



Predicting individual differences in mindfulness: The role of trait anxiety, attachment anxiety and attentional control

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ABSTRACT

Two correlational studies sought to identify possible predictors of individual differences in naturally occurring mindfulness. In study one, trait anxiety and attachment anxiety, but not attachment avoidance, were negatively predictive of mindfulness. In study two, trait anxiety (–) and attentional control (+), but not openness or parental nurturance, predicted mindfulness. In addition, there was evidence of a partial mediation effect of attentional control on the association between trait anxiety and mindfulness. Key features of trait anxiety such as attentional and interpretative processing biases, as well as those of attachment anxiety such as rumination and hypersensitivity, are at odds with mindfulness characteristics such as attention to what is present coupled with an attitude of openness and acceptance. Thus, whether generalised or specific, anxiety appears to be antagonistic to mindfulness; control over one's attentional resources may form part of the underlying explanation.

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1. Introduction

Originating in contemplative traditions such as Buddhism, mindfulness is defined as a state of enhanced attention to, and awareness of, what is taking place in the present (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Such awareness is characterised as open and receptive, but not judgemental (Bishop et al., 2004; Deikman, 1982). Mindfulness appears to be absent when attention is captured by rumination and fantasy (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Building on the original work of Kabat Zinn (1982), mindfulness-based interventions have proliferated over the past twenty years, mostly with very positive outcomes (Baer, 2003; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004). Underpinning most of these studies is an assumption that mindfulness training increases levels of mindfulness and such increases mediate the observed positive outcomes. However, attempts to validate this assumption have rarely been undertaken, the most likely reason being the absence of appropriate measures. It is only in the last few years that psychometrically valid measures of mindfulness have appeared in the literature (Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmüller, Kleinknecht, & Schmidt, 2006).

In developing their measure, Brown and Ryan (2003) argued that mindfulness could be considered a 'naturally occurring characteristic' (p. 822) with both inter- and intra-personal variation. Similarly, Walach et al. (2006) argued that mindfulness could be expressed dispositionally and in state form, depending on the

time-frame in question. Given the importance of the construct in terms of physical and psychological well-being, Brown and Ryan (2003) emphasised the need to explore its antecedents. As an initial step in this direction, the two studies reported here were designed to investigate possible predictors of mindfulness.

2. Study 1

Whilst it is likely that individual differences in mindfulness will eventually prove to be multiply determined, a decision was made in the first instance to explore both the developmental and personality domains for factors that might possess predictive utility. Attachment and trait anxiety emerged as strong candidates from their respective fields.

2.1. Attachment

Attachment processes developed in early childhood are believed to remain active throughout the lifespan (Bowlby, 1988). Current conceptualisations of attachment suggest a two-dimensional system, namely anxiety and avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley & Waller, 1998). Low levels of anxiety and avoidance reflect secure attachment (Schachner, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005).

Insecure attachment, however, can take one of two forms. If proximity-seeking is highly desired, then a 'hyper-activating' attachment strategy is adopted. This is characterised by intensive efforts to seek proximity and protection, hypersensitivity to signs of rejection and abandonment, and excessive rumination upon

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one's personal deficiencies and threats to one's relationships (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998). Collectively, these features constitute attachment anxiety (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). In contrast, where it is felt that proximity-seeking will not serve to reduce threat, a 'deactivating' attachment strategy is adopted. Here, one removes oneself from stimuli that are likely to activate the attachment system. This results in the avoidance of proximity-seeking, the denial of attachment needs and the suppression of signs of vulnerability. This strategy is known as attachment avoidance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

The current study seeks to determine whether attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance predict mindfulness. According to Bishop et al. (2004), mindfulness involves attending to immediate experience and adopting an attitude of curiosity, openness and acceptance. It also includes a 'decentred' approach to one's thoughts which serves to reduce cognitive elaboration and prevents rumination (Teasdale et al., 2000). Finally, instead of observing one's experiences through various filters of beliefs and expectations, mindfulness involves direct observation of them. Thus, given the hypersensitivity to rejection and rumination on personal deficiencies associated with attachment anxiety, together with the thought suppression, relationship avoidance and person perception biases associated with attachment avoidance, it seems that these dimensions are essentially antithetical to many of the key features of mindfulness. Therefore, it is hypothesised that both attachment anxiety (H1) and attachment avoidance (H2) will be negatively predictive of mindfulness. Furthermore, since low scores on both attachment dimensions are associated with secure forms of attachment, the analysis will examine the interaction of the two main predictors to see if it accounts for additional amounts of criterion variance.

2.2. Trait anxiety

Trait anxiety is closely related to one of the 'big five' personality factors, namely neuroticism; however, the underlying cognitive architecture of the former is probably better understood (Eysenck, 1992, 1997). People high in trait anxiety are thought to possess both attentional and interpretative processing biases (MacLeod, 1990). Specifically, they are more likely than low anxious counterparts to detect threat, regardless of its source (Eysenck, 2000). Similarly, they are more likely to make threatening interpretations of ambiguous stimuli whereas low anxious counterparts are inclined to make neutral interpretations (Eysenck, Mogg, May, Richards, & Mathews, 1991). This bias towards detecting, interpreting and elaborating threat may be contrasted with mindfulness which advocates an open acceptance of what is present. Accordingly, it may be hypothesised that trait anxiety will be negatively predictive of mindfulness (H3).

3. Method

3.1. Design and measures

A cross-sectional, correlational design was employed. Attachment-related anxiety, attachment-related avoidance and trait anxiety constituted the predictor variables. The criterion variable was mindfulness.

Attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance were measured by the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) questionnaire. The measure comprises 36-items and employs a six-point Likert scale. Higher scores signified more attachment-related anxiety ($\alpha = 0.92$) and attachment-related avoidance ($\alpha = 0.92$). Secure attachment patterns are reflected in low scores on both scales.

Trait anxiety, a 'facet' of neuroticism, was measured using an 8-item scale from the revised NEO personality inventory (NEO-PI-R; Costa and McCrae (1992)). Respondents were asked to read the item statements and to rate their level of agreement with each using a five-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicated more trait anxiety ($\alpha = 0.76$).

Mindfulness was measured by the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Although each of the 15 items signified the absence of mindfulness, the six-point Likert scale is arranged such that higher scores reflected more mindfulness ($\alpha = 0.85$).

3.2. Participants

Of the 334 questionnaires distributed to psychology students and staff, 127 usable replies were obtained (38%). The sample comprised 100 females and 23 males (four respondents failed to provide demographic details). Ages ranged from 17–60 years, with just over half (53%) of the participants being 30 years or younger.

3.3. Procedure

Students and teaching staff were approached on campus and invited to participate in the study. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire anonymously and return it either to a designated box on campus or post it to the researcher in an accompanying stamped self-addressed envelope.

4. Results

The means and standard deviations for the variables, together with their inter-correlations, are presented in Table 1. As expected, mindfulness correlated negatively and significantly with all three hypothesised predictors.

Next, mindfulness was regressed onto attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, their interaction, and trait anxiety (see Table 2). Overall, the model accounted for 18% of the variance in mindfulness and proved to be reliable [$F(4,122) = 6.57, p < 0.001$]. Individually, attachment anxiety and trait anxiety were significant predictors, the latter emerging as slightly stronger. Neither attachment avoidance, nor its interaction with attachment anxiety, emerged as significant.

5. Discussion

In line with the first hypothesis, adult attachment anxiety emerged as a significant independent predictor of individual differences in mindfulness. Examination of the attachment literature offers a solid conceptual basis for such a finding. Firstly, anxiously attached individuals are hypervigilant to threat-related cues, especially cues of rejection and abandonment, and ruminate extensively on distress-related material (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998). In contrast, mindful people do not deliberately monitor the environment for threat signals and, given their tendency not to elaborate incoming sensations and thoughts, they avoid rumination

Table 1
Mean scores, standard deviations, and inter-correlations between variables in study 1 ($N = 127$)

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Mindfulness	3.87	0.81	–			
2. Attachment anxiety	2.71	0.96	–0.32**	–		
3. Attachment avoidance	2.68	0.95	–0.25*	0.36**	–	
4. Trait anxiety	3.09	0.72	–0.33**	0.31**	0.22*	–

* $p \leq 0.01$; ** $p \leq 0.001$.

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