The Effects of Mindfulness on Mental and Physical Health and in Everyday Life

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Introduction

Mindfulness, in psychological terms, is defined as “paying total attention to the present moment with a non-judgmental awareness of inner and outer experiences” (Chiesa & Serretti, 2011, p. 442). According to David, Boniwell, and Ayers (2013), mindfulness is deeply rooted in Buddhist principles, specifically through meditation, which has been incorporated into modern day psychology (p. 388). Over the last couple of decades, research on mindfulness has been augmented (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007, p. 211), which has uncovered the practicality of integrating mindfulness into therapy for the treatment of mental and physical health conditions (Chiesa & Serretti, 2011, p. 442). Key to mindfulness is implementing awareness, attention, and consciousness to present events and experiences in everyday life in order to create mental clarity (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 882). An emphasis on being “present” is core to mindfulness therapy, as it is used to help patients perceive reality accurately, in preference to using misconstrued thoughts and perceptions that form habitually due to holding only brief attention and awareness (Brown et al., 2007, p. 212). Being “present” is also fundamental in individuals who are experiencing physical pain or illness. Important mindfulness-based interventions to mention are Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), all of which are verified by a growing body of research (Brown et al., 2007, p. 219). Finally, there is a factor of intention to being mindful that may or may not have an affect on the outcome of such
mindfulness practices. Objective research into the effects of mindfulness on mental and physical health is worth the time and effort for it could result in new therapy techniques for the overall health and well being of the public.

**Mindfulness and Buddhist Roots**

Mindfulness, according to the Buddhist way of life, “offers a scaffold for a meditative way of life compromising the balancing of attention-concentration (to discipline a wandering mind) and awareness-introspection (to understand karma and not-self)” (David, Boniwell, & Ayers, 2013, p. 363). The Buddhist faith is the birthplace of mindfulness, having established the practice’s core meaning and various methods of use, particularly with mindfulness meditation. David et. al, (2013) reveals how the Buddhist tradition centers itself around balancing the mind during mindfulness meditation in order to reduce any mental, emotional, or physical pain and suffering (p. 359). It is noted that a lack of affective, or emotional, balance causes people to either be disconnected from emotional expression or overtly enveloped in extreme emotion (p. 392), which could lead to mental health issues such as depression or bipolar disorder. Brown et. al, (2007) illuminates that the origin of mindfulness comes from the Buddhist idea that a majority of mental anguish is caused by our “perceived need” for our lives to be different than they currently are, such as wanting things we can’t have (p. 226). What it takes to overcome these thoughts is an attention and awareness on the present moment in order to more efficiently process things as they truly are, which takes place during the meditation. In mindfulness-based interventions (detailed below in **Mindfulness and Physical Health**), mindfulness meditation is applied in treatment of a plethora of mental and physical health issues.

**Consciousness, Attention, and Awareness in Everyday Life**

Three important terms in establishing mindfulness are *awareness, attention, and*
Consciousness. Awareness (our perception of experiences both inside and outside or ourselves), along with attention (placing focus on our awareness of a certain experience), makes up what is our consciousness (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 882). Throughout our day, we are usually going from task to task without truly taking note of our surroundings; we only briefly pay attention to simple tasks such as washing dishes or folding laundry. In practicing mindfulness, however, sustaining awareness and attention is imperative to maintaining an uninterrupted connection with reality because it allows for mental flexibility and clarity during the both the simple and challenging events and experiences we endure throughout our lifetime (Brown et. al, 2007, p. 212). This mental flexibility and clarity allows us to move from a broad perspective of reality to a focused set of details such as thoughts, emotions, and anything else we perceive about our current state (Brown et. al, 2007, p. 213, 215), the idea being that one will be able to regulate any overwhelming thoughts and emotions that arise, and will let them pass rather than overreact and dwell on them.

The Importance of Intention

The Kabat-Zinn definition of mindfulness makes it clear that there needs to be an intention to practice such awareness and attention to ourselves and to the world around us (Brown et, al. 2007, p. 215). Intention in this context means that there is a willingness to commit oneself to being mindful, with the belief that this practice will be beneficial to whatever problem is being dealt with. According to Stefan Schmidt (2004), intention is necessary to promote healing because it is used to “gain insight” into ourselves, and “to encounter ourselves and the world with an attitude of love and compassion” (p. S-9). He explains that the connection with our “inner selves” originates through mindfulness, and is important in creating a “healing interaction” between our minds and bodies (p. S-8, S-10). However, it’s hard to find sufficient
research that reports on the effects of intention during mindfulness practice, so it is unclear whether or not this intention during mindfulness plays a significant role in cultivating overall health and well-being.

**Mindfulness-Based Interventions and Mental Health**

From recent empirical research, mindfulness has proved to be a useful technique in reducing the effects and relapse of diagnosed mental health issues. Specifically, mindfulness facilitates the “regulation of negative emotional states” by preserving presence during emotionally offensive stimuli rather than unfocused and instinctive overreacting (Brown et. al, 2007, p. 220). Such findings are monitored via the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), a tool used to evaluate changes in mindfulness during therapy (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 824). Brown & Ryan (2003) concluded that those with a higher score in mindful attention and awareness are more cognizant of their emotions and behavior (p. 832), and show lower severity of “anxiety, depression, and neuroticism and higher life satisfaction, self-esteem, and positive affectivity” (p. 843).

Mindfulness has also made its way into several therapy techniques and interventions for mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), initially created for recovering depressive individuals, has spread its effects to individuals with anxiety and bipolar disorder as well (Chiesa & Serretti, 2011, 442). MBCT is usually governed in a group context, helping to maintain progress in symptom reduction through enhanced support. Brown et. al, (2007) provide a lot of support on these mindfulness-based interventions. They found that, similar to MBCT is therapy known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). As noted previously, both practices integrate the use of mindfulness mediation to help patients maintain an “affective balance”, which is defined by David et. al,
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(2013) as “the mental freedom from excessive emotional states, strong emotional fluctuations, emotional apathy or inappropriate emotions” (p. 392). Both MBCT and MBSR have demonstrated efficacy in treating patients who suffer from depression and anxiety by providing tools necessary to achieve an affective balance (David et. al, 2013).

According to Brown et. al, (2007), MBSR is attributed to lessening symptoms of stress and mood disorders, and strengthening emotional regulation, perceptions of control, and overall levels of mindfulness of the patients involved, while Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) reduces distress symptoms, thoughts of suicide, and “psychiatric hospitalizations, and improves social adjustment, and global mental health functioning” (p. 221). Finally, Brown et. al, (2007) found that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) fosters an ability for the patient to observe thoughts and emotions through mindfulness in a nonreactive way by having the patient focus attention on his or her core values in order to practice healthy behavioral regulation (p. 221). These therapy techniques use mindfulness as a central route to improved mental health quality and they prove to have sustaining and significant effects.

Mindfulness and Physical Health

It is clearly understood that no one enjoys being in pain, so when Brown et. al, (2007) argues that one must be able to consciously focus on the pain in his or her body in order to positively support their physical health (p. 221), it is quite puzzling. However, this attention to the body, which is known as somatic experience, is a mindfulness technique that has recorded success when it comes to alleviating physical pain and discomfort. A reluctance to immerse oneself in somatic experience during times of “physical pain and distress” can have the counterproductive effect of lowering one’s threshold to these negative physical states (Brown et. al, 2007, p. 222). Improved physical health conditions through the use of mindfulness-based
interventions are most vividly seen when it comes to relieving stress in afflicted individuals. When it comes to diseases such as cancer, AIDS, and chronic pain, patients have benefitted from interventions such as MSBR to not only reduce medical symptoms, but to also reduce the stress that comes along with having such emotionally draining diseases (Brown et. al, 2007, p. 222). For example, in Randomized Clinical Trials (RCT) on the effects of mindfulness mediation on patients with psoriasis, a stress related skin disease, the individuals who underwent mindfulness therapy had more positive results (clearer skin) than the control groups (p. 223). Furthermore, Brown et. al, (2007) noted that mindfulness therapy also has some positive effects on our immune systems, as seen in a controlled experiment that resulted in greater antibody response to a flu vaccine (p. 223).

**Conclusion**

Mindfulness has shown great promise in promoting mental and physical health. Through a group of mindfulness-based interventions and meditation practices, mindfulness proves to be of aid to those under mental and/or physical distress. However, there is a factor of intention that is key to being mindful, and it raises the question of how important this willingness to participate is in achieving legitimate well-being. Is it possible that someone who has an intention to be mindful will benefit more from mindfulness than one who does not, since being mindful is partly about focusing on one’s inner feelings and emotions in order to relieve any mental or physical distress? This is the question that needs to be examined in order to connect the effects of mindfulness practice with a certain level of intention. By surveying a group where intention during mindfulness is present against a group where it is not, the results could reveal whether or not intention can increase an individual’s benefits from practicing mindfulness.
References


