



Mindfulness-oriented meditation improves self-related character scales in healthy individuals

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Abstract

Previous studies have shown that mindfulness meditation may improve well-being in healthy individuals and be effective in the treatment of mental and neurological disorders. Here, we investigated the effects of an 8-week mindfulness-meditation program on the personality profiles of three groups of healthy individuals with no previous experience with meditation as compared to a control group not enrolled in any training. Personality profiles were obtained through the Temperament and Character Inventory (Cloninger et al., 1993). In the experimental groups, significant increments after the training were obtained in all the three character scales describing the levels of self maturity at the intrapersonal (Self-Directedness), interpersonal (Cooperativeness), and transpersonal (Self-Transcendence) levels. No changes were found in the control group. Strikingly, these effects were significant only in those groups who were engaged in consistent daily meditation practice but not in the group who attended the meditation training but were less consistent in home practice. Since higher scores in the character scales are associated to a lower risk of personality disorder, we propose that the increase of self maturity after the training may be an important mechanism for the effectiveness of mindfulness-oriented meditation in psychotherapeutic contexts.

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1. Introduction

The most common forms of meditation have their roots in healing and spiritual Hinduism and Buddhist traditions and can be referred to as attentional and emotional regulatory training practices followed with the aim of developing psychophysical balance and well-being [2,3]. Despite the existence of several types of meditation techniques, open monitoring meditation and focused attention meditation are probably the two most common styles and are combined in contemporary clinical interventions based on mindfulness-meditation [2]. Mindful awareness, which is effectively cultivated through the practice of meditation, is an attribute of consciousness consisting of being attentive to and aware of present-moment events and experiences; this generally occurs with a non-judgmental attitude of openness and acceptance [2,4–6], in which activated self-feelings,

thoughts, and sensations are not attempted to be changed by the perceiver but are instead observed and accepted.

Thus, key aspects of mindful awareness are concepts like “openness” and “receptiveness” to the present-moment experience [4]; these concepts are in contrast with the lack of awareness (mindlessness) we typically experience when we are entangled in everyday thoughts and rumination and are tied into past or future concerns. This lack of mindful awareness may hinder the individuals’ awareness of cues and alarm signals coming from the internal or external environment, thus making the regulation of one’s behavior less efficient in relation to the situations and relations of the outside world. This in turn may ensue into several negative effects on self-regulatory processes and psychological well-being.

The scientific interest on mindfulness meditation has greatly increased in the last two decades [7] and this is probably due to the beneficial effects that this practice seems to have on psychological well-being. Indeed, a variety of mindfulness-based interventions have been found to be effective in the treatment of a number of clinical disorders including chronic pain, eating disorders, anxiety, and depression [8–12]. Meditative practices have also been

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found to produce beneficial effects on the well-being of healthy individuals [13–15]. Mindfulness meditation, in particular, has been proposed to improve well-being through a series of interacting mechanisms (see [16] for review) that include: i) more efficient attention regulation (e.g. [17]; see also [18,19]), ii) increased body awareness (e.g. [13,20]), and iii) more efficient emotional regulation abilities (e.g. [21,22]).

Only a few studies, however, have so far investigated whether and how mindfulness meditation may promote changes in personality and self-perception (see [16] for review). Changes in individuals' self-concept have been found in some previous studies adopting many different types of meditative practices. For example, in a study by Emavardhana and Tori [23], two large cohorts of young participants (18 years old) attending a 7-day Vipassana meditation retreat were compared with a control sample on several aspects of self-representations. The authors found significant increments for the meditator vs. the control group in several self-representation subscales of the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale [24], a personality inventory measuring the “completeness” of the concept of Self under many different internal and external perspectives such as Self-Criticism, Identity, Self-Satisfaction, Physical-, Moral-, Personal-, Social- and Family-Self. In another study, Nystul and Garde [25] compared transcendental meditators and non-meditators on the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale [26] and found that the former, with respect to the latter group, reported a more positive concept of self at the intrasubjective and intersubjective levels. Moreover, Turnbull and Norris [27] found that, after transcendental meditation practice, a group of healthy individuals changed their self-concepts and perceived their actual-self as being increasingly more similar to their “ideal- and social-self”.

From the point of view of personality, the possible correlation between mindfulness and personality traits has been explored in a variety of studies using in particular the well-known and diffuse Big-Five model of personality (e.g. [28]; see e.g. [29] for a meta-analysis with respect to the Big-Five model). For example, Ortner et al. [21] found that greater mindfulness scores were correlated with lower emotional interference and lower neuroticism. Moreover, in her meta-analysis on the relation between the Big-Five model and mindfulness, Giluk [29] found that the strongest negative correlations with mindfulness involved neuroticism and negative affect, while positive correlations involved especially conscientiousness. While neurotic individuals tend to be anxious, moody, and insecure and more susceptible to psychological distress, self-conscious individuals are dependable, goal-directed and with good self-regulation skills.

Another well-known model of personality dimensions, which is widely used especially in biological psychiatry studies, is the so-called “biosocial” model of personality developed by Cloninger [30,31]. In this model, personality is characterized by two components: Temperament and

Character. Based on a neurobiologically-based model of operant conditioning, Cloninger defines the “Temperament” as a complex system of automatic responses to environmental stimuli: the individual tends to respond in a similar way in similar situations [31]. There are 4 temperamental systems in the brain, each responsible for the activation, maintenance and inhibition of behaviors in response to specific classes of stimuli. Cloninger's model captures the essence of each of these systems in 4 separate dimensions: i) Novelty Seeking encompasses exploratory excitability, impulsiveness and curiosity, ii) Harm Avoidance captures levels of anticipatory worry, pessimism, and fear of uncertainty, iii) Reward Dependency refers to attachment, independency and sentimentality, and iv) Persistence refers to industriousness and resistance to frustration. The combination and relative arrangement of different levels of each temperament dimension describe the way the individual reacts and behaves in the environment, thus delineating the basic subtypes of personality and personality disorders; however, when considered alone, they are unable to predict whether or not a person *will* develop a personality disorder.

Accordingly, an additional aspect of personality, the “character”, has to be taken into account in order to better identify adaptive and maladaptive personality subtypes. Character refers to a more “conceptualized” (“mentalized”) knowledge and evaluation of the *self* (the conceptual idea one has of himself) and is responsible for efficient self-regulation. In Cloninger's terms, the character consists of three levels of “completeness” and maturity of the *self*: “intrapersonal”, “interpersonal” and “transpersonal”. Self Directedness (intrapersonal level) defines the maturity of the *self* as an autonomous individual; it is linked to concepts of self-efficacy and self-esteem; Cooperativeness (interpersonal level) defines the maturity of the *self* as part of a community or society and is linked to concepts like compassion, empathy, and tolerance; Self Transcendence (transpersonal level) defines the maturity of the *self* as integrating part of a transpersonal, universal reality and is linked to concepts like spirituality and creativeness. According to Cloninger, in order to obtain efficient self-regulation and be protected against personality disorder, an appropriate level of maturity has to be reached in these three scales, and particularly in the Self Directedness and Cooperativeness dimensions. Individuals with low levels of Self Directedness and Cooperativeness are at high risk of developing personality disorders, which would in turn follow the specific temperamental profiles. Within this theoretical framework, and in two subsequent steps [31,32] Cloninger developed a personality inventory called Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI) consisting of 240 questions investigating all the 7 relevant facets of personality (the four Temperament and the three Character dimensions).

Very few studies have correlated personality traits within the TCI framework with mindfulness levels or meditative practice in general. In a study by Smalley and colleagues [33] it was found that adults suffering from ADHD showed

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