

Short communication

The role of thought suppression in the relationship between mindfulness meditation and alcohol use

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Abstract

Previous studies have demonstrated that attempts to suppress thoughts about using substances may actually lead to increases in substance use. Vipassana, a mindfulness meditation practice, emphasizes acceptance, rather than suppression, of unwanted thoughts. A study by Bowen and colleagues examining the effects of a Vipassana course on substance use in an incarcerated population showed significant reductions in substance use among the Vipassana group as compared to a treatment — usual control condition [Bowen S., Witkiewitz K., Dillworth T.M., Chawla N., Simpson T.L., Ostafin B.D., et al. (2006). Mindfulness Meditation and Substance Use in an Incarcerated Population. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*.]. The current study further examines the mediating effects of thought suppression in the relationship between participation in the course and subsequent alcohol use. Those who participated in the course reported significant decreases in avoidance of thoughts when compared to controls. The decrease in avoidance partially mediated effects of the course on post-release alcohol use and consequences.

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1. Introduction

Several studies suggest that thought suppression often results in an increase, rather than a decrease, in unwanted thoughts (Wegner, 1997; Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987). Research in addictive behaviors has found that thought suppression impedes attempts to quit smoking (Haaga & Allison, 1994; Salkovskis & Reynolds, 1994; Toll, Sobell, Wagner, & Sobell, 2001), and that heavy social drinkers given

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instructions to suppress alcohol-related thoughts and urges demonstrated stronger expectancies after alcohol cue exposure when compared to controls (Palfai, Monti, Colby, & Rohsenow, 1997).

Contrary to thought suppression, mindfulness-based strategies emphasize acceptance, non-judgment and non-reaction to thoughts, feelings and sensations. Several studies have incorporated meditation and mindfulness techniques in treatment of substance use, with promising results (e.g., Gifford et al., 2004; Linehan et al., 1999). However, little is known about the mechanisms by which mindfulness leads to changes in substance use.

A study of a 10-day intensive Vipassana mindfulness meditation course held in a minimum security jail in Seattle found that course participants, when compared to a treatment as usual control (TAU) group, showed significant decreases in substance use three months following release from jail. The current study is a secondary data analysis examining thought suppression as a mediator of the relationship between meditation and post-release alcohol use.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The 173 study participants (57 meditation course, 116 TAU) in the current analyses completed both baseline and post-course assessments. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 58 ($M=37.4$, $SD=8.6$) and 79% were male. Sixty one percent identified as Caucasian, 13% African American, 8% Latino/a, 8% American Indian, and 1–2% as either Pacific Islander, Alaskan Native, Asian American or other. A full description of the sample can be found in Bowen et al. (2006).

2.2. Procedure

Participants practiced sitting meditation for approximately 8 to 10 hours daily throughout the 10-day course. Meditation instructions focused on observation of breath and body sensations, and acceptance, rather than reaction or avoidance, of internal experiences. Throughout the course, participants refrained from reading, writing or speaking, aside from asking questions to the instructor.

2.3. Measures

All participants were given a baseline battery of self-report questionnaires prior to the start of the course, a post-course assessment immediately following the course, and follow-up assessments three and six months after release from jail. Thought Suppression was measured using the White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI, Wegner & Zanakos, 1994). Quantity and frequency of peak weeks of alcohol use was assessed with the Daily Drinking Questionnaire (DDQ; Collins, Parks, & Marlatt, 1985). Alcohol-related negative consequences were measured using the Short Inventory of Problems (SIP; Miller, Tonigan, & Longabaugh, 1995). Means and standard deviations for all measures are listed in Table 1.

3. Results

Similar to previous findings (Rassin, 2003), a Principal Components Analysis of the WBSI provided support for a two-factor model from which two subscales were created: Thought Avoidance

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