



Does the acting with awareness trait of mindfulness buffer the predictive association between stressors and psychological symptoms in adolescents?



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ABSTRACT

Dispositional mindfulness has emerged in recent years as an important resilience factor that can help to improve mental health, particularly when individuals face stress. However, there has been a lack of longitudinal studies that have examined its role as a moderator of the predictive association between the occurrence of stressors and psychological symptoms. This study examines whether the acting with awareness component of dispositional mindfulness moderates the predictive associations between stressors and several psychological symptoms in a one-year prospective study. An initial sample of 1257 adolescents (ages 14–18) participated in this study. They completed measures of acting with awareness and several psychological problems at baseline and measures of psychological problems and stressors one year later. The results indicate that awareness predicts a decrease in non-suicidal self-injury for automatic and social reinforcement. Moreover, awareness attenuates the predictive association between stressors and both externalizing problems and non-suicidal self-injury behaviors. Although awareness is cross-sectionally associated with lower scores for depressive symptoms and drug abuse, longitudinal associations are not statistically significant.

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1. Introduction

Stress is a well-known predictor of several psychological symptoms, such as depression, non-suicidal self-injury, aggressive behavior, and drug abuse in adolescents. Whereas several studies have investigated individual vulnerabilities that can increase the influence of stressors on psychological symptoms, very few studies have examined the role of protective factors. Dispositional mindfulness has emerged in recent years as an important resilience factor that can help to enhance mental health. However, there has been a lack of longitudinal studies that have examined its role as a moderator of the predictive association between the occurrence of stressors and symptoms. In the current study, we examine whether the acting with awareness component of dispositional mindfulness moderates the predictive associations between stressors and several psychological symptoms in a one-year prospective study with adolescents.

1.1. Mindfulness and psychological symptoms

Dispositional mindfulness is a complex construct (Singh, Lancioni, Wahler, Winton, & Singh, 2008). Moreover, it comprises several

dimensions, such as observing experiences, describing inner experiences by means of words, acting with awareness, non-judging inner experience, and non-reactivity to inner experience (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006). Of these, one of the most studied dimensions is acting with awareness, which is consistent with the description of mindfulness provided by Brown and Ryan (2003). They described mindfulness as enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality. Individuals differ in their propensity to be aware and to sustain attention to what is occurring in the present. According to Brown and Ryan, present-centered attention–awareness is foundational to mindfulness and it is the focus of the current study.

Most studies on the beneficial role of mindfulness in mental health have focused on depressive moods. Dispositional mindfulness in general, and acting with awareness in particular, has been negatively associated to depressive symptoms in samples of adolescents (Calvete, Sampedro, & Orue, 2014; Ciesla, Reilly, Dickson, Emanuel, & Updegraff, 2012; Royuela-Colomer & Calvete, 2016). Unfortunately, most of these have been cross-sectional or short-term longitudinal studies (e.g., Dixon & Overall, 2016; Royuela-Colomer & Calvete, 2016), which limits the study of the predictive role of awareness in the development of depression.

The influence of awareness on other psychological problems has received less attention, although it could act as a protective factor against several problems in which emotion regulation impairment and difficulties controlling one's own behavior are involved. For instance, a number

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of cross-sectional studies report that acting with awareness is linked to lower substance use in both adults (Fernández, Wood, Stein, & Rossi, 2010) and adolescents (Brown, West, Loverich, & Biegel, 2011; Calvete et al., 2014).

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is another psychological problem in which emotion regulation deficits are involved (Chapman, Gratz, & Brown, 2006). Like depression, NSSI increases dramatically throughout adolescence. In fact, a depressive mood has been found to act as an antecedent of NSSI (Stallard, Spears, Montgomery, Phillips, & Sayal, 2013). Nock and Prinstein (2004) proposed the four-function model of NSSI, which states that NSSI behaviors are maintained by two dimensions of reinforcement: social versus intrapersonal and negative reinforcement versus positive reinforcement. Therefore, according to this model, NSSI leads to positive automatic and social reinforcement and the avoidance of negative automatic and social outcomes. As emotion regulation is speculated to be impaired in adolescents reporting NSSI behaviors, interventions that focus on increasing mindfulness are expected to be helpful for treating individuals whose self-injury serves as automatic reinforcement (Bentley, Nock, & Barlow, 2014). However, evidence for the link between awareness and NSSI is scarce. In one of the few available studies, a general measure of dispositional mindfulness predicted a decrease in NSSI in a five-month follow-up (Garisch & Wilson, 2015).

Finally, emotion regulation deficits also have an impact on externalizing problems, such as aggression (e.g., Calvete & Orue, 2012). In fact, the awareness facet of mindfulness has been negatively related both to aggression related factors such as anger, hostile attribution, hostility and impulsivity as well as to different externalizing problems (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Peters, Erisman, Upton, Baer, & Roemer, 2011) indicating that it could act as an aggression inhibiting factor. However, most studies of the relationship between awareness and externalizing problems have been cross-sectional, employing undergraduates, which prevents the establishment of a temporal relationship between the variables and the extension of the findings to other populations.

1.2. Acting with awareness as a moderator of the association between stress and psychological symptoms

The beneficial effects of awareness could occur through the reduction in reactivity to stressors. In support for this hypothesis, findings from some experimental studies indicate that acting with awareness predicts lower anxiety and psychophysiological reactivity to experimentally manipulated stressors (Bullis, Bøe, Asnaani, & Hofmann, 2014). Moreover, a few studies have examined whether acting with awareness reduces the association between life stressors and psychological symptoms. For instance, Marks, Sobanski, and Hine (2010) found that acting with awareness attenuated the cross-sectional association between life hassles and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and distress. Nevertheless, to our knowledge, only two longitudinal studies have tested the stress moderation hypothesis. Ciesla et al. (2012) asked adolescents to report once a day how many major stressful events occurred in their life on each day for 7 days. They found that the non-judgmental acceptance facet of mindfulness – but not the acting with awareness facet – attenuated the impact of daily stressors on depressive mood. In contrast, Dixon and Overall (2016) found that adult individuals that were high in acting with awareness reported significantly lower depressed mood on days assessed as high-stressful than individuals that were low in acting with awareness in a ten-day period. These mixed findings indicate that further research is warranted.

1.3. Overview of the current study

The above review indicates that the acting with awareness component of mindfulness is negatively associated to psychological problems. However, the few studies that have examined its role as moderator of the association between stressors and psychological problems have obtained mixed findings. In the current study, we used a different

approach to examine whether acting with awareness, both alone and in interaction with the occurrence of stressors, predicts a reduction in several psychological symptoms over time. In contrast with the studies by Ciesla et al. (2012) and Dixon and Overall (2016), we used a life events inventory that included several types of life stressors. In contrast with these previous studies, which used a short-term interval between measures, we used a one-year follow-up to examine the capability of acting with awareness to attenuate the impact of life events over long-term periods. We used measures of depression, non-suicidal self-injury for automatic reinforcement and for social reinforcement, drug abuse, and general externalizing problems. We conducted our study with adolescents because the aforesaid psychological problems undergo a major increase at this stage. We predicted that acting with awareness would predict a decrease in psychological symptoms over time (direct effect). We also expected the predictive association between stressors and psychological symptoms to be lower in those adolescents that are high in acting with awareness.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

The initial sample comprised 1257 adolescents between 14 and 18 years of age ($M = 15.33$; $SD = 0.98$). Participants were students from 21 secondary schools in the Bizkaia and Alava provinces of the Basque Country, Spain. The schools were selected randomly and included both public and private education centers. The final sample included 818 adolescents (414 girls, 385 boys, and 1 did not indicate sex; mean age = 15.18, $SD = 0.94$) who completed the measures both at Time 1 (T1) and at Time 2 (T2). Most participants were either Spanish (94.1%) or to a lesser extent South American (4.4%). The remaining 1.5% were from several different countries. The socio-economic levels were determined by applying the criteria recommended by the Spanish Society of Epidemiology and Family and Community Medicine (2000) and were represented with the following distribution: 14.7% low, 18.2% low-medium, 31.2% medium, 29.4% high-medium, and 6.5% high levels.

2.2. Measures

Acting with awareness was measured by means of the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale-Adolescents (MAAS-A, Brown et al., 2011). The MAAS is focused on the presence or absence of attention to and awareness of what is occurring in the present. This scale is comprised of 14 items with a response range from 1 (*rarely*) to 6 (*almost always*). The items were recoded so that higher scores represent a higher level of awareness. Examples of items are: “I tend to walk quickly to get where I’m going without paying attention to what I experience along the way” and “I do jobs or tasks automatically, without realizing what I’m doing.” The Spanish validation of this scale has been shown to have excellent psychometric properties in adolescents, including construct validity, convergent validity, and reliability (Calvete et al., 2014). In the present study, the alpha coefficient was 0.85.

Stressors were assessed using the Adolescent Life Events Questionnaire (ALEQ; Hankin & Abramson, 2002), which assesses a broad range of life events that typically occur among adolescents, including school/achievement problems, friendship and romantic difficulties, and family problems. Examples of items from the ALEQ include “got a bad report card” and “had an argument with a close friend”. Although the ALEQ consists of 70 different negative life events, in this study we used a shorter version consisting of 45 events. We did not include those events that were not culturally characteristic of Spanish adolescents (e.g., don’t get invited to dances when you want to go) or that were very unusual (e.g., had a baby that you didn’t plan or want). Participants were asked to indicate whether these negative events had occurred to them, and if so, to indicate the degree of stress they felt on a

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