The role of mindfulness in interpersonal perceptions of empathy and comfort with vulnerability
Nicholas Canby, Justin Laplante, James Cordova
Clark University, Worcester, United States

Background and Objectives: Although relationships and social interaction are key components in human well-being and functioning, little research has investigated the effects of mindfulness practice on the interpersonal relationships of those who meditate. The present study sought to investigate the relational effects of mindfulness practice using an experimental paradigm in which participants, some of whom had been trained in mindfulness practice, interacted in dyads and then assessed each other's levels of empathy, as well as their own levels of comfort being vulnerable with their partner.

Methods: The mindfulness group (N=18) were undergraduates from a Psychology of Mindfulness course who underwent mindfulness training for a semester. The control group (N=37) were undergraduates recruited from other Psychology classes. All participants completed surveys that measured mindfulness, empathy, self-compassion, positive and negative affect, and anxiety. Forty-six participants participated in a social interaction task based on Aron, et al. (1997), which involved asking a partner increasingly personal questions. After each interaction, participants rated each other using surveys that measured their comfort being vulnerable with their partner and their partner's empathy.

Results: Longitudinal analyses indicated that mindfulness and self-compassion scales significantly increased pre to post class for the mindfulness group (ps < .05). Dyadic social relations analyses indicated that a significant amount of variance in interpersonal perceptions of empathy and comfort with vulnerability was due to the actor (p < .05), while the variance due to the partner was non-significant (p > .05). Actors who rated themselves high in self-compassion and self-reported mindfulness were significantly more comfortable being vulnerable with their partner (p < .05) and rated their partner as being more empathic (p < .05). These variables also significantly interacted with membership in the mindfulness group (p < .05).

Discussion: Results indicate that participants who rated themselves high in mindfulness and self-compassion and who participated in the mindfulness training group rated others as having more empathy and were more comfortable being vulnerable with whoever they interacted with.

Conclusion: Results imply that through self-reinforcing beliefs more mindful and self-compassionate individuals perceive others in ways that may lead to greater intimacy, compassion, and prosocial behavior.