Lin Jiahui

The Idea: Mental Wellness as a Learnable Practice

Designed for CityUHK students, the trilingual platform offers mindfulness-based sessions, mood check-ins, short guided practices, reflections, and an AI-supported chatbot in English, Mandarin, and Cantonese.

But the point is not simply access. Through small, regular activities, *MindfulCityU* turns mental wellness into something students can practise gradually, instead of something they only think about after stress has already built up.

Yahui described the platform as a way for students to "know much better about yourself". By checking their mood, reflecting on their thoughts, and practising mindfulness, students can recognise what they are feeling earlier and respond before things escalate.



The Practice: Learning to Catch Stress Early

One clear example is a module called "Thoughts Are Not Facts". Gloria explained that when students are stressed, they may mistake their thoughts for reality. For example, if a group member does not reply to a message, a student might quickly think, *They are ignoring me, or I must have done something wrong*. A small moment becomes heavier, not because the situation has changed, but because the thought around it has grown.

"Sometimes we just use our perception and think that is the fact," Gloria said. "But actually, that is just what you thought about."



MindfulCityU's module teaches students to notice the early signs of stress building up: an anxious thought, a quick assumption, or a negative story forming in their mind. By pausing to ask whether a thought is actually true, students can practise managing stress before it escalates.

The Design: Small Enough to Use

The team also learned that mental wellness practices have to fit into real student life. During early testing, some students found the first video was too abstract, so the team added more concrete examples. When longer practices felt difficult to complete, they created shorter three-minute and five-minute exercises for use between tasks.

That matters because students often need support when formal help feels far away. Shuting recalled one master's student who had newly arrived in Hong Kong and felt lonely without close friends or family nearby. The student found the platform helpful because she could use the chatbot and practise mindfulness at night, when no one else was around.



The Boundary: A Smaller First Step

Professor Young described *MindfulCityU* as part of a stepped-care approach. Students with mild stress can use the application to build awareness and practise mindfulness skills. If screening tools show more serious distress, students are encouraged to seek professional help through CityUHK's support services.

So *MindfulCityU* is not designed to replace counsellors. Rather, its role is to help students start earlier, while stress is still manageable.

In the end, its value lies in making that first step smaller. As Gloria put it, the goal is to help students move from simply surviving university stress to actively striving in university life. And sometimes, that begins with a few quiet minutes and a tool already in their pocket.

