



SPECIAL ARTICLE

# Mindfulness is not enough: Why equanimity holds the key to compassion



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## KEYWORDS

Mindfulness;  
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**Abstract** In order to appreciate mindfulness, it is necessary to focus on the concepts of non-judgement and acceptance as these attributes underpins the practice. Non-judgement is a label celebrated within a variety of helping professions and as a value at the core of much practice. In the context of mindfulness based interventions, accepting thoughts non-judgementally is an essential skill. However, the author argues against the ability of individuals to be non-judgemental given the profundity of its meaning and without other skills in place (without the practice of equanimity). The author puts forward a conceptual model of judgement and 'naturally occurring ignorance' in order to explore the potential barriers to practice. The author hypothesises that equanimity is the key mediating factor in being non-judgmental and therefore having the ability to generate compassion. A conceptual 'cycle of judgement' was created and discussed. Further, a theoretical model of 'naturally occurring ignorance' was created in order to confirm the barriers to equanimity, with the motivation of cultivating compassion.

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## PALABRAS CLAVE

Mindfulness;  
Compasión;  
Ecuanimidad;  
No juicio

**El *mindfulness* no es suficiente: por qué la ecuanimidad tiene la llave de la compasión**

**Resumen** Para valorar el *mindfulness*, es necesario centrarse en las ideas del no juicio (o imparcialidad) y de la aceptación ya que esto conceptualmente sustenta la práctica. El no juicio es una palabra importante en una variedad de profesiones de ayuda y un valor fundamental de muchas prácticas. En el contexto de las intervenciones basadas en el *mindfulness*, la aceptación de los pensamientos de manera no prejuiciosa es un ingrediente esencial. Sin embargo, el autor está en contra de la capacidad de las personas de ser imparciales, dada la profundidad de su significado. El autor presenta un modelo conceptual de juicio e «ignorancia presente de forma natural» para explorar conceptualmente las barreras potenciales a la práctica.

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El autor plantea la hipótesis de que la ecuanimidad es el factor mediador clave para facilitar la compasión. Se creó y se abordó un modelo conceptual de juicio. Además, se creó un modelo teórico de «ignorancia presente de forma natural» para subrayar las barreras a la ecuanimidad, con la motivación de cultivar la compasión.

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## Introduction

It could be argued that the pace and scale of research coupled with the erratic media attention into the practice of mindfulness is beginning to take the buzz out of the buzzword. Although giant strides have been made in the field in recent years, a healthy scepticism has emerged (Hyland, 2014; Zizek, 2012). It is argued that the overlap of psychological constructs under the umbrella of 'mindfulness' prohibits, and, to some extent, distorts the transformative potential of mindfulness. That is, the transformative potential for mindfulness is facilitated by the intervention of the central psychological construct of equanimity. This paper suggests Mindfulness acts only as the first stage towards the cultivation of equanimity and that it is this complimentary practice that facilitates compassion and garners further research in isolation.

This article builds on the work of Desbordes et al. (2015) by clearly differentiating 'non-judgemental acceptance' and 'attention' within current mindfulness understanding. Although 'acceptance', and 'non-judgement', are significant, they do not fully capture the concept of equanimity. Furthermore, this paper highlights the necessity of researchers producing validated quantitative tools that seek to measure this construct and aids future researchers understanding of critical considerations when establishing self-report questionnaires. Moreover, interventions specifically aimed at cultivating equanimity should be promoted via EEG in order to accurately assess this multi-dimensional construct.

Clear distinctions made between the 'attentional' faculties of mindfulness and the realm of 'non-judgmental/acceptance' or 'equanimity' would build on Lindsay, Young, Smyth, Brown, and Creswell (2017) pioneering mindfulness dismantling study. The study exemplified participants whom had both attention monitoring and acceptance mindfulness training experienced a greater reduction in mind wandering relative to other conditions including attention itself. This, for the first time highlights acceptance as a critical driver in the reduction of mind wandering, which is significant, given the challenge to describe and measure the effects of meditation and to explain their relevance for health and well-being.

Though there is a wide breadth of mindfulness studies, each to some extent reflects the authors' personal interests and expertise. An abundance of mindfulness scales have been introduced in line with the exponential growth of the discipline in recent years. 'Paying attention to the present moment without judgement' (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) is widely accepted as one of the leading definitions. Yet on closer

inspection, it is clear this working definition encompasses two separate elements, with one being the clear development of ones attentional capacity (paying attention to the present moment) and the other, a non-judgmental experiential attitude towards phenomenon (without judgement).

Various western definitions of mindfulness highlight a common component of mindfulness as an 'attitude of openness and acceptance'. Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, and Toney (2006) defines it as "'a state of being in which individuals bring their attention to the experiences occurring in the present moment, in a non-judgmental or accepting way'" (p. 27); an adaptable state of consciousness that encompasses receptive attention and awareness of one's inner state and the outside world, regardless of whether these encounters are positive or negative (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). The aforementioned work has resulted in a worldwide surge of interest in Mindfulness based interventions in a variety of sectors. There have been a number of studies that have looked at the value of mindfulness based interventions in managing such states as stress reduction, depression and general anxiety disorder (Baer, 2003; Carmody & Baer, 2009; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Teixeira, 2008; Toneatto & Nguyen, 2007).

In consideration of mindfulness based training's (MBT's) wider application to various sectors, Bishop et al. (2004) recommended a dual functioning operational definition, one that encompasses 'the self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience', and secondly, 'an orientation that is characterised by curiosity, openness, and acceptance.' Here, the distinction between 'paying attention' and 'non-judgmentally' is clearly categorised, however it is worth mentioning this was later criticised for confusing attention with awareness (Rapgay & Bystrisky, 2009).

Several reviews of the scales have been conducted (Baer, 2011; Bergomi, Tsacher, & Kupper, 2013; Park, Reilly-Spong, & Gross, 2013; Sauer et al., 2013) which have highlighted different structures and emphasise different aspects which reflect different understanding of mindfulness. Only one scale the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory scale (FMI) was largely influenced by the mindfulness practice found in Buddhism but still includes the contemporary understanding of mindfulness (Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmuller, Kleinknecht, & Schmidt, 2006). The clear inconsistency caused by differing factors suggest the possibility that current mindfulness scales may measure aspects that do not match the elements found in traditional mindfulness meditation, namely an emphasis on equanimity as the foundation for mindfulness practice.

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