The Mediating Roles of Cognitive Biases in the Associations between Trait Mindfulness and Affective Symptoms

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Research shows that mindfulness and its cultivation are effective in reducing depressive and anxiety symptoms. Less is known, however, about the mechanisms underlying the impact of trait mindfulness on depression and anxiety.

One potential mediator between trait mindfulness and affective symptoms is cognitive bias. By being mindful, individuals may find it easier to experience emotional life non-judgmentally and non-reactively and less bias in cognitive processes (e.g., interpretation, attention, and memory), and in turn, less vulnerable to develop and maintain the depression and anxiety symptoms.

Despite its importance, research on the mediating role of cognitive bias in the associations between trait mindfulness and affective symptoms is scarce. In this study, we proposed a conceptual framework to examine three distinct cognitive biases as mediating mechanisms underlying the associations of trait mindfulness with depression and anxiety.

A total of 155 community adults completed a questionnaire which measured trait mindfulness and symptoms of depression and anxiety. They also completed three cognitive bias tasks which measured interpretation, attention, and memory biases. Correlation analyses showed that interpretation bias was negatively associated with trait mindfulness and positively associated with depression and anxiety symptoms. Regression analyses further demonstrated that interpretation bias was a partial mediator of the mindfulness-depression link and of the mindfulness-anxiety link.

Our study had significant theoretical contributions and practical implications. Theoretically, our findings demonstrated cognitive biases as mediating mechanisms underlying the relations between trait mindfulness and affective symptoms. Specifically, trait mindfulness was associated with less negative interpretation bias and, in turn, less severe depression and anxiety symptoms. Practically, our findings had important implications for the design and development of mindfulness training programs for individuals with depressive and anxiety symptoms.