



# The origins of individual differences in dispositional mindfulness



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## ABSTRACT

A large and coherent body of evidence reveals that high dispositional mindfulness is a positive personal resource, yet remarkably little is known about the origins of individual differences in mindfulness. Attachment theory describes how early experiences with caregivers shape psychosocial development across the lifespan. Drawing from attachment theory, we propose that those who have received sensitive and responsive caregiving in childhood are more likely to have a secure attachment style which may, in turn, provide greater capacity for mindfulness. In an adolescent sample attending a large urban university (Study 1), there were indirect effects of parental rejection and parental warmth on mindfulness via attachment anxiety and avoidance. In Study 2 we tested the same hypotheses in a group of adolescent high school students and replicated the above pattern of results. In brief, both retrospective reports (Study 1) and current reports (Study 2) of the quality of parenting received were associated with individual differences in mindfulness via attachment processes. This research suggests that the origins of individual differences in dispositional mindfulness may have their roots in early childhood experiences.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Individual differences in dispositional mindfulness

Much evidence attests to the benefits of high dispositional mindfulness on a wide range of psychosocial outcomes (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011). Mindfulness is often defined as the process of “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4) and “the non-judgmental observation of the ongoing stream of internal and external stimuli as they arise” (Baer, 2003, p. 125). In contrast to mindfulness, *mindlessness* refers to the relative absence of mindfulness, and is characterized by attention being directed to the future or the past, a preoccupation with thoughts, emotions, fantasies and planning, and behaving on automatic pilot rather than with conscious awareness (Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003). Brown and Ryan (2003) note that mindlessness is often defensively motivated whereby individuals may be unwilling to attend to particular thoughts, emotions or experiences that arise.

In addition to the practice of cultivating mindfulness through meditation, the term mindfulness can refer to a state or quality of awareness, or to a psychological trait (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2005). A mindful state is characterized by directing bare attention toward the present moment, and attending only to experiences

actually observed rather than reacting based on habitual responses or prior history (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). It has been proposed that almost all individuals are capable of mindfulness, but there are individual differences in dispositional mindfulness, and mindfulness may therefore be conceptualized as a trait-like construct (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). As such, dispositional mindfulness refers to an individual's capacity and “tendency to abide in mindful states over time” (Brown et al., 2007, p. 218). The development of self-report measures of dispositional mindfulness (e.g., Baer et al., 2004; Baer et al., 2008; Brown & Ryan, 2003) has provided substantial evidence to indicate that individuals do indeed differ in naturally occurring dispositional mindfulness, and that these individual differences predict psychosocial outcomes in theoretically meaningful ways.

High dispositional mindfulness is associated with increased life satisfaction (Brown & Ryan, 2003), healthy emotion regulation (Baer et al., 2004; Pepping, Davis, & O'Donovan, 2013), lower depression and anxiety, more positive affect and less negative affect (Brown & Ryan, 2003), secure attachment (Pepping, O'Donovan, & Davis, 2014; Shaver, Lavy, Saron, & Mikulincer, 2007), and increased self-esteem (Pepping, O'Donovan, & Davis, 2013). High dispositional mindfulness is also associated with romantic relationship satisfaction (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007; Wachs & Cordova, 2007), initial romantic attraction in women (Janz, Pepping, & Halford, 2015) and satisfaction with interpersonal relationships (Pepping, O'Donovan, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Hanisch, 2014). In brief, individuals higher in dispositional mindfulness fare better than their less mindful counterparts on a wide range of psychological and social outcomes.

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However, remarkably little is known about the origins of dispositional mindfulness.

### 1.2. The origins of dispositional mindfulness

Several researchers have suggested that the capacity for mindfulness may have its roots in early childhood experiences (Ryan, Brown, & Creswell, 2007; Shaver et al., 2007). Ryan et al. (2007) proposed that individuals who experience sensitive and responsive caregiving characterized by love and support for autonomy may have greater capacity for mindfulness. Specifically, the development of mindful awareness and capacity for self-observation is “facilitated by providers who can be attuned to, mirror, and resonate with the infant’s experience” (Ryan et al., 2007, p. 180), whereas individuals who grow up in abusive or rejecting environments may have this capacity for mindful attention impaired (Ryan et al., 2007). We agree with this proposition, and in light of recent evidence indicating that individuals with a secure attachment style also tend to be more mindful (Pepping et al., 2014; Pepping, O’Donovan, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Hanisch, 2015; Shaver et al., 2007), we propose that attachment theory may be a useful framework for conceptualizing the origins of individual differences in dispositional mindfulness.

### 1.3. Attachment theory and origins of mindfulness

Attachment refers to the affectional bond formed between an infant and caregiver during the early years of life (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Bowlby (1969) proposed that humans have a biologically evolved *attachment behavioural system* that motivates infants to seek proximity to stronger and wiser caregivers to protect the infant from harm. When caregivers are reliably available, sensitive, and responsive, an infant develops a secure attachment style and “is likely to experience felt security – a sense that the world is generally safe, that attachment figures are helpful when called upon, and that it is possible to explore the environment curiously and confidently and to engage rewardingly with other people” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 21). When infants do not experience responsive caregiving, they adopt secondary, insecure attachment strategies (Main, 1990).

The attachment system is active across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment in adulthood is conceptualized along two dimensions: attachment anxiety, which is characterized by fear of rejection, concern about relationships, and fear of abandonment; and attachment avoidance which reflects discomfort with intimacy and closeness (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Individuals who are low in anxiety and avoidance are said to have a secure attachment style. Insecure attachment (high attachment anxiety and/or avoidance) has consistently been shown to predict poorer psychosocial adjustment, whereas secure attachment (low attachment anxiety and avoidance) is consistently associated with a wide variety of positive psychosocial outcomes (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

It is well established that sensitive and responsive parenting leads to the development of a secure attachment style in childhood and adulthood (Grossman, Grossman, & Waters, 2005; Van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2004), and there is moderate continuity of these attachment patterns across the lifespan (Fraley, 2002). The quality of parenting received in childhood predicts a wide range of other outcomes that are related to mindfulness. For example, authoritarian parenting from fathers has been linked with heightened neuroticism (Patock-Peckham & Morgan-Lopez, 2009), which is inversely related to mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Similarly, poor parental bonds with fathers are associated with higher depression (Patock-Peckham & Morgan-Lopez, 2007), and greater parental neglect is associated with symptoms of stress (Backer-Fulghum, Patock-Peckham, King, Roufa, & Hagen, 2012), both of which are inversely correlated with mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Keng et al., 2011). In brief, the quality of parenting received in childhood is associated with attachment

security, and a range of other indices of well-being that are related to mindfulness. It therefore seems likely that the quality of parenting received in childhood may influence not only attachment patterns, but also a range of other psychosocial outcomes, including the development of mindfulness.

Recent research reveals that attachment and mindfulness are related (Pepping, O’Donovan, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Hanisch, 2015; Shaver et al., 2007; Walsh, Balint, Smolira, Fredericksen, & Maden, 2009) such that those with a secure attachment style also tend to be more mindful. Pepping et al. (2014) recently found that the two dimensions of attachment insecurity (anxiety and avoidance) predicted 18.8% of the variance in mindfulness in non-meditators, and 43.3% of the variance in mindfulness in a group of experienced meditators. There may be a bi-directional causal association between attachment and mindfulness, whereby individuals with a secure attachment style may have greater capacity to focus attention on the present moment without worrying about rejection and abandonment (attachment anxiety) and without defending against threatening emotions or intimacy (attachment avoidance; Ryan et al., 2007; Shaver et al., 2007). On the other hand, individuals higher in mindfulness may be less consumed with thoughts and emotions related to insecure attachment (Ryan et al., 2007; Shaver et al., 2007). Recently, Pepping, Davis, and O’Donovan (2015) examined this bi-directional association using very brief experimental procedures. Results revealed that priming attachment security did not lead to an increase in state mindfulness, and increasing state mindfulness did not lead to an increase in state security. However, these were very brief experimental manipulations and the possibility remains that over time, attachment security may facilitate greater mindfulness and vice-versa.

Rather than being defensively on guard to avoid being rejected or injured, an individual with a secure attachment style can focus his or her attention on the present moment in an open and non-judgemental manner, which may provide greater capacity for mindfulness (Ryan et al., 2007). Individuals with a secure attachment style have typically experienced caring and supportive interactions with attachment figures during times of distress (Grossman et al., 2005; Van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2004), which is associated with comfort in the knowledge that others will be supportive and responsive in times of distress, and individuals with a secure attachment style can therefore divert attention to other activities rather than worrying about possible abandonment or being cautious of closeness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). We propose that sensitive and responsive parenting should lead to secure attachment, which in turn may provide greater capacity for mindfulness.

To date, only one study has investigated the association between reports of parenting received in childhood and mindfulness. In an important investigation of predictors of dispositional mindfulness, Walsh et al. (2009) found that retrospective reports of parental nurturance did not predict mindfulness. However, participants’ experience with mindfulness meditation practice was not assessed, and it is therefore difficult to draw firm conclusions from this study. Given that experience in mindfulness meditation leads to increases in mindfulness (Lykins & Baer, 2009), in order to accurately examine predictors of ‘naturally occurring’ dispositional mindfulness, it is necessary to exclude individuals who have engaged in practices that systematically enhance mindfulness. This is important given the possibility that those who have experienced low parental nurturance may be particularly motivated to practise mindfulness meditation to alleviate the cognitive and emotional difficulties arising from difficult childhood experiences. In addition, the relationship between parenting received in childhood and dispositional mindfulness is likely to be complex and may be indirect.

## 2. Study 1

Remarkably little is known about the origins of individual differences in dispositional mindfulness. Several researchers have proposed

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