



The contribution of mindfulness to predicting burnout in the workplace



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ABSTRACT

Research has found that burnout leads to depression, reduced productivity, and increased compensation claims. According to the Job Demands–Resources Model, staff start to progress through the first (emotional exhaustion), second (cynicism) and third (reduced professional efficacy) components of burnout when they perceive their workplace demands exceed their workplace resources and personal traits. Recent research suggests that mindfulness (a singular focus to the present with an attitude of acceptance) could be a new personal trait that buffers against burnout. The first aim of the present study with 381 employees was to test whether each of the five facets of mindfulness were significant predictors for the three components of burnout. The second aim was to test how effective overall mindfulness was at predicting burnout, when compared to other resources. Each component of burnout was analysed separately through hierarchical multiple regression. Mindfulness, personal traits, workplace resources and workplace demands were entered separately as blocks in the analysis. The results found that different facets of mindfulness predicted different components of burnout. The results also found that overall mindfulness was a new, unique personal trait that can be factored into the Job Demands–Resources Model. Clinical applications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Burnout in the workplace is comprised of three distinct components, emotional exhaustion (extreme mental or physical fatigue), cynicism (detached response to workplace services), and reduced professional efficacy (perception of an inability to successfully complete tasks). In all its forms, burnout has been found across all occupations, with the most common cause being prolonged stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Burnout is detrimental to the individual because it reduces mental wellbeing, even to the point of depression (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Exhausted or cynical employees are detrimental to employers and the broader economy, through reduced productivity, lost work time and increased compensation claims. For example, workplace compensation claims currently cost the Australian economy \$A14.8 billion. A significant proportion of these claims are predicted to be due to burnout, because the majority are filed due to prolonged stress (Guthrie, Ciccarelli, & Babic, 2010). As such, understanding the personal and workplace resources and demands that contribute to employees developing burnout has broad benefits to society.

The Job Demands–Resources model proposes that burnout will occur when employees perceive that the quality and quantity of the demands in the workplace exceed the quality and quantity of the resources available to them (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Thus, the presence of workplace demands does not always determine if

employees reach the point of stress where they start to feel exhausted. Instead, resources can buffer against demands. Resources can be present in the workplace environment or they can be a personal trait. Effective resources include work climate, job social support, job autonomy, and skill discretion, and personal traits, such as self-efficacy and optimism (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Age and education can be confounded by older employees having more education, better jobs and less burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Mindfulness, or bringing one's complete attention to the present moment with an accepting attitude, has been suggested to be an additional personal trait that can influence whether or not a person becomes burnt out.

'Mindful' individuals perceive their internal thoughts and external sensations without attempting to avoid them, or mentally labelling them as 'good' or 'bad' (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Individual differences in a person's ability or enthusiasm to sustain a mindful state have been found. This ability or enthusiasm has been termed as dispositional mindfulness, and has been found to act as a positive personal trait that bolsters mental health (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009). For example, dispositional mindfulness has been found to co-relate with psychological wellbeing in a study of 184 university students (Harrington, Loggredo, & Perz, 2014). In organisational psychology, being more mindful has been found to reduce employee burnout (Cohen-Katx, Wiley, Capuano, Baker, & Shapiro, 2005). For example, an intervention based on mindfulness training has been found to reduce burnout in a study of 27 nursing professionals (Cohen-Katx et al., 2005). These results indicate that mindfulness could be another personal internal resource that buffers against burnout. However, to date, no research has investigated the effect of mindfulness on burnout in a generalised sample. In

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addition, the interaction effects between the five facets of mindfulness, and the three components of burnout have been minimally explored.

Mindfulness was initially considered as a one-dimensional construct, with tests yielding a single score (Brown & Ryan, 2003). However, recent research suggests that mindfulness consists of five different attributes (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006). These attributes include 1) the observation of the present and external environment, 2) the ability to describe that environment with words, 3) the ability to act with awareness of that environment, 4) to not judge the environment, and 5) to not react thoughtlessly to that environment. In the intervention described by Cohen-Katx et al. (2005), mindfulness was measured as a single construct. Therefore, with the expanded definition, it is not clear whether one or all of the five facets will predict which component of burnout. In addition, no research to date has identified whether mindfulness acts as a unique trait that buffers against burnout, or whether it merely enhances the effectiveness of the personal traits and workplace resources already identified.

This study has two aims. The first aim is to test whether the five facets of mindfulness predict workplace burnout in a sample of employees with diverse educational qualifications. It is hypothesised that higher levels of the five traits of mindfulness will be associated with lower scores on the three components of burnout. The second aim is to test whether the facets of mindfulness continue to predict each component of burnout over and above the variables previously identified by the JD–R Model (i.e., personal traits, workplace resources and workplace demands). It is hypothesised that mindfulness would remain a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and the loss of professional efficacy, over and above the influence of personal and workplace resources and workplace demands.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Volunteers ($N = 381$, 78% female) were over 18 years and employed at least one day per week. Participants reported their highest level of education (finished high school ($n = 79$); technical and trade qualification ($n = 59$); undergraduate degree ($n = 128$); postgraduate degree ($n = 118$)), their marital status (single, divorced or separated, married or other), and how many hours per week they worked. Volunteers were recruited from four sources. First, an invitation was posted on the primary researcher's Facebook page at two separate time points, four weeks apart. Second, a local psychologist emailed invitations to his professional contacts. Third, all staff and students at a regional university were sent an invitation three times, with two weeks between each invitation. Lastly, a local yoga studio included an invitation to participate in the study in an e-newsletter. Ethics approval for the study was granted by the Human Ethics Committee (S/13/489) of the researchers' university.

2.2. Procedure

Interested participants clicked on an embedded link (www.surveymonkey.com), in the invitation to access the survey. The first page of the survey provided information about the study and participants provided consent to participate by clicking the 'next' button, then participants were taken to the survey itself. No incentive was offered for participants to complete the survey.

2.3. Variables included in the JD–R Model

2.3.1. Personal traits

Mindfulness was measured with the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ, Baer et al., 2006), which has 39 items in total. There are the five subscales of 1) 'Observe' (8 items, e.g., 'I remain present with sensations and feelings even when they are unpleasant or

painful'), 2) 'Describe' (8 items, e.g., 'I'm good at finding the words to describe my feelings'), 3) 'Act-aware' (8 items, e.g., 'I rush through activities without being really attentive to them'), 4) 'Non-judge' (8 items, e.g., 'I tend to evaluate whether my perceptions are right or wrong') and 5) 'Non-react' (7 items, sample item 'Usually when I have distressing thoughts or images, I step back and am aware of the thought or image without getting taken over by it'). Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$ (Observe), .89 (Describe), .88 (Act-aware), .92 (Non-judge), and .81 (Non-react). Items were rated on a Likert scale, from 1 (never or very rarely true) to 6 (very often or always true).

Dispositional optimism was measured with the Life Orientation Test–Revised Scale (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994), 6 items, e.g., 'In uncertain times, I usually expect the best'. Items were rated on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$.

Self-efficacy was measured with the General Self-efficacy Scale (Scholz, Gutierrez, Sud, & Schwarzer, 2002), 10 items, e.g., 'I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough'. Items were rated on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$.

2.3.2. Workplace resources

The supportive climate in the workplace was measured through the Work Climate Questionnaire (Baard, Devi, & Ryan, 2004), 15 items, e.g., 'I feel understood by my manager'. Items were rated on a Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$.

The degree of autonomy in the participant's job was measured with the Job Autonomy Scale (Voydanoff, 2004), four items, e.g., 'I have a choice in deciding how I do my tasks at work'. Items were rated on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$.

Skill discretion was measured with the Skill Discretion Scale (Schwartz, Pieper, & Karasek, 1988), four items, e.g., 'In my job I keep learning new things'. Items were rated on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$.

Social support in the workplace was measured with the Job Social Support Scale (Van Ypern & Hagedoorn, 2003), four items, e.g., 'I can rely upon my immediate supervisor when things get tough at work'. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$.

2.3.3. Workplace demands

Work demands were measured with two subscales (Work Load and Emotional Work Demands) of the Tilburg Work Pressure Scale (Roe & Zijlstra, 2000). The Work Load subscale had seven items, e.g., 'Can you manage your work easily?'. Emotional Work Demands had 6 items, e.g., 'Are you confronted with matters that affect you personally?'. All items were rated on a Likert scale, from 1 (not at all) to 9 (all the time). Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$ (Work Load) and .86 (Emotional Work Demands).

2.3.4. Burnout

Burnout was measured with the Maslach Burnout Inventory General (MBI-G) (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). The MBI-G measures the three separate components of burnout: emotional exhaustion (5 items, e.g., 'I feel used up at the end of the workday'); cynicism (5 items; e.g., 'I have become less enthusiastic about my work'); and professional efficacy (6 items, e.g., 'In my opinion, I am good at my job'). Items were rated on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Scores were reversed for professional efficacy such that high scores indicated greater levels of each component of burnout. Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$ (emotional exhaustion), .86 (cynicism), and .72 (reduced professional efficacy). Each component of burnout is considered a separate construct, and are not summed for analysis.

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