

Comparing the effectiveness of different mindfulness interventions for anxiety: The benefit of adding anxiety-specific practice

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Background and objectives: In recent years, mindfulness-based approaches have gained increasing research interest and support for their application in the treatment of anxiety disorders. In this context, one area that has remained relatively unexplored, and which we aimed to start addressing in this study, concerns how different mindfulness interventions compare in their efficacy to reduce anxiety. This avenue of research is important as it may point to elements to include in treatment and may ultimately help maximize the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions.

Methods: Participants were 148 undergraduate students. In a first session, they completed a number of self-report questionnaires assessing intolerance of uncertainty, mindfulness, and anxiety symptoms. Subsequently, they were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a control condition consisting of listening to an audiobook and returning attention to the audio when distracted; a mindfulness condition consisting of conventional mindfulness instructions (mindfulness of breath, body sensations, thoughts); and a mindfulness-of-anxiety condition that included conventional instructions and added an anxiety-specific element, in which participants were asked to bring to mind a moderately anxiety-provoking memory and to apply mindful awareness to memory-related thoughts and emotions. Instructions were delivered via audio tape, both in the first session and as homework for 12 consecutive days. In a follow-up session, the self-report measures were completed a second time.

Results: Analysis of changes in symptoms revealed significant differences between groups for symptoms of social phobia and interoceptive fear, and a marginally significant difference for agoraphobia symptoms. Post hoc tests revealed that these effects were driven by greater symptom change in the mindfulness-of-anxiety condition compared to control. No significant differences between groups were found for change in worry, intolerance of uncertainty, or mindfulness.

Discussion and conclusion: The findings from the present study provide initial evidence that applying mindfulness exercises to the experience of anxiety-related memories can be beneficial for the reduction of anxiety. Potential limitations such as the use of a student sample are discussed, as well as avenues for future research, such as investigation of whether the findings are specific to these types of anxiety.