



Mindfulness and emotional regulation as sequential mediators in the relationship between attachment security and depression



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ABSTRACT

Depression is a significant global health issue that has previously been associated with negative early care experiences and insecure attachment styles. This has led to much interest in identifying variables that may interrupt this relationship and prevent detrimental personal, social and economic outcomes. Recent research has indicated associations between the two seemingly distinct constructs of secure attachment and mindfulness, with similar positive outcomes. One hundred and forty eight participants completed an online survey exploring a possible sequential cognitive processing model, which predicted that higher levels of mindfulness and then emotional regulation would mediate the relationship between attachment and depression. Full mediation was found in regards to secure, preoccupied and dismissive attachment, whereas partial mediation was identified in the case of fearful attachment. The results support the possibility of an alternative cognitive processing pathway that may interrupt the association between negative early care experiences and concomitant negative mental health outcomes. Further exploration of this relationship is indicated.

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1. Introduction

Depression is a significant global health issue affecting quality of life, mortality and morbidity (Kessler & Bromet, 2013). By 2020, it is predicted to represent approximately 15% of the global burden of disease (Murray & Lopez, 1996). Previous research has identified a well-established link between attachment styles and developmental outcomes, including mental health, e.g. depression; physical health and social outcomes (Bifulco et al., 2004; Bowlby, 1980; Schore, 2001; Sroufe, 2005; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005a). According to Bowlby (1980), depression is associated with a perceived helplessness in developing and sustaining relationships, reportedly formulated from negative early care experiences instrumental in the development of internal working models that see one as unlovable and unworthy (Cummings & Cicchetti, 1990). Consistent with Bowlby (1980); Roepke and Seligman (2015) report negative prognoses, i.e., mental representations of future scenarios, similarly underpinned by a pessimistic template, as the primary causal variable in the development and maintenance of depression. These perspectives match Beck's influential discoveries about cognitive distortions (Beck, 1963). The effect of preconceived beliefs on the aetiology of depression clearly indicates the importance of contrary mental activities such as current moment awareness, to allow an individual to experience self as an effective agent of change and reduce the incidence of depression. Increased

mindfulness has previously been proposed to result in improved social functioning through a reduction in defensive responding on cognitive, emotional and behavioural levels (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2008; Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004). The current study explores the possible role of mindfulness and emotional regulation as sequential mediators in the cognitive process between attachment and depression.

Attachment styles were initially differentiated by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) identifying distinct categories of relationship between infants and their primary caregiver. The availability and accessibility of a sensitive caregiver was associated with a secure attachment style, typically characterised by effective emotional regulation. Conversely, the absence of a sensitive caregiver reportedly results in an insecure attachment style associated with largely ineffective strategies for need fulfilment. The insecure attachment styles are differentiated into three categories: insecure-ambivalent, insecure-avoidant and insecure-disorganised attachment styles (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Main & Cassidy, 1988) and are associated with poorer mental health outcomes, including depression (Cummings & Cicchetti, 1990; Sroufe, 2005). Adult classifications, i.e. secure, preoccupied, dismissive and fearful, paralleling those identified in childhood, support the continuity of attachment history (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Further, preoccupied and fearful attachment styles have been associated with a higher propensity for postpartum depression, mediated by low self-esteem and self-critical thoughts (Lee & Koo, 2015). The authors attribute this association to the 'negative self' model characteristic of these attachment styles (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Conversely, a dismissive style, associated with a 'positive self' model was not found to be significantly related to depression (Reis & Grenyer, 2004). The significant

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impact on mental wellbeing, health and social outcomes behaves us to identify variables that may alter attachment styles and/or their impact.

Internal working models reportedly provide a set of rules for processing attachment related information (Bowlby, 1973; Bretherton & Mulholland, 2008; Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). Bowlby (1980) referred to the “defensive exclusion” of potentially painful information. Essentially, this requires the individual to filter out such information from further processing. This strategy is seemingly less utilised by an individual with a secure attachment history, allowing for more open processing. Furthermore, secure individuals are reported to process non-attachment related information in a positively biased manner and insecure individuals, with a negative bias (Dykas & Cassidy, 2011).

Essentially, the internal working models provide expectation for future outcomes (Bretherton & Mulholland, 2008). An individual with a secure history tends to anticipate being capable in eliciting care and hence, confident in tolerating and recovering from difficult emotions. In their review of attachment and social processing, Dykas and Cassidy (2011) identify competence as including the ability to acknowledge, accept and recover from distressing emotions; a process consistent with mindful awareness and emotional regulation; supportive of literature identifying commonality between the constructs: secure attachment and mindfulness (Goodall, Trejnowska, & Darling, 2012; Siegel, 2007).

To interrupt the relationship between attachment styles and depression it is seemingly important to allow for the incorporation of new information regarding current context, which may then afford new experiences of lovability and worthiness. Automatic processing has been referred to as a “top down” approach, where schemas, memories, cognitions and emotions interpret and influence understanding of sensations and hence, shape experience, conversely mindfulness is the maintenance of awareness, to take in and process information as it is, in the current context (Siegel, 2007). It implies an open processing, without bias, affording a flexible response and deviation from organised behavioural patterns (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). Kabat-Zinn (2003) indicates the importance of a curious mind in allowing one to process new experiences openly, a stance contrary to that engaged in when connected to pre-conceptualisations. This allows for the incorporation of novel information into schemas or working models, which may alter attachment style or limit their influence. Further, a more contextually appropriate response may provide new information regarding self. Behavioural manifestation of this is perhaps witnessed in the secure young child through exploratory behaviour, which occurs through the experience of safety, allowing deactivation of the attachment system (Cassidy, 2008).

Siegel (2007) highlights the overlap of outcome measures related to attachment security and mindfulness, specifically referring to the pre-frontal cortex and its role in modulating fear, response flexibility, self-regulation, attunement, empathy and emotional balance. This is supported by a British online survey (Goodall et al., 2012) reporting a potential bidirectional relationship between mindfulness and attachment security, suggesting that increased mindfulness skills could reduce the behaviours more characteristic of insecure attachment styles. Further they indicate a conceptual overlap between aspects of dispositional mindfulness and emotional regulation, namely; the awareness of internal experiences and acceptance of emotional response. The authors highlight the importance of emotional awareness in reducing the cognitive bias common to a more automatic processing style. A further study by Pepping, Davis, and O'Donovan (2013) reported that the relationship between mindfulness and attachment security was fully mediated by emotional regulation difficulties. This is consistent with the underlying premise that a secure attachment results from the internalisation of soothing care experiences and facilitates the development of self-regulation strategies (Snyder, Shapiro, & Treleaven, 2012; Sroufe et al., 2005a; Thorberg & Lyvers, 2010). Following the Minnesota longitudinal study, Sroufe (2005) reports infant attachment as critical to the development of emotional regulation and other functional capacities.

2. Current study

Mindfulness has been associated with a range of positive emotional and social variables, including wellbeing (Baker, Huxley, Dennis, Islam, & Russell, 2015; Mitchell & Heads, 2015), relationship satisfaction (Jones, Welton, Oliver, & Thoburn, 2011) and a decrease in emotional distress factors, e.g. depression and anxiety (Pepping, O'Donovan, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Hanisch, 2014); findings that share similarity with a secure attachment history. Mindfulness is proposed to provide opportunity for perspective and space between thoughts, emotions and possible behavioural choices. Further it allows one to see that an emotion will pass, facilitating tolerance (Snyder et al., 2012). This understanding of mindful awareness is akin to the full processing of social information and self-regulation proposed for securely attached individuals (Bowlby, 1980; Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). Given the commonality shared between the two constructs, mindfulness and secure attachment, and their relationship to emotional regulation, the following study seeks to explore a possible sequential mediation model of mindfulness and emotional regulation in the relationship between attachment style and depression. It is proposed here that the ability to disengage from previous associations allows for a less conceptually reactive response thereby reducing negative prospectations and ameliorating psychological distress, namely, depression. It is hypothesised that mindfulness and then emotional regulation has an indirect effect on the relationship between attachment and depression.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

One hundred and fifty-one participants (111 female and 40 males ranging in age from 18 to 52 years, $M = 21.28$, $SD = 5.89$), enrolled in a first year psychology course at a regional university completed an online survey to receive credit for their course requirements. The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) mean scores for the total sample revealed moderate depression (18.68, S.D. 9.45), severe anxiety (16.25, S.D. 7.65), and moderate stress (20.18, S.D. 10.12). This is consistent with studies reporting a two-fold increase in prevalence of distress amongst university students compared with the general population; representing a high risk population (Stallman, 2010). Of the 151 participants, 61 (40.4%) selected a secure attachment style as the category of ‘best fit’ on the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), 29 (19.2%) preoccupied, 40 (26.5%) fearful and 21 (13.9%) as dismissive.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Five facets mindfulness questionnaire (FFMQ), (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006)

The FFMQ is a 39 item scale measuring five identifiable facets of mindfulness. They include: (i) Non reactivity, (ii) Observing/noticing/attending, (iii) Acting with awareness, (iv) Describing/labelling with words and (v) Non-judging of experience. It is rated on a 5 point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never or very rarely true) to 5 (very often or always true). According to Baer et al. (2006) the FFMQ demonstrated adequate to good internal consistency with alpha values ranging between .75 and .91 with modest correlations between factors.

3.2.2. Relationship questionnaire (RQ) (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991)

The continuous items of the RQ were used to identify attachment style. The RQ consists of four short paragraphs that describe relationship attitudes. Each paragraph is rated on a 7-point Likert-type Scale ranging from 1 (does not describe me at all) to 7 (describes me exactly). For example the preoccupied item states: “I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others, but I often find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable being without close

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