

Mindfulness and Happiness among Students: Mediating Role of Perceived Stress

Akhilendra K. Singh

Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

Mindfulness is a state of mind characterized by awareness and attention in the present moment, which reduces negative feelings and enhances positive emotions. This study aims to explore the relationship of mindfulness, perceived stress and happiness. The mediating role of stress in the relationship between mindfulness and happiness was also underpinned. A sample of 144 students from senior secondary schools was tested by using Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale –R, Perceived Stress Scale, The Oxford Happiness Scale and Subjective Happiness Scale. The data, which was obtained through these tests, were analyzed by applying correlation and regression analysis and the results indicated that mindfulness was significantly and positively associated with happiness whereas negatively associated with perceived stress. The data stipulates that perceived stress significantly mediates the relationship of mindfulness and happiness. The results were discussed in the light of available research; future direction and recommendation for effective intervention strategies were also suggested.

Keywords: Meditation Analysis, Mindfulness, Perceived Stress, Subjective Happiness, Trait Happiness.

Mindfulness has gained precedence in positive psychology. The past three decades have witnessed the remarkable augment in theorizing and research on mindfulness (Keng, Smoski & Robins, 2011). Practitioners also have shown greater interest in the application of mindfulness-based interventions in clinical and non-clinical settings (Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007; Chiesa & Malinowski, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008). Mindfulness is a useful concept as it enhances our health and well-being by disengaging individuals from automatic thoughts, habits, and unhealthy behavior patterns (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Although, the notion of mindfulness is rooted in Eastern philosophy yet, research on its contributions in Eastern countries is very limited (Charoensukmongkol, 2014). The present study was conducted using the survey to explore the relationship of mindfulness, perceived stress, and happiness among students. It intended to address two focal research questions, whether mindfulness could explain perceived stress and happiness among students. Similarly, how the level of perceived stress is associated with happiness. In addition to the direct effect,

(1987) defined happiness as an individual's affective and cognitive evaluation of their life. Some measures of happiness emphasize the affective component (e.g., the Positive and Negative Affect Scale, Watson Clark & Tellegen, 1988), some emphasize the cognitive component (e.g., the Satisfaction with Life Scale, Diener et al., 1985), and some others present a combination as general measures of happiness (e.g., the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, Hills & Argyle, 2002). OHQ has been used widely to assess global trait happiness (Hills & Argyle, 2002; Meleddu et al., 2012).

Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) proposed another approach to define happiness that captures the global and subjective qualities of happiness. Regardless of assessing positive and negative affect separately, this approach allows the individual to give an overall assessment of the extent to which he or she is a happy person. Consequently, it identifies a relatively stable attribute of happiness which is separate from life experiences.

Stress is an inevitable part of an individual's life. Stress can be defined as generalized perception of individual and cognitive appraisal of stress is vital in evaluating stressful events (Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983). A person interprets environmental events based on their own values and resources and reacts physiologically, psychologically, and behaviorally. Any life event is only characterized as stressful when the demands of the event exceeded over the person's available resources (Cohen et al., 1983). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) stated that individuals experience stress when they perceive events they encounter as 'taxing or exceeding their resources and jeopardize their well-being' (p. 19).

Mindfulness and Happiness

The relationship between mindfulness meditation practices and psychological well-being were tested in earlier studies. By comparing meditators and non-meditators on several indices of psychological well-being Lykins and Baer (2009) reported that meditators were significantly high on mindfulness, self-compassion and overall sense of well-being compared to non-meditators. Likewise, Orzech,

Shapiro, Brown, and McKay (2009) found that more meditation experience was related to higher levels of subjective well-being and self-compassion. In a recent study, Englund-Helmke (2014) established that a person with longer history of mindfulness practices would likely have a greater quality of work, happiness, calmness, and peace. A significant and positive association of mindfulness with several aspects of well-being was also reported in previous studies (Good et al., 2016; Iani, Lauriola, Cafaro & Diddona, 2017; Keng et al., 2017).

In addition to the psychological health benefits of meditation practice and cultivating 'mindful alertness' in everyday life, simply being in a mindful state momentarily is associated with a higher sense of well-being (Lau et al., 2006). Previous researches also documented the fact that people with higher levels of natural mindfulness (without mindfulness practices) feelings are more inspired, joyful, grateful, hopeful, content, vital, and satisfied with life (Cardaciotto, Herbert, Forman, Moitra & Farrow, 2008; Christopher & Gilbert, 2010; Feldman, Hayes, Kumar, Greeson, J., & Laurenceau, 2007; Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmuller, Kleinknecht & Schmidt, 2006). Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

H1: Mindfulness would be significantly and positively associated with happiness.

Mindfulness and Perceived Stress

Studies comparing meditators and non-meditators have shown that individuals with a higher level of mindfulness tended to experience lower stress and stress-related symptoms such as anxiety, neuroticism, depression, negative emotions, nervousness, sadness, hopelessness and unpleasant affect (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Charoensukmongkol, 2014; Christopher & Gilbert, 2010; Englund-Helmke, 2014).

Lykins and Baer (2009) reported that meditators were significantly lower on psychological symptoms, rumination, thought suppression, fear of emotion, and difficulties with emotion regulation, compared to non-meditators. Based on their comprehensive study Sharma, Sharma, and Sharma (2011) argued that meditation can have far-reaching physical and psychological effects. Meditation can reduce

psychosomatic symptoms and are helpful in the prevention and treatment of anxiety, depression, obsession, arthritis, diabetes, heart disease, strokes, migraines, and tension headaches.

In previous research, it has also been found that people with higher levels of natural mindfulness (without mindfulness practices) reported feeling of less stress, anxiety and depression. (Cardaciolo et al., 2008; Feldman et al., 2007; Good et al., 2016; Walach et al., 2006). Weinstein, Brown and Ryan (2009) investigated the effects of Mindfulness on stress perception and reported that individuals with higher level of dispositional mindfulness, perceived less stress. Therefore:

H2: Mindfulness would be significantly and negatively associated with perceived stress.

Perceived Stress and Happiness

Perceived stress is predisposed to associate positively with psychological and health-related problems. A study by Ghorbani, Krauss, Watson, and LeBreton (2008) found that those who were high in perception of stress tend to experience higher level of anxiety and depression. In their study Bedini et al. (2011) also demonstrate that perceived stress is negatively associated with measures of quality of life. Akintayo (2012) established a significant relationship between occupational stress and psychological well-being. Using college student sample Hamarat, Thompson, Zabrocky, Steele, Matheny, and Aysan, (2001) examined the levels of perceived stress as predictors for life satisfaction. In this study, perceived stress was surfaced as a significantly better predictor for life satisfaction. Recently, Wike (2015) also found a predictive, significant relationship of perceived stress for psychological well-being among college students. Therefore:

H3: Perceived stress would be significantly and negatively associated with happiness.

Mediating Role of Perceived Stress in Mindfulness and Happiness Relationship

In earlier researches, mindfulness was found to mediate the relationship between meditation practices and psychological well-being (Baer et al., 2008; Josefsson, Larsson, Broberg, & Lundh, 2011). Most studies support the notion

that mindfulness practices lead to a reduction in levels of psychological distress and symptoms, and greater levels of well-being. Practicing mindfulness may also assist in the prevention of mental health problems, by lowering levels of stress and negative psychological symptoms, and increasing levels of well-being (Ma & Teasdale, 2004; Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995; Reibel, Greeson, Brainard, & Rosenzweig, 2001). Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

H4: Perceived stress will significantly mediate the relationship between mindfulness and happiness.

Method

Participants

One hundred and forty-four students of secondary and senior secondary level from various schools of Varanasi District have participated in the study and the age of participants range from 14-18 years (M=15.48 years; SD=0.96 years). Seventy-five of the participants were male (52.08 %) and 69 were female (47.92 %). There were 105 participants from secondary level (72.92 %) and 39 from senior secondary level (27.08 %) of schooling.

Measures

Along with demographical data sheet (age, gender, education) following measures were employed in the present study:

Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale-R (CAMS-R; Feldman, et al., 2007). It is a 12 item self-report measure, written in everyday language, which is more useful for individuals without prior experience in mindfulness practice. Feldman, et al., (2007) also suggest the utilization of the 10-item version of CAMS-R with the omission of 2nd and 7th items since these items may be potentially confounded with worry and rumination respectively. Consequently, the 10 items version was used in the present study. Ten items version of CAMS-R demonstrated acceptable levels of internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.78$, Feldman et al., 2007).

Oxford Happiness Questionnaire-Form S (OHQ-S). This was developed by Hills and Argyle (2002) and it makes use of eight items in its short form to assess trait happiness. This

scale uses a 6-point scale affixed with 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The scale items express how participants may feel about themselves (e.g., 'I am well satisfied about everything in my life'). The OHQ demonstrate good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.91$) and test-retest reliability ($r = 0.69$ after 2 weeks) (Cruse, Lewis, & McGuckin, 2006).

Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS). This scale was developed by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) to measure subjective happiness from a global perspective. It includes four items (e.g., 'In general, I consider myself') using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (less happy) to 7 (more happy). In sequence to adapt the questions to adolescent level, questions three and four were slightly modified (Holder, Coleman & Wallace, 2008). The SHS shows a high degree of internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha ranged from 0.79 to 0.94) (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

Perceived Stress Scale-10 (PSS10; Cohen & Williamson, 1988). It is the extensively used as a psychological instrument for measuring the perception of stress (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2012). Participants are asked to indicate how often they have found their lives uncontrollable, unpredictable, and overloaded in last months. Participants responded on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often). The PSS 10 was found to be highly reliable ($\alpha = 0.91$; Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2012).

Procedure

All the necessary permissions regarding data collection was taken from the school's administration. Interactions with students were kept personal and the aim of the study was explained to them. When the students agreed to

participate in the study a booklet containing the above scales were given to them for response.

Statistical Analysis

Mediated regression analysis was completed to determine the relationship between mindfulness and happiness as mediated by stress. In mediated regression (Baron & Kenny, 1986) the dependent variable (happiness) is regressed on the independent variable (mindfulness) in the second step, the mediator (stress) is regressed on the independent variable. In the last step, the dependent variable is regressed consecutively (hierarchical) on both the mediational and independent variables. At each step, there must be a significant ($ps < 0.05$) effect and the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable must be less in the third equation than in the first equation. Full mediation is supported when the independent variable has no significant ($ps < 0.05$) effect on dependent variable when the mediator variable is controlled, whereas partial mediation is indicated if the effect of the independent variable is reduced, but is still significant ($ps < 0.05$) when the mediator variable is controlled (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Results

To examine the relationship between mindfulness, stress and happiness, correlational analysis was performed, and the obtained results are reported in Table-1. It shows that mindfulness was significantly and negatively correlated with perceived stress and positively correlated with trait happiness and subjective happiness. Perceived stress was significantly and negatively correlated with trait happiness ($r = -.308$, $p < .01$) and subjective happiness ($r = -.329$, $p < .01$).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for all variables (N=144)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Mindfulness	24.264	3.839	1			
2. Perceived Stress	21.306	6.832	-.293**	1		
3. Trait Happiness	48.007	9.862	.226**	-.308**	1	
4. Subjective Happiness	17.931	4.481	.197**	-.329**	.343**	1

** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 2: Mediated Regression Analysis

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables (Happiness)	
	Trait Happiness	Subjective Happiness
Mindfulness		
Step 1 (Mindfulness > Happiness)	.226**	.197**
Step 2 (Mindfulness > Stress)	-.293***	-.293***
Step 3a (Stress > Happiness)	-.308***	-.329***
Step 3b (Mindfulness > Happiness)	.149	.110
Sobel Test	2.65**	2.74**

p < .01 *p < .001

Hypothesis Testing

The analyzed results from mediated regression analysis are presented in Table-2 and Figure- 1. In the first step of the analysis, Happiness (dependent variable) was regressed on the mindfulness (independent variables). In step 2, Stress (mediating variable) was regressed on mindfulness. For step 3 of the mediated regression, each of the two happiness variables was regressed on mindfulness and stress separately. Thus, for trait happiness and subjective happiness, two separate regressions were calculated.

First, for the association between mindfulness and happiness (trait and subjective), the result showed a positive relationship between the two variables, suggesting that high level of trait mindfulness can be linked to higher level of trait happiness ($\beta = .226, p < .01$) and subjective happiness ($\beta = .197, p < .01$). This relationship was also statistically significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Results further indicate that mindfulness was significantly and negatively associated with stress ($\beta = -.293, p < .001$) (H2 is supported). Stress was significantly and negatively associated with trait

happiness ($\beta = -.308, p < .001$) and subjective happiness ($\beta = -.329, p < .001$) (H3 is supported).

According to criteria proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), obtained results supported full mediation of stress in the relationship between mindfulness and happiness (Trait and Subjective). Results of Sobel Test also supported that stress is significantly mediating the relationship of mindfulness with trait happiness and subjective happiness (H4 is supported).

Discussion

The present study contributes to existing research related to effects of mindfulness on psychological health and perceived stress. The study, which focused on students' respondents from India, tested the direct and indirect effect of mindfulness on perceived stress and happiness. Evidence was found about the direct effects of mindfulness on perceived stress and happiness. On the other hand, the indirect effects of mindfulness were found through perceived stress for happiness.

Mindfulness and Happiness

First, the results indicated that mindfulness is a good predictor of trait happiness and subjective happiness. Those who were high on mindfulness have the propensity to report higher trait happiness and subjective happiness. This result is consistent with previous research conducted in the Western countries (Englund-Helmke, 2014; Feldman et al., 2007; Keng et al., 2011). People who have high level of mindfulness are aware to their inner self more than their counterpart; they have a better propensity to interpret the process and causes of their triggering emotion and its management. It has been found that people with higher levels of mindfulness are superior to regulate their sense of well-being by ability of better emotional understanding, awareness, acceptance, and the skill to correct or repair unpleasant mood states (Baer, et al., 2008; Brown, et al., 2007; Feldman, et al., 2007). The ability to skillfully regulate one's internal emotional experience in the present moment might be translated into happiness in the long-term. So, it seems logical that the people who score high on mindfulness express high level of

happiness (trait and subjective).

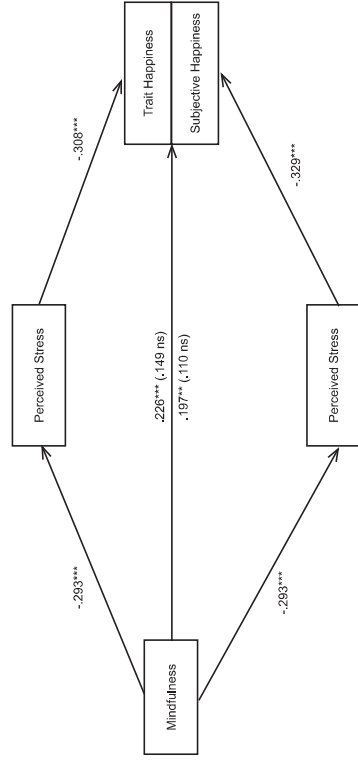
Mindfulness and Perceived Stress

Second, the major finding of the study signifies that mindfulness has a better predisposition to predict perceived stress. Above all, those who were high on mindfulness tended to report lower perceived stress than their counterpart. This result is similar to the several previous researches of this type, which demonstrated the effectiveness of mindfulness for stress reduction (Birmie, Garland, & Carlson, 2010; Heidar & Morovati, 2016; Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005; Witkiewitz & Bowen, 2010).

Mindfulness tends to help individuals deal effectively with unpleasant feelings, as it prevents them from under-engaging (e.g., through suppressing) and over-engaging (e.g., worry, overgeneralization) with emotional encounters (Baer et al., 2006; Feldman et al., 2007). Therefore, mindfulness base activities can prevent an individual from being preoccupied with stressors. Mindful individuals are attentive to their thought and emotional reactions when experiencing stressful situations. Improved focus on the 'here and now' prevents us from spending all our time in the past, cogitate and regretting, or in the future, originating hypothetical anxiety-provoking circumstances.

Perceived Stress and Happiness

The third major finding of this study was a significant and negative association of stress with trait happiness and subjective happiness. Like this finding Schiffrin, & Nelson (2010) found a significant linear inverse correlation between perceived stress and happiness. Recently King, Vidourek, Merianos, and Singh (2014) also reported that level of perceived happiness differed significantly based on stress levels. Those who felt unhappy were most likely to report high stress compared to their happy counterparts. A higher-level of stress experience reduced the feeling of happiness considerably (Navig, Albrekisen, & Ovarnstrom, 2003). Our finding supports existing literature on decreasing college students' stress levels and will help to increase their overall perceived happiness (Schiffrin & Nelson, 2010).



p < .01 *p < .001 ns = not significant

Note: The standardized regression coefficient between mindfulness and happiness, controlling for stress, is in parentheses.

Figure 1: Path Coefficient (Standardized) for the Mindfulness/Perceived Stress/Happiness (Trait and Subjective) Mediation Analysis

Mediating Effect

Besides direct effect, the present study found that mindfulness may allow people high level of subjective happiness and trait happiness indirectly through perceived stress. Previous studies reported that mindfulness is positively associated with psychological health (e.g. positive emotion, satisfaction with life, and adaptive emotion regulation) and negatively associated with psychological ill-health (e.g. anxiety, stress and depression) (Keng et al., 2011). The current study presents an evidence of the relationship between mindfulness and happiness through perceived stress.

Mindfulness denotes full and non-judgmental candidness to present-moment experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Wherever acceptance and non-judgment of mindfulness are concerned, acceptance may decrease stress by helping us to release the control and accept the facts. Low levels of stress will lead to perceived happiness (Schiffman & Nelson, 2010) whereas non-judgment may make us happier by cutting out secondary emotions (e.g., getting annoyed because we are nervous) and the anecdotes we tell ourselves about certain experiences. Thus, mindfulness reduces perception of sensitivity of stress and this low level of stress will lead to positive emotions and happiness among students.

Implications, Limitations and Direction for Future Research

The findings of the study may be utilised for improving the well-being of the students. Experts may assist in improving students' mental health by increasing their happiness, decreasing high-stress levels by using stress management techniques. Academic programming for enhancing happiness should include mindfulness based skills and practice for maintaining healthy relationships such as assertiveness training and students focused stress management programs (King et al., 2014).

This study is not free from limitations. First, data obtained in this study were self-reported in nature which may lead socially desirable responses. Second, the sample was delimited to college students of Varanasi district of India and may not be generalized to

other geographical regions. Third, measuring happiness is subjective in nature and may or may not correlate with the actual perception of happiness.

Future investigations should explore the relationship between mindfulness, stress, happiness and academic achievement along with demographic data to create effective interventions that increase levels of happiness and academic performance among students. Evaluation research needs to be conducted to identify effective programs that enhance students' happiness and reduce high-stress levels as this study proves that stress affects happiness. In future, mindfulness-based interventions should aim to reduce stress levels by teaching students how to do their daily activities mindfully.

Conclusion

In general, mindfulness is a state of mind characterized by consciousness and concentration in the present moment, and by accepting, curious, and non-judgmental attitude. Our study supported the fact that mindfulness not only reduces stress, but also enhances happiness by changing our perception and relationship with our experiences. Perception and response to stress-provoking milieu are more important for happiness because the perception of stress mediates the relationship between mindfulness and happiness.

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- Akhilendra K. Singh**, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, DAY PG College, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. Email: akhilendra_dhu@yahoo.com
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- Prof. Rohtash Singh**, Conference Director
Address: Chairman, Dept. of Psychology,
Kurukshehra University, Kurukshehra, Haryana 136119.
Email: iaapconfuk2019@gmail.com
Mobile: +91-9416214826
- Prof. Nov Rattan Sharma**, Secretary, IAAP,
Address: Head, Dept. of Psychology, M.D. University, Rohtak,
Haryana 124001.
Email: sec.iaap@gmail.com
Mobile: +91-93555612805, +91-9416493613