

How Does Employee Mindfulness Reduce Psychological Distress?

Erin M. Eatough

Baruch College and The Graduate Center, The City University of New York

As pointed out by Hyland, Lee, and Mills (2015), the most prominent effect of mindfulness is a significant decrease in experienced stress levels, and one of the most popular mindfulness interventions is mindfulness-based *stress reduction*. When it comes to psychological stress, desirable outcomes are both expected and documented for employees who adopt a mindful approach to work. But *how* are these beneficial effects happening, exactly?

Hyland, Lee, and Mills did not elaborate on the theoretical frameworks that may be useful to academic researchers in organizational psychology aiming to better understand this phenomenon, nor did they discuss how examining mindfulness through the lens of occupational stress theory could lend new insights and inform new interventions. Indeed, from a strictly academic viewpoint, we have limited empirical evidence demonstrating how and why mindfulness “works,” especially pertaining to the occupational stress process as we understand it in organizational psychology. Thus, the purpose of my commentary is to supplement the focal article with an additional discussion of mindfulness in the context of several existing occupational stress theories.

In general, occupational stress research relies on a stressor-strain model whereby stressors (environmental stimuli) lead to strains (maladaptive responses to stressors). There are several points of entry in this process whereby mindfulness may exert influence. First, mindfulness may alter initial perception and appraisal of stressors to begin with. Second, after the stress process has begun, mindfulness may offer reserves of personal resources and promote adaptive coping. Finally, if strain responses do ultimately arise, it may aid in one’s self-regulation of them.

What follows is a concise discussion of each of the points of entry noted above and the corresponding theoretical frameworks that may be used to support empirical investigations. Notably, I focus on the western interpretation of the construct of mindfulness. Furthermore, although neurobiological

Erin M. Eatough, Department of Psychology, Weissman School of Arts and Sciences, Baruch College and The Graduate Center, The City University of New York.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Erin M. Eatough, Department of Psychology, Weissman School of Arts and Sciences, Baruch College and The Graduate Center, The City University of New York, One Bernard Baruch Way, New York, NY 10010. E-mail: erin.eatough@baruch.cuny.edu

processes are undoubtedly at play, the current discussion is limited to psychological mechanisms.

Mindfulness and Stressor Perception

First, let us consider how mindfulness may alter employees' perception of stressors themselves. Appraisal occurs early on in a transactional exchange between the person and the environment. The popular cognitive theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) posits that the experience of stress emerges not only from an event itself but also from the appraisal of the event as being negative and as exceeding a person's coping capacity.

Because mindfulness is characterized by observing stimuli without judgment or evaluation, mindfulness practice may allow for a more nonjudgmental and accepting assessment of the environment. Mindfulness is thought to improve one's ability to receptively process internal and external stimuli as they occur. Thus, when mindful individuals attend to the present moment in a receptive, nonjudgmental way, they should observe stressful events more objectively and refrain from attaching a meaning or evaluation to them. This helps individuals generate an adaptive appraisal, viewing demanding situations as less stressful or threatening. In addition, mindfulness is thought to decrease automaticity of mental processes. An employee's prior experiences, as well as his or her embedded mental models, can spark automatic thought patterns and automatically generate meaning, which may be maladaptive or even invalid. Mindfulness, however, is thought to counteract automatic mental schemas, and this reduction in automatic thinking could assist in a more accurate primary appraisal process.

Turning to another theoretical lens, many occupational stressors are characterized by identity threat or threat to the self. The stress-as-offense-to-self framework (Semmer, Jacobshagen, Meier, & Elfering, 2007) suggests that workplace stressors influence psychological states when they are identity relevant (e.g., mistreatment). Such stressors threaten self-esteem and positive self-evaluation because work roles are tied up in a holistic view of self. Events incongruent with our sense of self are stressful.

Mindfulness, however, is thought to create a decoupling of the self from events, thoughts, and emotions. Meta-awareness, or being aware of one's own thinking, is one of the characteristics of mindfulness-based practices allowing the individual to separate "self" from sensations and thoughts by allowing, identifying, and acknowledging them. Mindfulness promotes the objectification of experiences and emotions, reducing them to innocuous sensory information versus being self-relevant. Thus, with high mindfulness, "self-relevant" or "identity-threatening" stressors could become events

completely unattached to self-schema and therefore much less stressful, if at all.

Novel insights could be gained by merging the concept of mindfulness with the theories of how stressor perceptions are generated. In particular, does the nonjudgmental appraisal process promoted by mindfulness practice (i.e., discontinuing to appraise an event as “good” or “bad”) reduce or eliminate a stress response altogether? If so, is this a superlative situation, or can nonjudgment and decoupling from work experiences backfire to create complacency? Considering how central perception is to any given workplace stressor experience, gaining a better understanding of how to alter that perception could lead to very powerful intervention design.

Mindfulness and Coping

Another point of entry for mindfulness in the occupational stress process is poststressor appraisal during coping efforts. First, mindfulness may affect the level of available resources one has to manage a stressor. According to conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), personal resources are one category of resources that an individual may rely on when assessing the ability to cope with environmental challenges and/or coping itself. Personal resources buffer against stress and are generally linked to resiliency.

Mindfulness builds “personal resources” that could be useful to the employee in managing stressor experiences. In particular, mindfulness fosters caring, empathy, and compassion—not only for others but also for the self. It also affects self-efficacy, hope, and self-control. Thus, mindfulness may function to improve employee strain responses through the promotion of personal resources, which can buffer stressor experiences.

In addition, more mindful individuals may be more likely to *choose* adaptive coping strategies. Because mindful individuals are less prone to negative or distorted thinking patterns such as rumination or catastrophizing, they are more likely to select active or approach coping methods rather than methods that can perpetuate the stressor, such as avoidance (Weinstein, Brown, & Ryan, 2009). By exploring how mindfulness may be linked to personal resources and coping strategy selection, we stand to gain insight about what psychological and behavioral responses represent effective changes post–mindfulness intervention. Understanding the intermediary process between mindfulness and long-term outcomes could allow for more effective training evaluation and design.

Mindfulness and Self-Regulation of Strains

Finally, the link between mindfulness and desirable responses to occupational stressors may be explained through improvements in self-regulation, a concept that many researchers have already explored empirically, demon-

strating mindfulness to predict increased control of emotions. In line with this, researchers may consider the usefulness of the strength model of self-control (Baumeister, Bratlavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998) to understand how mindfulness-based practices may promote effective management of strain responses that do arise from an occupational stressor experience. Baumeister and colleagues suggest that self-regulation is a limited resource that can be used up and restored. Mindfulness may replenish self-regulatory resources after a stressor experience, allowing for better behavioral and emotional self-regulation poststressor. If self-control is a muscle, mindfulness may be the exercise.

Some groundwork in this area has already been done. An existing model of mindfulness explained by Glomb, Duffy, Bono, and Yang (2011) integrates self-regulation, suggesting that mindfulness enhances the self-regulatory processes, facilitating “staying in the moment,” without evaluation or emotional reaction. What is yet to be examined is whether mindfulness is helpful for managing stressor-induced strains via self-regulatory resource gain specifically.

By examining mindfulness within the context of self-regulation, several new insights could be gained. First, we may better understand the trajectory by which mindfulness may build self-regulation resources. For example, it may be that to enjoy self-regulatory gains, consistent and sustained efforts in mindfulness across time are required, like exercising a physical muscle. Second, if self-regulation is indeed a key mediator to broader well-being improvements, it will be important to tease apart mindfulness *per se* from simply allowing oneself the time and space to regain self-control resources (i.e., through general relaxation or distraction). Third, it is possible that certain *aspects* of mindfulness are more relevant to self-regulatory improvements than are others. For example, in one study only four facets of mindfulness (nonreactivity, observing, acting with awareness, and describing) related to self-control (*rs* ranging from .19–.32; Ghorbani, Watson, Farhadi, & Chen, 2014). The nonjudging factor did not. When self-regulation in the face of challenge is important (e.g., customer service), new research may direct training to particular *aspects* of mindfulness. As time-sensitive and cost-efficient interventions are commonly desirable in workplace settings, this information would be valuable.

In sum, there are several points of entry for mindfulness in common occupational stress process frameworks. By examining mindfulness within the context of occupational stress theory, we may be able to better understand the psychological mechanisms behind its effects. Those theoretical frameworks discussed here, although certainly not exhaustive, have hopefully sparked ideas for new integrations of mindfulness in occupational stress research.

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Mindfulness and Performance: Cautionary Notes on a Compelling Concept

Erik Dane
Rice University

As Hyland, Lee, and Mills (2015) note, many conceptualizations of mindfulness include three characteristics. In particular, mindfulness is often defined as a state of consciousness in which an individual (a) focuses on the present moment, (b) attends to phenomena occurring both externally and internally, and (c) remains open to and accepting of observed stimuli—and thus avoids making judgments. Together, these characteristics grant insight into how mindfulness stands to improve performance in work settings. Just as directing attention to the work environment and the tasks and events associated with it can equip workers with key information for making decisions

Erik Dane, Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Business, Rice University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Erik Dane, Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Business, Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, TX 77005. E-mail: erikdane@rice.edu