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Emotional intelligence mediates the relationship between mindfulness and subjective well-being

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ABSTRACT

Both mindfulness and emotional intelligence are associated with positive life outcomes, including greater subjective well-being. The present study examined whether emotional intelligence mediates the relationship between mindfulness and subjective well-being. Participants completed measures of characteristic mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and affect and life satisfaction as indices of subjective well-being. Higher levels of mindfulness were associated with greater emotional intelligence, positive affect, and life satisfaction and lower negative affect. Higher levels of emotional intelligence were associated with greater positive affect and life satisfaction and lower negative affect. Emotional intelligence mediated between mindfulness and higher positive affect, lower negative affect, and greater life satisfaction. These results provide information regarding a possible process through which mindfulness exerts its beneficial effects.

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1. Introduction

Mindfulness consists of non-evaluative awareness and focus on the present. Mindfulness is a flexible state of consciousness that encompasses open and receptive attention and awareness of both one's inner state and the outside world (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). Characteristics of mindfulness include clarity of awareness, non-conceptual (or non-semantic) awareness, ability to widen or narrow attention, non-interference of evaluation or judgement with sensory experience, orientation to the present, and aware transitions between focus of attention such as in transitions between attention on the inner self and the outer world (Brown et al., 2007). As Brown et al. (2007) pointed out, as well as being a state of consciousness, mindfulness is also a trait, in that some individuals are more typically in a mindful state than other individuals. Studies of the biological underpinnings of higher levels of trait mindfulness (e.g., Frewen et al., 2010) suggest that mindfulness is associated with differential brain activation during emotional processing.

Higher levels of mindfulness are associated with an impressive variety of good outcomes, including better mental health, greater relationship satisfaction, and more effective management of pain (Brown et al., 2007). One of the most firmly established correlates of trait mindfulness is greater subjective well-being (Baer et al., 2008; Brown, Kasser, Ryan, Linley, & Orzech, 2009; Brown & Ryan,

2003; Falkenstrom, 2010; Howell, Digdon, Buro, & Sheptycki, 2008). For example, greater mindfulness is associated with significantly more positive affect, less negative affect, and greater life satisfaction (Brown & Ryan, 2003). As mindfulness increases as a result of interventions, such as meditation training, well-being also tends to increase (Falkenstrom, 2010; Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008; Zautra et al., 2008).

Some preliminary evidence suggests that higher levels of mindfulness are associated with more adaptive emotional functioning, operationalized as emotional intelligence (Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003). Models of emotional intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) include emotional abilities or competencies (such as perceiving, understanding, managing and harnessing emotions effectively in the self and others) that group together and that involve drawing on emotion in adaptive ways. Perceiving of emotion involves recognizing emotional cues. Understanding emotion entails applying knowledge of the complexities and subtleties of emotional experience. Managing emotions involves being able to regulate emotions effectively and appropriately. Harnessing emotions consists of utilizing emotion towards other ends such as drawing on positive mood to facilitate creativity.

Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2004) argued that emotional intelligence is best conceived of as an ability similar in nature to cognitive intelligence. Other theorists and researchers (Neubauer & Freudenthaler, 2005; Petrides & Furnham, 2003) posited that emotional intelligence can also be conceptualized as dispositional or trait functioning. Even though the emotional intelligence literature

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has sometimes presented ability and trait functioning conceptualizations of emotional intelligence as mutually exclusive alternatives (e.g., Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000), they may be complementary dimensions of adaptive emotional functioning (Schutte, Malouff, & Bhullar, 2009). Higher levels of emotional intelligence, both measured as a trait and as an ability, have been found to be associated with various positive outcomes, and especially with indices of subjective well-being such as positive affect and life satisfaction (Austin, Saklofske, & Egan, 2005; Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004; Martins, Ramalho, & Marin, 2010; Schutte et al., 2009; Schutte, Malouff, Simunek, McKenley, & Hollander, 2002; Schutte, Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2007; Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004; Wing, Schutte, & Byrne, 2006).

Core aspects of mindfulness help explain the connection between emotional intelligence and mindfulness. As Brown et al. (2007) pointed out mindfulness adds “clarity and vividness to current experience and encourages closer, moment-to-moment sensory contact with life” (p. 219) and “enhances self-regulated functioning that comes with ongoing attentional sensitivity to psychological, somatic and environmental cues” (p. 220). Koole (2009) pointed out that mindfulness encourages development of emotional regulation. Thus, core aspects of mindfulness may make it more likely that individuals develop the competencies comprising emotional intelligence. Mindfulness may encourage individuals to accurately perceive their own and others’ emotions and effectively regulate emotions. The non-evaluative aspect of mindfulness should make it more likely that individuals are able to gain accurate understanding of their own and others’ emotions. The self-regulated functioning inherent in mindfulness relates to the emotion management component of emotional intelligence. Finally, awareness of current emotions may facilitate the timely harnessing of emotions.

Facilitating the growth of emotional intelligence may be one of the processes through which mindfulness brings about desirable outcomes. Greater subjective well-being is associated with both more mindfulness (Baer et al., 2008; Brown et al., 2009; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Falkenstrom, 2010) and higher emotional intelligence (Austin et al., 2005; Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Brackett et al., 2004; Schutte et al., 2009, 2002; Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004; Wing et al., 2006). Mindfulness may facilitate the development of greater emotional intelligence, and emotional intelligence in turn may lead to greater well-being.

The present study set out first to replicate previous findings regarding the connections between mindfulness and subjective well-being, mindfulness and emotional intelligence, and emotional intelligence and subjective well-being. High positive affect, low negative affect, and greater life satisfaction are often used as indices of subjective well-being (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005) and the present study likewise used them as indicators of subjective well-being. Second, the study set out to examine whether emotional intelligence mediates the relationship between mindfulness and subjective well-being.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

One hundred and twenty-five university students, including many mature aged returning students from different regions of Australia, participated in the study. Participants’ mean age was 34.17 (SD = 9.63); 108 were women, 14 were men and three did not report their gender. The high percentage of women participating was consistent with high percentage of female students in the student population. Participants anonymously completed online previously developed and validated scales (in the order of Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory, Assessing Emotions Scale, PANAS, and Satisfaction with Life) comprising the study material.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Mindfulness

Trait mindfulness was assessed through the short form of the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (Kohls, Sauer, & Walach, 2009; Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmuller, Kleinknecht, & Schmidt, 2006). The scale assesses the extent to which individuals focus on the present in a non-evaluative manner. In previous research this short form of the inventory had an internal consistency of 0.86 and evidence of validity such as associations with years of practice of meditation and lower levels of depression and anxiety (Kohls et al., 2009). In the present study the internal consistency of the scale, as assessed by Cronbach’s alpha, was 0.82.

2.2.2. Emotional intelligence

The Assessing Emotions Scale (Schutte et al., 1998, 2009) was used to measure trait emotional intelligence. The scale assesses how effectively respondents typically identify, understand, regulate, and harness emotions in themselves and others. In previous research the scale had internal consistency of between 0.87 and 0.90, a two-week test–retest reliability of 0.78, and evidence of construct validity through association with related constructs (Schutte et al., 1998, 2009), including associations with other measures of trait emotional intelligence (Kirk, Schutte, & Hine, 2008) and ability emotional intelligence (Schutte, Malouff, & Hine, *in press*). In the present study the internal consistency of the scale, as assessed by Cronbach’s alpha, was 0.87.

2.2.3. Positive and negative affect

The Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) assess positive and negative affect. The Negative and Positive Affect Scales consist of emotion descriptors (such as “enthusiastic” for the Positive Affect Scale and “guilty” for the Negative Affect Scale). The PANAS has different instructions for different time periods, ranging from how the respondent feels at the moment (state affect) to how the respondent generally feels (trait affect). The present study used the general (trait) instructions. In previous research internal consistency for the scales using the trait instructions ranged from 0.85 to 0.88, eight-week test–retest reliability ranged from 0.68 to 0.71, and the scales showed evidence of validity, including expected associations with other measure of mood (Watson et al., 1988). In the present research internal consistency, as assessed by Cronbach’s alpha, was 0.85 for the Positive Affect Scale and 0.84 for the Negative Affect Scale.

2.2.4. Satisfaction with life

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a measure of global life satisfaction. In previous research the internal consistency of the measure ranged from 0.82 to 0.87 and the scale showed evidence of construct validity through associations with theoretically related constructs, including other aspects of subjective well-being (Pavot & Diener, 1993). In the present study the scale had an internal consistency of 0.89.

3. Results

Greater mindfulness was significantly associated with more positive affect, more life satisfaction, and less negative affect. Greater mindfulness was also associated with higher emotional intelligence. Higher emotional intelligence was associated with more positive affect, more life satisfaction and less negative affect (see Table 1).

Mediation analysis traditionally involves four steps (Kinney, 2006). First, the predictor must correlate with the dependent variable. Second, the mediator must correlate with the dependent

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