

Mindfulness Practices and Emotional Development in Adult Life: A Developmental Framework for Research and Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Clinical research documents many short-term benefits of mindfulness for addressing difficult emotions, but claims of enduring changes far exceed the available evidence. In this exploratory study, I begin the systematic evaluation of the possible long-term effects of mindfulness on emotional development in normal adult life. This study establishes a comprehensive developmental framework for research and teaching on mindfulness and adult emotional development, and reports the results of a pilot study of mindfulness and emotional characteristics in a sample of 138 leaders from 16 countries.

Taking an interdisciplinary perspective, I argue that a developmental approach requires linking biology, behavior, and subjective experience to understand mindfulness practices and their effects. Drawing from Buddhist and Western psychological research, theory, and practice, I present a three-tiered framework for understanding what mindfulness is and how it catalyzes change. First, mindfulness is defined as a cognitive skill that operates in three mindful mental states: mindful attention, mindful absorption, and mindful awareness. Practices that develop each state are explored, focusing on Buddhist calming and insight meditation practices. Second, incorporating evidence from neurobiology, I argue that mindful awareness catalyzes transformational change through optimally integrating conceptual and pre-conceptual ways of knowing. Third, the potential of mindfulness to catalyze adult emotional development is explored via the distinctions between state and trait change from personality psychology, and content and structure change from adult development theory. I argue that mindful awareness catalyzes development of a radical simplicity for working with emotions, in contrast to the development of complexity that is the focus of adult development theory.

Results of an empirical pilot study using the framework of trait change documented higher Mindfulness scores associated with lower Neuroticism, especially Angry Hostility, from the Five Factor Model; and higher Emotional Intelligence, especially Emotional Self-Awareness and Stress Tolerance, from the Bar-On model. Type of practice comparisons documented higher Mindfulness scores only in association with an Integral meditation practice. Qualitative data from profiles of three leaders representing the strongest associations were analyzed to identify themes for future follow-up interviews exploring how mindfulness may have helped them with negative emotions in their professional and personal lives.