

Original

Mindful eating and its relationship with body mass index, binge eating, anxiety and negative affect

Comer con atención plena y su relación con el índice de masa corporal, atracones, ansiedad y afecto negativo

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Abstract

Mindful eating concerns an awareness of our dietary habits, while its absence is typically associated with anxiety, negative affect and binge eating. The objective of this study was to analyze these variables in a sample of 216 individuals, divided in four groups: students who practiced sport regularly, university athletes, yoga practitioners and persons suffering from obesity. They were assessed by a semi-structured interview and the questionnaires MEQ, BES, PANAS and BAI. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, ANOVA and multiple regression. Results demonstrated that people who have less awareness of their eating habits are generally more overweight, more anxious and have higher levels of negative affect, while they demonstrate less control over their eating habits. Moreover, these variables can predict binge eating. The model obtained was significant ($p < .001$) and its predictive capacity through R square corrected was .51. This means that the model predicts a 51% of binge eating from mindful eating, body mass index, anxiety and negative affect.

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Keywords: Mindful eating; Obesity; Anxiety; Negative affect; Binge eating

Resumen

Mindful eating se concibe como una consciencia de nuestros hábitos alimenticios, mientras que su ausencia está asociada a la ansiedad, al afecto negativo y a los atracones alimenticios. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar estas variables en una muestra de 216 participantes, divididos en 4 grupos: estudiantes que practican deporte regularmente, atletas universitarios, practicantes de yoga y personas con obesidad. Todos ellos fueron evaluados mediante una entrevista semiestructurada y los cuestionarios MEQ, BES, PANAS y BAI. Los análisis estadísticos que se utilizaron fueron los estadísticos descriptivos, la correlación de Pearson, ANOVA y la regresión múltiple. Los resultados demostraron que las personas con menores niveles de consciencia sobre sus hábitos alimenticios tenían un peso más elevado, más niveles de ansiedad y afecto negativo y menor control sobre sus hábitos alimenticios. Además, estas variables podían predecir el atracón alimentario. El modelo obtenido fue significativo ($p < 0.001$) y su capacidad predictiva mediante R^2 fue de 0.51. Esto indica que el modelo es capaz de predecir un 51% de los episodios de atracón alimentario mediante el *mindful eating*, el índice de masa corporal, la ansiedad y el afecto negativo.

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Palabras clave: Comer conscientemente; Obesidad; Ansiedad; Afecto negativo; Atracón alimentario

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Introduction

Mindfulness is a practice that allows the mind to concentrate on the present moment. Brown, Ryan, and Creswell (2007) define mindfulness as the awareness of an event without judging the moment. The roots of the concept are based on different philosophical and psychological trends, such as Buddhism, existentialism, humanism and the American transcendentalism (Brown et al., 2007). Mindfulness is defined as a moment-to-moment visualization that keeps judgments aside while maintaining an open heart (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). A useful metaphor proposed by Rappaport, Trantham, Surrey, Chang, and Mullin (2013) is to picture in our minds a hurricane in which we settle in its eye while there is chaos all around us. We are thus able to maintain peace and to capture the situation from different perspectives.

One of the main focuses in training mindfulness is conscious of the body, considered as an interactive and dynamic process that includes the perception about the states, processes, acts and sensations of the corporal entity (Mehling et al., 2009). This corporal consciousness can be modified by different mental processes, which include attention, interpretation, values, memories, aptitudes, conditioning and affection (Mehling et al., 2011). Moreover, corporal consciousness has been linked with diseases such as diabetes, overweight and eating disorders (Dalen et al., 2010; Daubenmier et al., 2011; Framson et al., 2009; Hulbert-Williams, Nicholls, Joy, & Hulbert-Williams, 2014; Kristal, Littman, Benitez, & White, 2005; Mantzios & Wilson, 2015).

Due to the well-known relationship between eating habits and emotional well-being there has recently been an interest in the link between mindfulness and nutrition. Some training programs based on mindfulness have shown satisfactory results in this context. They demonstrate how mindfulness training shifts eating habits away from external factors like the form and smell of food, toward a greater appreciation of internal factors such as appetite (Rodin, 1981). The result is less consumption based exclusively on external stimuli – smell and/or attractiveness of the food – and, by extension, a general shift in eating preferences toward healthier foods. Consequently, there is a reduction in weight (Dalen et al., 2010; Hong, Lishner, Han, & Huss, 2011; Kristeller & Hallett, 1999; Kristeller & Wolever, 2010; Wansink, Painter, & North, 2005; Wansink, 2004; Wansink, 2010).

In this sense, mindful eating is defined as the connection between the mind and body that permits awareness of what we are eating and how it makes us feel (Hirshmann & Zaphiropoulos, 2012). In short, it concerns why we eat: because we are hungry, because it is time to eat, because of a particular social situation, for example, even though we are not hungry (Bahl, Milne, Ross, & Chan, 2013; Hepworth, 2011; Hong et al., 2011; Rodin, 1981). Mindful eating is thus described as a state of attention without judgment about the physical and emotional sensations we experience while eating (Framson et al., 2009). Accordingly, the practice of mindful eating involves our full awareness so as to identify emotional or physical hunger. It helps to distinguish the needs of our body and to determine whether or not we have had enough food (The Center for Mindful Eating,

2013). This allows for the greater enjoyment of eating, including an appreciation of the form, smell and flavor of food, while recognizing that these external factors are not the main cause of eating.

Thich Nhat-Hanh and Cheung (2010), in their book “Savor, mindful eating, mindful life” explain how cultural, economic and marketing practices are inherent to the way we consume and buy food. With technological improvements and lifestyle changes we have become increasingly sedentary, which in turn affects our eating habits. Their teachings show that the principal factors that change people’s eating habits involve particular emotions, the environment and individual levels of awareness. Similar studies have revealed a negative correlation between mindful eating and obesity (Dalen et al., 2010; Daubenmier et al., 2011; Framson et al., 2009; Hulbert-Williams et al., 2014; Kristal et al., 2005; Mantzios & Wilson, 2015). Accordingly, people suffering from obesity have demonstrated a reduced consciousness of what and how they consume.

Based on these previous investigations we can infer that obesity is highly related to negative emotions. Anger, anxiety, sadness, or depression all contribute to our eating habits. It can lead to an increased appetite and search for higher calorie foods thus forming a chain reaction in which the individual is unable to better understand the relationship between mood and consumption (Hulbert-Williams et al., 2014; Lindeman & Stark, 2001). In the case of persons diagnosed with bulimia, guilt and anxiety result in the consumption of large amounts of high calorie foods and compensatory conducts to eliminate these negative feelings (Mauler, Hamm, Weike, & Tuschen-Caffier, 2006). Anxiety, for example, is one of the principal emotions involved with an increase in eating habits (Daubenmier et al., 2011, 2012; Hearon, Utschig, Smits, Moshier, & Otto, 2013; Levitan & Davis, 2010). Similarly, for Davenport, Houston, and Griffiths (2012), food works like a reward wherein women suffering from anxiety feel better though eating. In short, consumption becomes a coping mechanism to reduce negative emotions.

In addition, other authors have contributed to our understanding of mindful eating by treating it as a measureable characteristic. Framson et al. (2009), for example, created the Mindful Eating Questionnaire (MEQ) to evaluate the level of mindfulness of our eating habits. According to the study, people with a higher body mass index demonstrate less mindful eating than the people who practice yoga and meditation. Further to this, other authors demonstrate that mindful eating is highly related to yoga and sport practice (Daubenmier, 2005; Kristal et al., 2005; McIver, O’Halloran, & McGartland, 2009).

These findings could be related with the body awareness, an interactive and dynamic process which includes the perception about the states, processes, actions and sensations of the body (Holzel et al., 2011; Mehling et al., 2009). In this sense, people who practice yoga and sport could have more body awareness and following this, more mindful eating.

Moreover, other studies show that mindful eating is negatively correlated with binge eating (Cohen, 2008; Jordan, Wang, Donatoni, & Meier 2014; Kristeller, Wolever, & Sheets, 2014; Mauler et al., 2006; Rodin, 1981; Wansink, 2010, 2011). This relates to a loss of control in a short period of time when a

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