



# The relationship between dispositional mindfulness, attachment security and emotion regulation

Karen Goodall\*, Anna Trejnowska, Stephen Darling

Division of Psychology and Sociology, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, EH21 6UU, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

Mindfulness may be conceptualised as a dispositional trait which differs across individuals. Previous research has independently identified both attachment security and emotion regulation abilities as correlates of dispositional attachment. We investigated the relationship between the three concepts in a sample of 192 participants who had previously had no mindfulness training. Participants completed the Five Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ), the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Revised (ECR-R) and the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) online. Exploratory factor analysis revealed a 2-factor solution accounting for 52% of the variance across scores on these measures. The first factor accounted for 36% of the variance and loaded highly on emotion regulation and mindfulness subscales. The second factor accounted for 16% of the variance and loaded highly on emotion regulation, attachment and mindfulness subscales. We called the first factor 'conscious awareness of emotional states' and the second factor 'metacognition of emotional states'. The results confirmed that both emotional regulation abilities and attachment security were related to dispositional mindfulness.

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## 1. Introduction

Mindfulness is conceptualised as a state of attentiveness to present events and experiences that is unmediated by discriminating cognition (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). It involves paying sustained attention to ongoing sensory, cognitive and emotional experience, without judging or elaborating on that experience (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Interest in mindfulness has grown from converging research which indicates that higher levels of mindfulness are positively correlated with various indices of mental well being (e.g., Brown et al., 2007; Falkenström, 2010; Howell, Digdon, & Buro, 2010).

Mindfulness levels can be increased through meditation or mindfulness-based training (Baer et al., 2008; Falkenström, 2010), however individual differences in mindfulness levels have been noted in those with no prior experience (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006; Brown et al., 2007; Cordon & Finney, 2008; Thompson & Waltz, 2007; Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmuller, Kleinknecht, & Schmidt, 2006). Brown et al. (2007) suggested therefore that mindfulness may be an inherent or dispositional trait. The

current study set out to explore potential correlates of dispositional mindfulness in non-meditating individuals.

As the regulatory benefits of mindfulness are increasingly recognised (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006), emotion regulation has been identified as a correlate of mindfulness. Gratz and Roemer (2004) define emotion regulation as the ability to monitor, accept and understand emotions and to continue with goal-directed behaviour when emotionally activated. Mindfulness training has been demonstrated to impact on emotion regulation at both the neural level (Goldin & Gross, 2010; Modinos, Ormel, & Aleman, 2010) and at the cognitive level (Jermann et al., 2009). Furthermore, in disorders of emotion, such as depression and anxiety disorder mindfulness-based interventions alleviate symptoms (Jermann et al., 2009; Roemer et al., 2009).

Early modulation of emotion is thought to evolve initially from a dyadic management of emotion between caregiver and infant (Schore, 2003) thus implicating the role of early interactions on later emotion regulation abilities. Siegel (2001) suggested that differences in maternal interaction style may play a mediating role in the simultaneous development of both emotion regulation and mindfulness as higher mindfulness in mothers could result in the mother attending more receptively to the infant's needs and emotional states which would simultaneously promote secure attachment and mindfulness in the child.

Attachment theory proposes that cognitive schemas of regulating behaviour during episodes of distress are learned through repeated interactions with caregivers in childhood (Bowlby,

\* Corresponding author. Address: Division of Psychology and Sociology, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh EH21 6UU, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 (0)131 474 0000.

E-mail address: [kgoodall@qmu.ac.uk](mailto:kgoodall@qmu.ac.uk) (K. Goodall).

1980). Attachment in adulthood can be construed as individual differences on two orthogonal dimensions: (a) the anxiety dimension and (b) the avoidance dimension (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Low scores on these scales denote attachment security. Attachment anxiety is associated with a hyperactivating regulation style which encompasses hypersensitivity to perceived threats to self and relationships and excessive rumination. Attachment avoidance, in contrast, is related to an underactivating style, whereby the individual defensively inhibits emotions through denial or distortion (Cassidy, 1994).

Secure attachment has been shown to positively relate to several indices of emotion regulation capacity, such as lower stress reactivity, lower physiological reactivity to ego-threatening stimuli and behavioural self-regulation (Diamond, Hicks, & Otter-Henderson, 2006; Powers, Pietromonaco, Gunlicks, & Sayer, 2006). Conversely, insecure attachment correlates positively with higher levels of depression, anxiety and somatic symptoms (e.g., Shaver, Lavy, Saron, & Mikulincer, 2007) and disordered personality traits (Tiliopoulos & Goodall, 2009).

Furthermore, several studies have demonstrated an association between attachment and mindfulness (Cordon & Finney, 2008); in particular, low levels of attachment anxiety have been associated with higher levels of mindfulness (Walsh, Balint, Smolira, Fredericksen, & Madsen, 2009). It should be noted, however, that studies based on participants who have had meditating experience, or where their meditation experience is unknown, are potentially confounded by the fact that increasing levels of mindfulness could simultaneously increase attachment security (Shaver et al., 2007). It is important, therefore when investigating the role of attachment in individual differences in dispositional mindfulness to focus on non-meditating populations. The majority of studies of self regulation focus on emotion regulation. Attachment, although linked to emotion regulation, comprises elements also of self-regulation in terms of interpersonal relationships and concepts and may therefore be thought of as a broader concept.

There are, therefore, good theoretical reasons for thinking that attachment and emotion regulation may independently be related to dispositional mindfulness, however to our knowledge there is no research which investigates the underlying relationship between all three concepts. In the current study we were interested in how specific aspects of emotion regulation and attachment might be related to individual differences in particular aspects of dispositional mindfulness. Bearing this in mind, we chose to conduct exploratory factor analysis using measures of emotion regulation, mindfulness and attachment.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Measures

#### 2.1.1. The Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire

(FFMQ; Baer et al., 2006) is the most up-to-date and comprehensive measure of mindfulness, which incorporates the components measured by five previously developed mindfulness questionnaires. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or rarely) to 5 (very often or always true). It is a 39 item multifaceted scale consisting of five subscales: (i) *non-reactivity to inner experience* (noting thoughts and feelings without the need to respond to them); (ii) *observing/noticing/attending* (observing and paying attention to sensations/perceptions/thoughts and feelings); (iii) *describing/labelling experience with words*; (iv) *acting with awareness* (non-distraction and concentration) and (v) *non-judging of experience* (acceptance of thoughts and emotions experienced).

The facet scales show adequate to good internal consistency with alpha coefficient values ranging from .75 to .91 (Baer et al., 2006). Construct validity was supported by Baer et al. (2008).

2.1.2. *The Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire – Revised* (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) is a 36-item self-report assessment of adult attachment. The scale comprises two 18-item subscales measuring two latent dimensions which are hypothesised to underlie the attachment construct: *attachment-related anxiety* and *attachment-related avoidance*. Items are rated on a seven point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores reflect greater levels of avoidance and/or anxiety and therefore a more insecure attachment. The anxiety dimension illustrates the extent to which people fear about their partners' lack of availability and responsiveness. The avoidance dimension measures levels of discomfort with closeness and interdependence. The scale has good internal reliability, with alpha coefficient values of .90 or higher for both sub scales (Fairchild & Finney, 2006) and convergent and discriminant validity (e.g., Sibley, Fischer, & Liu, 2005).

#### 2.1.3. The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale

(DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004) The DERS is a brief 36 item self-report questionnaire designed to assess multiple aspects of emotion regulation. The measure yields a total score as well as scores on six scales derived through factor analysis: (i) *non-acceptance of emotional responses* (e.g., 'When I'm upset, I become embarrassed for feeling that way'); (ii) *difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviour*; (e.g., 'When I'm upset, I have difficulty getting things done'), (iii) *impulse control difficulties* (e.g., 'When I'm upset, I feel out of control'); (iv) *lack of emotional awareness* (e.g., 'I pay attention to how I feel'); (v) *limited access to emotion regulation strategies* (e.g., 'When I'm upset, I believe that there is nothing I can do to make myself feel better'); (vi) *lack of emotional clarity* (e.g., 'I am confused about how I feel').

Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert type scale, with 1 as 'almost never' and 5 as 'almost always'. Higher scores indicate greater difficulties in emotion regulation. Gratz and Roemer (2004) report Cronbach Alpha coefficients greater than .80 for each subscale and internal consistency of 0.90, as well as, good test-re-test reliability and adequate convergent validity with established measures of emotion dysregulation in non-clinical samples.

## 2.2. Participants and procedure

The online questionnaire battery comprising the FFMQ, ECR-R and DERS was presented on a British online survey site. The survey front page comprised an information sheet and participants signalled informed consent by clicking on an 'I agree' button which took them to the survey questionnaires. Institutional ethical approval was granted. Participants were recruited through university email adverts and opportunity sampling out with the university. In total 199 individuals participated. The sample was 84% female, and participants reported an average age of 26.6 years (range 18–65 years). Nationality was as follows: UK: 77.9%, other European: 22.1%. Five participants who reported meditating regularly were excluded from the analysis, leaving a total of 194 non-meditators. 47.9% of these reported they had tried meditation, but were not regular practitioners, while 52.1% reported no experience with meditation at all.

## 2.3. Statistical analysis

SPSS 19.0 was used for the descriptive analysis of raw data, first order correlations and factor analysis.

## 3. Results

Preliminary analyses were performed on the data to ensure linearity assumptions were not violated. Inspection of scatter plots

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