



# Being present in the moment: Event-level relationships between mindfulness and stress, positivity, and importance



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## ABSTRACT

Each day for two weeks, participants (psychologically healthy adults residing in the community) described the events that happened to them. These descriptions included how attentive to the present moment they were during the event, and how stressful, positive, and important the event was. Three-level MLM analyses (events nested within days, days nested within persons) found that dispositional (trait) mindfulness was positively related to event-level mindfulness (presence), positivity, and importance, and was negatively related to event-level stress. At the event-level, presence was positively related to how positive and important events were and was positively related to how stressful events were. Moreover, these event-level relationships did not vary as a function of trait mindfulness. These results suggest that although more mindful people may experience less stress, when stress occurs, people tend to become more mindful.

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## 1. Introduction

Although definitions of mindfulness vary, there is broad agreement that mindfulness is an attentional style (or way of paying attention) that originated in contemplative traditions such as Buddhism. One of the most commonly cited definitions of mindfulness describes it as “paying attention in particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Similarly, other definitions emphasize that mindfulness involves maintaining awareness to the present moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Although major conceptualizations of mindfulness (e.g., Bishop et al., 2004; Shapiro, Carlson, Austin, & Freedman, 2006) include other components than attention, such as awareness, intention, and/or acceptance, most definitions of mindfulness involve sustained consciousness/awareness of external events and internal experiences as they occur (Jankowski & Holas, 2014).

The primary focus of the present study was the relationship between mindfulness and stress. A considerable body of research has found that mindfulness is negatively related to stress at the trait level. More mindful people experience less stress (e.g., Nyklíček & Kuijpers, 2008), and they react to stress more adaptively than the less mindful (e.g., Bränström, Kvillemo, Brandberg, & Moskowitz, 2010). Similarly,

mindfulness and stress have been found to be negatively related at the within-person level. For example, in an experience sampling study, Weinstein, Brown, and Ryan (2009) found that daily mindfulness was negatively related to daily stress.

Nevertheless, despite the growing body of research on mindfulness and the fact that definitions of mindfulness emphasize “being in the moment” (what we refer to as *presence*), we know of no study that has examined people’s presence during everyday events. To address this issue, we conducted a study in which participants described the events they experienced each day, including their attention to the present moment. We also measured trait-level mindfulness. Together, these data allowed us to examine how mindfulness, conceptualized in terms of basic awareness of present moment, varied at both the state (event) and trait (dispositional) levels.

### 1.1. Mindfulness as a disposition

Research on mindfulness has its roots in clinical psychology, and within this context, increasing mindfulness is seen as a means to increase well-being, and the existing research supports such a conclusion. Mindfulness training has been found to have a variety of positive effects, including increased well-being, reduced psychopathology and emotional reactivity, and improved behavioral regulation (e.g., Khoury et al., 2013). Consistent with these results, naturally occurring differences in mindfulness have been found to be positively related to measures of well-being such as life satisfaction and self-esteem (e.g., Brown &

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Ryan, 2003). Complementing this, research has found negative relationships between mindfulness and measures of distress (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003; Cash & Whittingham, 2010). It appears that greater dispositional mindfulness is associated with increased well-being and better mental health.

### 1.2. Mindfulness as a state

By definition, mindfulness is a state — an individual's orientation to what he or she is experiencing at a specific time, and dispositional mindfulness can be defined in terms of the average mindfulness a person experiences. Although it may be useful to think of dispositions as aggregates of states, few psychological constructs are fixed across time and situations. In fact, variability may be more the norm than it is the exception, and such an assumption underlies research that is often referred to as “experience sampling.” In such studies participants provide responses each day or multiple times a day, and analyses focus on within-person variability in constructs that traditionally might have been considered to be stable traits such as the Big Five (e.g., Fleeson, 2001).

Such within-person relationships concerning mindfulness have been examined previously. For example, Brown and Ryan (2003) collected measures of state mindfulness, autonomy, and emotional states multiple times a day for 21 days. They found that state mindfulness covaried with state feelings of autonomy and of affect. In a laboratory study, Weinstein et al. (2009) found that trait mindfulness was negatively related to state-level perceptions of stress, and in a diary study they found that daily mindfulness and stress were negatively related.

Despite the large body of research on mindfulness and stress, we know of no study that has examined relationships between how mindful people are at a moment in time and how stressed they feel at that same moment. The bulk of research on stress and mindfulness has concerned person-level relationships, and studies of state-level relationships have not examined stress-mindfulness relationships at the moment- or event-level. Knowing that mindfulness and stress are negatively related at the person-level or the day-level, tells us nothing about relationships at the moment- or event-level (e.g., when people are stressed are they less mindful). Relationships at different levels of analysis may represent psychological different processes (Affleck, Zautra, Tennen, & Armeli, 1999), and relationships between the same variables at different levels of analysis are mathematically independent (Nezlek, 2012).

### 1.3. The present study

The present study examined relationships between stress and mindfulness at what we will call the event-level, a specific point in time. We defined mindfulness in terms of attention to the present moment (*presence*). Participants described the events they experienced each day, and these descriptions included how present they thought they were during the event, and how stressful, positive, and important the event was. Our primary interest was the relationship between stress and *presence*. We collected measures of positivity and importance primarily to control the stress-mindfulness relationships we examined for relationships between stress and positivity and for relationships between stress and importance, although we had secondary hypotheses about positivity and importance. Participants also completed the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003), a trait level measure of mindfulness. Our study was guided by the following hypotheses.

#### 1.3.1. Event-level mean presence, positivity, and importance will be positively related to trait mindfulness, whereas event-level mean stress will be negatively related to trait mindfulness

Our event-level measure of presence was meant to assess a core element of dispositional mindfulness, and so we expected that event and

dispositional mindfulness would be positively related. Our expectations that mean event-level positivity would be positively related to trait mindfulness and that mean event-level stress would be negatively related to trait mindfulness are straightforward extension of the existing research. Although importance has not been discussed in research on mindfulness, we expected there would be a positive relationship between mean importance and trait mindfulness. Part of being mindful is being attentive to one's surroundings, to what is going on in the “here and now.” Mindful people recognize the importance of living in the moment, and this should translate into a greater recognition that what is happening here and now is important. Although these hypotheses involve event-level measures, they concern relationships at the person-level. The means these hypotheses concern are calculated across all the events, and as such they become person-level measures.

#### 1.3.2. At the event-level, we expected that presence would be negatively related to stress and would be positively related to importance and positivity

Studies at the person- and day-levels have found that mindfulness and stress are negatively related, which led us to assume the same relationship would exist at the event-level. Nevertheless, stress is a negative stimulus, and more stressful events might demand more attention than less stressful events (see Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). In light of this, we also entertained the possibility that presence and stress would be positively related. We expected that attention to the present moment and positivity would be positively related at the event-level based on existing research such as the moment-level relationships reported by Brown and Ryan (2003). We expected that importance and presence would be positively related at the event-level because mindfulness includes recognition of the importance of the here and now.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 153 community members, native Poles living in or near Warsaw, who responded to a call posted on two popular internet sites for participants in a “study about everyday functioning.” Inclusion criteria included being free from current or past history of psychiatric disorders, and participants were screened for psychiatric problems based on the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview (Sheehan et al., 1998). As a result, 22 participants were excluded from the analyses because they reported symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of a disorder, leaving a final sample of 131. For these 131 participants, mean age was 36.9 ( $SD = 14.1$ , range 16–71), and 88 were women. Sixty-seven had a college degree, 44 had only a high school degree, 14 had some college, 3 had only a primary school degree, and 3 did not describe their education. Participants were paid approximately 55 USD.

### 2.2. Procedure and measures

At introductory sessions, participants were told about the study and how to use the website, and they completed the MAAS (Brown & Ryan, 2003). MAAS scores were defined as the mean response to the items ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = .73$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ), and higher scores represented greater mindfulness.

Following this meeting, at the end of each day for two weeks, participants logged onto a secure website. In the instructions, we emphasized that we were interested in non-trivial events, and so participants were asked to “recall all the important events that happened today.” Events could be positive or negative, and participants indicated the nature of the event by selecting one of ten categories: interpersonal, family, partnership/marriage, health and physical symptoms, hobby, morals/values dilemmas, work/duties, contacts with officials, financial issues, and everyday life. Examples of positive and negative events were provided for each category.

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