



Trait mindfulness and protective strategies for alcohol use: Implications for college student drinking



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The use of Protective Behavioral Strategies (PBS) has been strongly linked with decreased experience of alcohol-related consequences, making them a potential target for intervention. Additionally, mindfulness is associated with decreased experience of alcohol-related consequences. The purpose of the current study was to evaluate a model of PBS as a mediator of the effect of mindfulness on alcohol-related consequences. Additionally, mindfulness as a moderator of the relationship between PBS and alcohol use and consequences was examined.

Methods: College students (N = 239) at a large South Central university completed self-report measures of demographics, alcohol use and consequences, use of PBS, and trait mindfulness.

Results: Results indicated that both higher levels of mindfulness and using more PBS predicted decreased alcohol-related consequences and consumption, with PBS mediating both relationships ($p < 0.01$). Those with higher levels of mindfulness were more likely to use PBS, with individuals using more PBS experiencing fewer alcohol-related consequences and consuming fewer drinks per week. Mindfulness moderated the relationship between PBS and consequences, with a significantly stronger negative relationship for those with lower levels of mindfulness.

Conclusions: Individuals who are higher in trait mindfulness are more likely to use PBS, which leads to a decrease in the experience of alcohol-related consequences. Furthermore, for individuals lower in mindfulness, low PBS use may lead to increased experience of alcohol consequences. Interventions that incorporate PBS may be most beneficial for students who are low in mindfulness and unlikely to engage in drinking control strategies.

1. Introduction

Hazardous drinking behavior in college students continues to be a significant problem within the U.S. Nearly two in five (39%) full-time college students reported engaging in binge drinking episodes in the last year (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013). Compared to non-college respondents of the same age, college students are more likely to report binge drinking episodes (4 or more drinks in a sitting for women, five or more drinks for men) and driving while under the influence (Hingson, 2010). Students who misuse alcohol put themselves at risk for a wide range of negative consequences, including increased risk for injuries, assault, and causing harm to others (Hingson, Zha, & Weitzman, 2009). Additionally, alcohol misuse by adolescents and young adults puts individuals at a greater risk for neurodegeneration and is associated with numerous neurocognitive deficits (Zeigler et al., 2005). Due to this wide range of negative outcomes associated with heavy alcohol use as well as the vast costs to society, effective prevention and intervention efforts are crucial for this

high-risk population.

The use of protective behavioral strategies (PBS) while using alcohol may mitigate the harms associated with heavy alcohol use. PBS are behaviors that increase self-control while drinking and help reduce negative alcohol-related consequences (Pearson, 2013). There are a variety of different protective strategies, ranging from adding extra ice to your drink to avoiding taking shots or trying to out-drink those with whom one is drinking (Martens et al., 2005). Recent research has established an association between the use of PBS and alcohol use and outcomes: those who report more PBS use tend to drink less and experience fewer alcohol-related problems (Pearson, 2013). Brief interventions for alcohol use that include personalized feedback, motivational interviewing, and a behavioral skills component, similar to PBS, are more efficacious than interventions that focus solely on education (Larimer & Cronce, 2007; Miller et al., 2013).

The negative relationship between PBS and decreased experience of alcohol-related consequences has been replicated in numerous studies (Martens et al., 2008; Pearson, 2013); therefore, interest in PBS as a

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construct and as a potential mechanism for change in interventions has continued to increase. Though numerous studies have examined the association between PBS and other relevant variables, including PBS mediation models and moderators of the relationship between PBS and alcohol outcomes (D'Lima, Pearson, & Kelley, 2012; Martens et al., 2008; Patrick, Lee, & Larimer, 2011), PBS use is yet to be integrated into a specific theoretical framework (Pearson, 2013). Examining factors that predict PBS use along with replicable moderators are important for determining a theory for which PBS use relates to our current understanding of drinking behaviors. Moving toward this, numerous studies have examined PBS as a mediator of the relationship between individual difference variables and alcohol-use and associated consequences. Variables that appear to have a relationship with PBS include depressive symptoms (Martens et al., 2008), self-regulation (D'Lima et al., 2012; Pearson, Kite, & Henson, 2013), and self-control (Pearson et al., 2013). Additionally, research has investigated potential moderators of PBS and alcohol use, such as negative urgency (Weaver, Martens, & Smith, 2012) and coping motives (Patrick et al., 2011). Given that PBS is linked to self-regulation and related constructs, PBS likely represents a drinking specific behavioral self-regulation strategy. For those who are high in self-control and/or low in negative urgency, PBS use might be intuitive, whereas individuals who are more impulsive or are low in self-control may be unaware of such strategies or unable to utilize them successfully.

Mindfulness, or being non-judgmentally aware and attentive to the present moment, is related to both self-control and goal achievement (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Masicampo & Baumeister, 2007). It is also negatively associated with specific facets of impulsivity, including negative urgency, positive urgency, and lack of perseverance (Peters, Erisman, Upton, Baer, & Roemer, 2011), facets related to drinking quantity, frequency, and related problems (Coskunpinar, Dir, & Cyders, 2013). PBS use while drinking can be thought of as a behavioral manifestation of maintaining awareness and self-control while drinking, both of which are closely related to mindfulness; therefore, examining associations between mindfulness and PBS may have important implications.

Associations between mindfulness and alcohol use and related outcomes have been investigated in numerous studies. Broadly, trait mindfulness tends to be associated with decreased alcohol consumption and experience of fewer alcohol-related negative consequences (Fernandez, Wood, Stein, & Rossi, 2010; Shorey, Brasfield, Anderson, & Stuart, 2014; Smith et al., 2011). Adults seeking treatment for substance use disorders have been found to have lower levels of mindfulness compared to adults not seeking treatment for substance use disorders (Shorey et al., 2014). Furthermore, non-judging thoughts and feelings (an acceptance-based factor of mindfulness) seem to be negatively related to alcohol-related consequences (Fernandez et al., 2010). One study measured alcohol problems and mindfulness in urban firefighters and found that mindfulness was associated with fewer alcohol problems as well as fewer PTSD, depressive, and physical symptoms, even after controlling for other study variables (Smith et al., 2011). Due to the associations between mindfulness and reduced alcohol-related consequences, there is encouraging evidence in support of mindfulness-based interventions for problematic substance use (Bowen et al., 2009; Bowen et al., 2014).

Though research has examined mindfulness as it relates to substance use broadly as well as interventions for substance use disorders, trait or state mindfulness has not been examined within any PBS and alcohol use framework. Because mindfulness has been linked to more goal-directed behavior and possibly less intrusive negative thinking, thus improving self-control (Masicampo & Baumeister, 2007), it seems likely that mindfulness would be positively associated with PBS use. A study by Brown and Ryan (2003) evaluated the ability of both state and trait mindfulness to predict self-regulation, and found that both significantly predicted self-regulation facets of behavioral autonomy and negative affect. Furthermore, mindfulness appears to be related to problem-focused coping strategies (Charoensukmongkol, 2013), suggesting that

individuals who are more mindful may be more likely to engage in behavioral coping strategies, similar to PBS. It is currently unknown how mindfulness may be related to PBS use, but it is possible that use of such strategies may be especially important for individuals with low levels of mindfulness who are more likely to consume more alcohol and experience more negative consequences as a result of their drinking.

To date, no research has examined a direct link between mindfulness and specific behavioral strategies to mitigate negative alcohol-related consequences; it is currently unclear how mindfulness might relate to PBS use. Because PBS represent a type of drinking control strategy and mindfulness increases self-control, it seems likely that mindfulness may be positively associated with PBS use, which in turn is associated with decreased alcohol consumption and consequences. It is also possible that PBS use is particularly important for individuals who are at higher risk for experiencing negative alcohol-related consequences (D'Lima et al., 2012; Weaver et al., 2012), such as individuals with lower levels of mindfulness (Roos, Pearson, & Brown, 2015). The primary aim of this study is to evaluate two separate models of PBS and mindfulness as they relate to alcohol use and related consequences. First, it was hypothesized that PBS would mediate the relationship between mindfulness and alcohol use and consequences. Second, it was predicted that mindfulness would be a moderator of the relationship between PBS and alcohol use and consequences such that PBS use would be more strongly negatively related to alcohol outcomes in those who are less mindful.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A convenience sample of undergraduate students who reported recent alcohol use from a large, public, south central university were recruited. Participants were eligible to participate if they were 18 years or older and reported at least one drinking episode within the past month. Participants completed all measures via an online survey and received credit within their psychology or speech course for participation. Eligible participants self-selected into the current study via an online research recruitment system and were then redirected to a secure website to complete the study. Participants received course credit upon completion of the study. No monetary or other compensation was offered. Participants who exited the survey prior to completion were not granted credit because there was no way to identify them as identifying information was collected via a separate survey upon study completion to protect their anonymity. All procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographics

Participants completed demographic questions that included age, gender, ethnicity, year in school, current living situation, Greek system involvement, and marital/dating status.

2.2.2. Alcohol use

All participants completed the Daily Drinking Questionnaire (DDQ; Collins, Parks, & Marlatt, 1985). This 4-item measure assessed the amount an individual drank each day during a typical week over the past month as well as the number of hours spent drinking each day of a typical week during the past month. Convergent validity of the DDQ with its original measure was significantly correlated, Pearson's $r = 0.50$.

2.2.3. Protective behavioral strategies for alcohol use

Participants completed the Protective Behavioral Strategies Survey (PBSS; Martens et al., 2005) to measure engagement in protective behaviors while drinking. This is a 15-item measure in which partici-

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