



Daily stress and the benefits of mindfulness: Examining the daily and longitudinal relations between present-moment awareness and stress responses



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ABSTRACT

Theories of mindfulness claim that a state of present-moment awareness enhances self-regulation in the presence of negative emotion. However, very little research has tested this claim in relation to daily stressors. This paper examined whether present-moment awareness during daily stressful events predicted enhanced responding to (a) the same day's event, (b) a stressful event on the subsequent day and (c) stressful events on average, among a sample of adults ($N = 143$) over 20 days. We found support for these predictions, controlling for negative affect and stress-related appraisals. These novel findings extend the personality literature by showing that present-moment awareness facilitates adaptive stress-responses, independent of an individual's affective state and the severity of threat experienced.

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1. Introduction

Daily stressors and hassles such as being stuck in traffic, losing keys or arguing with family may seem relatively benign. But there's evidence that these relatively minor stressors have a more negative impact on well-being than bigger life events because of their regularity and cumulative effects (Almeida, 2005; Chamberlin & Zika, 1990; Serido, Almeida, & Wethington, 2004). Oftentimes, people respond to these stressors by seeking to suppress thinking (Gross & John, 2003), by denying them (Brown & Locker, 2009), or by distracting themselves (Wilson et al., 2014). While these avoidant strategies often serve short term adaptive functions (van 't Riet & Ruiters, 2013), when used repeatedly they undermine well-being and behavioural effectiveness (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006).

Several individual-difference (e.g., personality, social support, health and socioeconomic) and intra-individual (e.g., mood, self-efficacy and physical symptoms) variables have been found to predict reactivity to daily stressors (Affleck, Tennen, Urrows, & Higgins, 1994; Almeida, 2005; Chamberlin & Zika, 1990; Tennen,

Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000). However, very little research has examined the role of a state of present-moment awareness (as opposed to somatic or affective states) in predicting responses to daily stress. Being psychologically present connects an individual to the opportunities available in any situation, and is therefore likely to broaden the range of possible responses to stress, meaning that such responses are more adaptive (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Hayes et al., 2006; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006).

Present-moment awareness has been defined as the "continuous monitoring of experience with a focus on current experience rather than preoccupation with past or future events" (Cardaciotto, Herbert, Forman, Moitra, & Farrow, 2008, p. 205). Research into the effects of maintaining a state of present-moment awareness has increased rapidly in recent decades, as a part of the growing research (e.g., Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007) and practical (e.g. Reb & Atkins, 2015) interest in mindfulness. Dozens of studies have reported that present-moment awareness as a general disposition is associated with a host of psychological benefits, such as reduced anxiety and depressive symptoms, lowered perceived stress, increased mood and improved well-being (Brown et al., 2007; Weinstein, Brown, & Ryan, 2009). However, much less research has explored how changes in state attention and awareness predict enhanced

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responses to stress (Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011; Tanay & Bernstein, 2013).

We are only aware of one study directly examining the relations among state present-moment awareness and coping with stress (Weinstein et al., 2009, Study 3). Participants in that study were prompted to report their momentary level of present-moment awareness three times per day, and these assessments predicted less avoidance coping measured at the end of each day over a seven-day period. Several other studies have examined whether state present-moment awareness positively influences other stress-related variables. For example, state mindfulness (measured with versions of the state Mindful Attention and Awareness Scale (MAAS); Brown & Ryan, 2003) has been found to predict greater post-conflict commitment, respect and support of a romantic partner (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007) and improved insight problem solving (Ostafin & Kassman, 2012). More recently, Hülshager, Alberts, Feinholdt, and Lang (2012; Study 2), found that state mindfulness (measured using the state MAAS) predicted less emotional exhaustion, measured daily over 10 working days, among a sample of professionals. Taken together, this research suggests that present-moment awareness should enhance the effectiveness of individuals' responses to daily stressors as they occur.

The present study examined the effects of present-moment awareness on three stress-response variables: values-consistent responding, coping self-efficacy and avoidance coping (following Weinstein et al., 2009). By examining three stress-response variables, we were able to corroborate findings across outcome variables and therefore draw more robust conclusions than would be possible by measuring a single outcome alone (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011). The relations between present-moment awareness and each of values-consistent responding, coping self-efficacy and avoidance coping are reviewed next.

1.1. Present-moment awareness and values-consistent responding to stress

Values-consistent behaviour is freely-chosen behaviour that is consistent with how an individual wishes to respond within the broader context of their life and long-term goals, rather than being unduly influenced by the short-term contingencies of the immediate environment (Smout, Davies, Burns, & Christie, 2014). Values-consistent action predicts less psychological distress and enhanced well-being (Ciarrochi, Fisher, & Lane, 2011; Ferssizidis et al., 2010; Smout et al., 2014) and in the context of stressful experiences predicts greater pain tolerance (Páez-Blarrina et al., 2008) and less defensiveness (Crocker, Niiya, & Mischkowski, 2008).

When an individual is psychologically present, they are more aware of their options as well as their values, and are therefore more likely to respond in autonomously-motivated and values-consistent ways (Hayes et al., 2006; Weinstein & Ryan, 2011). Several studies have demonstrated this. For example, Brown & Ryan (2003; Study 4) found that state present-moment attention and awareness, measured three times per day over 14 consecutive days, predicted greater momentary autonomy, controlling for covariates such as gender and time of day. Autonomy is defined as behaviour that is self-endorsed and volitional (Ryan & Deci, 2000) so it is indicative of values-consistent behaviour. Another study found that trait mindfulness (measured using the trait MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003) predicted more autonomously motivated behaviour (Levesque & Brown, 2007). More recently, present-moment awareness has been found to be positively associated with values-consistent behaviour (Smout et al., 2014; Trompeter et al., 2013).

In the context of every-day stressful events, we therefore expected that present-moment awareness would predict more

values-consistent responses to such events. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Arch & Craske, 2006; Britton, Shahar, Szepsenwol, & Jacobs, 2012; Hülshager et al., 2012; Reber et al., 2012), we expected that present-centred individuals would be less reactive to negative emotion, and that this in-turn would enable more values-consistent responses to stressful experiences.

1.2. Present-moment awareness and coping self-efficacy

In addition, we expected that present-moment awareness would predict greater perceived self-efficacy in coping with daily stressful events. Coping self-efficacy describes the perceived competence the individual has for dealing with a stressor (Schwarzer & Renner, 2000) and has been consistently found to predict greater resilience and less trauma following stressful events (Benight & Bandura, 2004; Luszczynska, Benight, & Cieslak, 2009). Conversely, low self-efficacy in relation to challenging experiences is associated with depression, anxiety and a loss of well-being (Karademas, 2006). Coping self-efficacy is therefore an important measure of an individuals' ability to effectively respond to stressful events (Benight & Bandura, 2004).

In the context of daily stressors, we expected that higher levels of present-moment awareness would be associated with enhanced coping self-efficacy, as increased present-moment awareness widens the range of response options available to the person (Hayes et al., 2006; Shapiro et al., 2006), meaning that an individual's perception of their ability to influence such situations should increase. Several studies provide support for this prediction. For example, a study of post-graduate counselling students found that present-moment attention (specifically, the ability to sustain and switch attention) predicted greater counselling self-efficacy (Greason & Cashwell, 2009). More recent studies of mothers and prospective mothers found that mindfulness-based interventions resulted in significantly greater maternal self-efficacy, relative to controls (Byrne, Hauck, Fisher, Bayes, & Schutze, 2014; Perez-Blasco, Viguer, & Rodrigo, 2013).

1.3. Present-moment awareness and avoidance coping

Finally, we expected that present-moment awareness would predict less avoidance coping with daily stressful events. Avoidance coping has been associated with greater psychological distress and reduced well-being across the life-cycle and across a range of stressors (for reviews, see Duangdao & Roesch, 2008; Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Roesch et al., 2005). As discussed, Weinstein et al. (2009; Study 3) found that state present-moment awareness predicted less avoidance (but not more approach) coping with daily stressful events, over a seven-day period. Other studies have sought to manipulate present-moment awareness via mindfulness interventions, and have found reductions in avoidance behaviours (Bergomi, Ströhle, Michalak, Funke, & Berking, 2013), and greater willingness to be exposed to unpleasant stimuli (Arch & Craske, 2006). These findings suggest that being in a state of present-moment awareness should be associated with less avoidance coping with daily stressors.

1.4. Controlling for the effects of threat appraisals and negative affect

Being psychologically present is claimed to facilitate more adaptive and less defensive responses to stressful situations, independent of how much negative emotion such situations elicit (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Hayes et al., 2006; Weinstein & Ryan, 2011). To test this claim, the present study controlled for the effects of two affect-related variables, threat appraisal and daily negative affect, on stress responses. Perceptions of threat have been consistently shown to predict more avoidant and defensive

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