



Mindfulness, self-compassion, and happiness in non-meditators: A theoretical and empirical examination

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 February 2010

Received in revised form 17 September 2010

Accepted 28 September 2010

Available online 25 October 2010

Keywords:

Mindfulness
Psychological well-being
Self-compassion
Eudaimonia

ABSTRACT

This study examined relationships between mindfulness and indices of happiness and explored a five-factor model of mindfulness. Previous research using this mindfulness model has shown that several facets predicted psychological well-being (PWB) in meditating and non-meditating individuals. The current study tested the hypothesis that the prediction of PWB by mindfulness would be augmented and partially mediated by self-compassion. Participants were 27 men and 96 women (mean age = 20.9 years). All completed self-report measures of mindfulness, PWB, personality traits (NEO-PI-R), and self-compassion. Results show that mindfulness is related to psychologically adaptive variables and that self-compassion is a crucial attitudinal factor in the mindfulness–happiness relationship. Findings are interpreted from the humanistic perspective of a healthy personality.

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1. Introduction

The present investigation served several purposes. It primarily examined dispositional mindfulness in relation to happiness in non-meditating individuals. Recent studies show that individual differences in mindfulness exist also in non-meditators, albeit in weaker forms (e.g., Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006). This growing literature indicates that mindfulness is a natural quality that promotes adaptive human functioning. Another purpose was to test and potentially expand the empirical evidence to date by placing mindfulness in relation to psychological well-being (PWB), self-compassion, and personality traits. Finally, this study sought to deepen understanding of the structure and mechanism of mindfulness by utilizing a recently developed empirical model (Baer et al., 2006), and hypothesizing that self-compassion mediates and augments mindfulness's association with well-being.

1.1. The nature of mindfulness

“Mindfulness is a total clarity and presence of mind, actively passive, wherein events come and go like reflections in a mirror; nothing is reflected except what is.”

Allan Watts (1957)

Mindfulness is a Buddhism-derived concept and practice that involves an undistracted awareness of the here-and-now. A lack of mindfulness means unknowing of underlying processes in our

subjective and objective worlds. An example of this is seen by *automaticity* (Anderson, 1992), where a person goes into automatic-pilot-mode during a complex, well-learned activity. Likewise is the ‘unknowing’ of absorption in a daydream or rumination while driving and the state of flow, characterized by complete engagement, balance between challenge and expertise, and time seemingly to stand still (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). In these states, consciousness is focused on the content of experience instead of the situation itself. Although automatic processing is reliable for well-learned behaviors and flow states are optimal for specific undertakings, these both can be inappropriate and problematic in the unknowing.

Mindfulness also involves a non-judging, non-identifying attitude. Thoughts, feelings, and sensations are observed as they follow a natural course in experience. Passive observation of one's inner experience, as easy as it sounds, is difficult in practice: the mind struggles with stillness over time. Therefore, mindfulness requires vigilance and stable concentration as well as openness.

Because mindfulness means continual contact with experience, there is an opportunity for insight. Maintaining clear and open awareness over time allows first-hand experience of how the mind functions. Like shining a flashlight inwards, subtle mind-full processes are revealed, such as how strong are reactions and how rapid-fire is the change of thoughts and emotions.

Buddhist philosophy maintains that mindfulness leads to insight into suffering, non-self (i.e. no permanent ego or self that underlies experience), and impermanence (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1957). Accordingly, knowing one's true nature helps one make choices conducive to lasting happiness, not just ephemeral

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pleasures. Buddhist philosophy further emphasizes the additional role of compassion and loving-kindness for happiness (see Rahula, 1959, p. 72; Salzberg, 1997). In this context, compassion arises naturally with mindfulness; understanding the ubiquity of suffering and the deep connection shared with other living beings inclines us to feel others' pain and wish them well, just as we wish to be well.

Although psychologists have been exploring mindfulness in relation to well-being, there has as yet been little consideration of an initial compassion for self in terms of a supplementary role in this relationship. The current study investigates this phenomenon.

1.2. Self-compassion

The concept of self-compassion is fundamental to compassion for others, the heartfelt experience of sharing the pain of another, and the wish for alleviation of their suffering (Goldstein, 2003). The distinguishing feature of self-compassion is that it is directed to one's private suffering.

Neff (2003) created a self-report measure of self-compassion that taps into six qualities, three positive (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) and three negative (self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification). This conceptualization has shown promising implications for psychological health. Neff, Kirkpatrick, and Rude (2007) found that self-compassion attenuated anxiety after an ego-threat, and that an increase of self-compassion over a one-month period was related to psychological-well being. In the current study, self-compassion was operationally defined and measured using Neff's scale.

Again, according to Buddhist psychology combining high levels of compassion and mindfulness should relate to higher levels of happiness than when one of these constructs operates alone. Being mindful of thoughts, feelings, and sensations means an encounter with personal suffering (e.g., memories of hurtful events from childhood; realization of neglect for loved ones). Self-compassion teaches us the ameliorative effect of self-understanding, patience, and balance during difficult experiences, and reminds us that suffering is common to all.

1.3. Eudaimonism

Traditional and recent ideas about the nature of happiness have fallen under two general categories, *hedonism* and *eudaimonism*. The former view maintains that pleasure is the ultimate goal of life (Falikowski, 2004, p. 82), whereas the latter is concerned with actualization of human potential. Some contemporary psychologists (e.g., Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008) argue that hedonic happiness is reflected in what Diener, Lucas, and Oishi (2002) refer to as subjective well-being (SWB), a widely used measure for happiness that involves high positive and low negative affect and high life satisfaction. According to Ryan et al. (2008), SWB fits into hedonism because it neglects higher human needs.

The term eudaimonism derives from Socrates (who followed his "Daimon," inner guide) and was expounded by Aristotle in *The Nichomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 4th Century BCE/1985). Eudaimonia is held as an endeavor toward human virtue and self-realization, beyond the pleasure-pain dichotomy. It approximates Maslow (1971) and Rogers (1995/1980) on the *healthy personality* by emphasizing the significance, potential, and positivity found at the core of being. As we begin to live through this positive center, we unveil a happier, healthier personality. An empirical example of eudaimonia is demonstrated in positive outcomes of transpersonal psychotherapy (Boorstein, 1996), where patients report higher levels of well-being after a difficult process of self-learning and self-integration.

To measure happiness as eudaimonia, Ryff and colleagues (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) devised a self-report, multidimensional questionnaire of psychological well-being (PWB) based on related work (e.g., Jung, Maslow, and Aristotle). The PWB Scale includes six sub-parts deemed necessary for a eudaimonic life, including sense of purpose, autonomy, warm relationships, personal growth, self-acceptance, and environmental mastery. In the present study, this scale served as the main index of happiness. We maintain that when mindfulness levels are high, people make decisions conducive to the characteristics of PWB. Further, this association is strengthened by self-compassion.

1.4. Mindfulness in contemporary psychology

The benefits of mindfulness are gaining empirical support in psychology (e.g., Baer et al., 2008; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008). Baer (2003) and Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, and Walach (2004) conducted meta-analyses demonstrating effects of mindfulness-based interventions on positive functioning. Kabat-Zinn's (1982) pioneering program Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) has been shown to lower perceived stress and rumination in non-clinical undergraduates (Shapiro et al., 2008) and reduce anxiety and depression in clinical samples (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992). Another successful program, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002; Teasdale et al., 2000), has been shown to reduce the relapse of major depression (when paired with a patient's regular treatment) better than ordinary treatments alone.

Research has also focused on structural models of mindfulness. Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, and Freedman (2006) proposed a theoretical model stressing three fundamental components: intention, attention, and attitude (the IAA model). *Intention* refers to the underlying reason for developing mindfulness, which tends to shift over time from self-regulation to self-exploration, and then finally to self-liberation. *Attention* includes the ability to pay attention to one mental object over time, shift focus between objects, and inhibit thought processes. Finally, *attitude* refers to the heart-qualities embodied by mindfulness such as compassion, patience, and non-striving, as opposed to self-condemnation.

Researchers have also explored empirically-based models of mindfulness. Baer et al. (2006) conducted a factor analysis of several existing mindfulness questionnaires, yielding five major facets or skills involved in mindfulness. These skills include *observing* experiences, *describing* those experiences, *acting with awareness*, and *non-judgment* and *non-reactivity* to inner experience. From this model, Baer et al. created the Five-Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ), used in this investigation.

Unique to the present study is that mindfulness is approached as common to the experience of non-meditating individuals. Also, little is known about the mindfulness-happiness phenomenon in connection to fundamental personality structures. Therefore, we included a measure of the five-factor model of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1985). Neuroticism, agreeableness, and openness, are of particular interest because they closely relate to the mindfulness-happiness relationship as outlined. For example, neuroticism is comprised of anxiety, hostility, and vulnerability to stress, which are conducive to maladaptive functioning. Conversely, agreeableness involves trust, tender-mindedness, and modesty, factors associated with well-being and the attitudinal components of mindfulness. People high in openness tend to be very imaginative, interested in intellectual and abstract material, and sensitive to the depths of emotions, which are theoretically related to the cognitive elements of mindfulness (e.g., observing and describing).

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