

Cultivating "Right Effort: increased regulatory choice flexibility following a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) workshop

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Background and objective:

At its very essence, Buddhist practice involves developing skills for dealing with negative thoughts and emotions in an adaptive manner. Concepts like "Right Effort" and "yoniso manasikara" (translated as "wise attention") encourage the practitioner to cultivate a diverse regulatory repertoire and the ability to flexibly choose the most beneficial response from moment to moment. Recently, Martine Batchelor, a prominent Buddhist teacher, analyzed Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, an 8-week program developed on the basis of Kabat-Zinn's MBSR protocol, and suggested it was in accordance with the notion of "Right Effort" developed by the Buddha.

"Right Effort" overlaps the concepts of "psychological flexibility" and "regulatory choice flexibility" (RCF), currently investigated in the context of resilience, wellbeing and emotion regulation (ER). Specifically, behavioral measures of RCF, defined as the ability of individuals to flexibly and adaptively move between ER strategies as per contextual demands, were recently developed. In this study, we used these behavioral measures to investigate the hypothesis that MBSR indeed increases participants' regulatory flexibility abilities.

Methods:

N=111 students enrolled into eight MBSR workshops that began in either semester A (experimental group) or semester B (waiting control group). After the experimental group finished their workshops, all participants were tested on the behavioral RCF task. In this task, contextual demands are represented by high- or low- negative valance pictures. Participants are presented with these pictures over multiple trials and are asked in each trial to choose between an engaging and a disengaging ER strategy (cognitive reappraisal or distraction). Higher RCF is associated with higher probabilities to choose disengaging ER in the highly negative stimuli and engaging ER in the lower ones.

Results:

As hypothesized, the RCF patterns of participants who underwent MBSR training were higher than those of control participants, indicated by a higher differentiation between strategies when faced with varying emotional contexts.

Discussion and conclusion

We demonstrated, using a behavioral task, that MBSR programs can enhance regulatory flexibility skills resembling "Right Effort". This may be driving the positive outcomes of MBSR and MBCT programs in increasing resilience and wellbeing and may help understand the overlapping benefits of different contemplative practices.