



The Relationship of Mindfulness and Meaning in Life Among College Students

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Abstract

This paper theorizes the relationship between mindfulness and meaning in life during the collegiate years. Experiencing meaning is a vital developmental task during early adulthood; finding innovative ways to cultivate college students' meaning in life is an imperative practical challenge for colleges and universities today. This exposition provides a conceptual framework regarding how these two psychological variables, mindfulness and meaning in life, may be related to each other. This paper describes specific processes that link these two variables. A review of the empirical evidence for the linkage between mindfulness and meaning in college students is performed. Based on this review, a future research study is proposed that directly examines this association in a sample of first-year college students, half of whom participated in a course designed to teach them mindfulness and thereby, improve their sense of meaning and flourishing in life.

Key Words: mindfulness, meaning in life, college students, conceptual review

Introduction

Can being more mindful help young people find more meaning in life? – How are mindfulness and meaning in life related during the early years of college, and why? This essay explores these questions and describes potential mediating processes that explain why mindfulness and meaning in life may be related. Whereas some scientific studies have found that there is a moderate positive correlation between mindfulness and meaning in life (e.g., Allan, Bott & Suh, 2014; Baer et al. 2008), no studies have empirically identified *why* mindfulness and meaning in life are related. Why they are related in college-aged students is explored.

Social Significance

The college years are an important time to explore issues of meaning in life. This age group, sometimes called emerging adulthood, is a distinct period between ages 18 and 29 (Arnett, 2014). Emerging adulthood is theorized to be a dynamic period of life that differs from adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Research on emerging adulthood has focused a lot on young people who attend college in industrialized societies of the West. Thus, this work is relevant at The Pennsylvania State University.

The relationship between mindfulness and meaning in life is important during emerging adulthood because at this time because young people may experience a loss of meaning in life due to various stage-specific factors. Jeffrey Arnett (2000) states that, “emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, [and] when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course” (pp. 469). Emerging adults have personal responsibilities, but the strength of these obligations might be less than in other life stages (Arnett, Žukauskienė, & Sugimura, 2014). The majority of young people between the ages of 18 and 29 do not believe that they have reached full adulthood yet, and many are searching for purpose and meaning in their personal, social and professional lives (e.g., Damon, 2010). In a broader context, there is little institutionally and culturally imposed structure on young people in the United States as they make the transition into adulthood (Schulenberg et al., 2004). Although the lack of structure and life facilitation can promote greater self-selection of life paths, it can also leave room for uncertainty and lack of purpose.

Finding purpose and meaning in life is a salient task of young people and the lack of its discovery may result in poorer mental health. Youth is a formative period of cultivating a sense of purpose, but culture does not always teach young people about meaning and flourishing. Traditional categories of youth purpose, such as family, community, faith, work, and country, may seem obsolete to today’s youth. Young people have their worldviews dominated by parents, teachers, counselors, peers, the media, and influential others (Mariano & Going, 2011), but it is at the critical age of emerging adulthood that they have to begin deciding on what is meaningful to themselves. Emerging adults begin to personally entertain meaning and future-oriented questions for the first time in a serious manner. Educational and media influences may no longer support such purposes (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Feelings of living in between concrete age groups might elicit feelings of depression and anxiety in some emerging adults, especially those who believe they should feel more adult at their current age than they actually are (Arnett et al., 2014). Emerging adults in contemporary culture may lack a sense of meaning in their lives during this central period of growth. Their mental health could also be affected by this ever-changing culture and its views on the growing population of young people.

A focus on mindfulness and meaning during college is also important because a lack of mindfulness and purpose may be part of what is a mental health crisis among emerging adults both during and after the transition to college today (Hibbs & Rostain, 2019). Developmental transitions, representing major life changes within individuals’ social roles and contexts, can contribute to declines in college students’ mental health (Schulenberg, Sameroff, & Cicchetti, 2004). For instance, anxiety and mood disorders are prevalent during the emerging adult years. Generally, feeling anxious or depressed is common during emerging adulthood (Arnett et al., 2014). Such mental health conditions take people away from the present moment (e.g., anxiety relates to worrying about the future, depression relates to worrying about the past). Rumination, absorption in the past, or fantasies and anxieties about the future can pull one away from what is taking place in the present (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Attentional distractions now saturate the lives of emerging adults unlike previous generations. Emerging adults may often find themselves without adequate social support, leading them to rely on social media to obtain validation virtually (Arnett et al., 2014). Relying on social media for validation allows people to distract themselves from reality which may isolate them from their true thoughts and feelings. Absorption in social atmospheres online can cause people to evade the present moment and lose sight of what is meaningful in their lives.

Mindfulness trainings and interventions may be able to mediate the sense of meaning in life. By knowing themselves, their values, and passions through mindfulness, they may be better able to pursue activities and actions that lead to a meaningful life. A core characteristic of mindfulness has been described as *open* or *receptive* awareness and attention (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Meaning in life may happen when one has a sense of coherence in their life. There are relatively few studies about this topic, but there are implications that mindfulness can help lead to mediating processes that may alleviate a loss of meaning in life. More studies are needed to popularize mindfulness and cultivate meaning in life in early college students.

Conceptual Model

Why might mindfulness improve meaning in life? In this section, I define mindfulness and meaning more clearly and explore how mindfulness may lead to greater meaning in life through mediating processes (see Figure 1). Specifically, I propose that mindfulness *teaches* people to pay attention, decenter, and broaden their attention. This mindful state of attention then can serve various functions such as emotion regulation and meaning making. Mindfulness practices may then *allow* people to engage in mediating processes that are related to meaning in life, including emotion regulation, reappraisal and making meaning, and saving the positive aspects of experiences. By fostering positive reappraisals and positive emotional experiences, mindfulness may generate deep eudemonic meaning that promotes resilience and engagement with a valued and purposeful life (Garland et al., 2015). The ability to make meaning out of life's moments may come from possessing the skills to react to stimuli in one's life in a new and refreshing way.

Definitions of Mindfulness

Mindfulness can be defined through two components proposed by Bishop et al. (2014): 1.) the self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience, allowing for increased recognition of mental events in the present moment, and 2.) the adoption of a particular orientation toward one's experiences in the present moment, an orientation that is characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance. In a different approach, mindfulness is conceptualized as serving five functions: observing experience, describing experience, acting with awareness, non-judging of inner experience, and non-reactivity to inner experience (Baer et al., 2008). This helps explain how present-centered attention that is curious, open and accepting may be helpful in emotion regulation for instance, through non-judgment and non-reactivity.

Definitions of Meaning in Life

Viktor Frankl (1959) argued that people function best when they perceive a sense of meaning and possess a life purpose, a unique mission to strive for throughout their lives (Steger, 2012). Meaning in life can be defined as the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives.

Sometimes, this definition also includes the notion that meaning in life is reflected in people's strength and intensity of desire and effort to establish and/or augment their understanding of their lives (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). In Park and Folkman's (1997) conceptual model, meaning has two components: 1.) global meaning and 2.) situational meaning. Global meaning refers to the most abstract and generalized level of meaning. This entails people's basic goals and fundamental assumptions, beliefs, and expectations about the world. Situational meaning refers to the interaction of a person's global beliefs and goals and the

circumstances of a particular person-environment transaction. Situational meaning involves the appraisal of person-environment transactions, which in turn influences how people cope with the demands of those transactions and their outcomes. Situational meaning has three major components. 1.) appraisal of meaning – the initial assessment of the personal significance of specific transactions between the person and the environment, 2.) coping processes – the processes in which people search for meaning once a situation has been appraised as stressful, and 3.) meaning as outcome – the meaning that the person makes in the aftermath of an event; meaning as outcome is a potential product of coping efforts (Park & Folkman, 1997). Mindfulness might clarify meaning through reappraisal and reflection on outcomes after the fact.

Mediating Processes Between Mindfulness and Meaning in Life

Mindfulness may increase meaning in life through various mediating processes. Mindfulness may affect meaning after (e.g., reflecting) something happens, during something happening (e.g., the present moment), and before (e.g., planning) something happens. For instance, Shapiro, Astin, and Freedman (2006) proposed that the three axioms of Intention, Attention, and Attitude (IAA) that are the building blocks of mindfulness may lead to greater meaning in life by paying attention, following intentions, and being open to experiences. Similarly, the Mindfulness-to-Meaning Theory (MMT) is a temporally dynamic process model of mindful positive emotion regulation that elucidates downstream cognitive-affective mechanisms by which mindfulness promotes health and resilience (Garland & Fredrickson, 2019). The MMT has two primary, empirically tractable hypotheses regarding processes that mediate between mindfulness and meaning: 1.) reappraisal and 2.) savoring (Garland and Fredrickson, 2019). Positive reappraisal through mindfulness is not intended to recast negative experiences as positive. The process of positive reappraisal that stems from mindfulness involves broadening the scope of one's appraisal to appreciate that even adverse experiences are potential personal transformation and growth. Reorienting one's reaction towards adverse experiences, provides a chance to make a meaning out of stressors and break maladaptive cognitive habits (Garland, Farb, Goldin, & Fredrickson, 2015). Thus, mindfulness may promote meaning by facilitating turning toward challenge and difficulty in life and seeing new lessons therein.

Other hypotheses that detail what mindfulness allows people to engage in are highlighted. 1.) Be authentic – bring attention and awareness to oneself to clarify personal values, and intentionally align one's behavior with personal values to confer meaning in life because people are their authentic selves. 2.) Engage with suffering – increase the threshold of understanding suffering. Instead of pushing suffering away or becoming over-identified with it, people are able to make meaning out of suffering. This connects back to the idea of non-reactivity in mindfulness practices. Struggles are a part of everyday life and people are more likely to make meaning instead of shying away from, rejecting, or refusing to come to terms with suffering. 3.) Seek pleasure wisely – understand that chasing certain pleasures are only short-term fixes, and chase meaning instead. In this instance, mindfulness helps us discover long-term happiness and understand short-term happiness. The source of happiness lies not in the object but in attitude towards its conditions.

Evidence of Associations

This section describes considerations in the existing scientific studies that have examined the relationship between mindfulness, meaning in life and possible mediating processes. In a study (Pearson, Brown, Bravo, and Witkiewitz, 2014) with 1,277 participants – comprised of a Southeastern university students and Southwestern university students – with mean ages of 21.95 (SD = 5.45) and 20.71 (SD = 4.31) respectively. Pearson et al. (2014) found that trait mindfulness was moderately associated with higher decentering ($\beta=.31, p < .05$), which was moderately associated with a higher perceived purpose in life ($\beta=.40, p < .05$). Bloch, Farrell, Hook, Van Tongeren, and Penberthy (2015) conducted a study with 205 participants, with a mean age of 20.69 (SD = 1.61), involving mindfulness and meaning in life. Time 1 analyses revealed that the presence of meaning was positively correlated with all five factors of mindfulness: observing ($r = .17, p < .05$) describing, acting with awareness, non-judging of inner experience, ($r = .32, .26, .26$, respectively, $p < .01$), and non-reactivity to inner experience ($r = .19, p < .05$). Based on Mindfulness-to-Meaning Theory (MMT), Hanley & Garland (2014) conducted a study with 101 participants, with a mean age of 22 (SD = 5.64), and found that dispositional mindfulness was significantly related with self-reported positive reappraisal ($\beta = .31, p < .01$), a key process of meaning making.

The Self-determination Theory (SDT), suggests that mindfulness may lead to greater authenticity, which in turn leads to increased meaning in life (Allan et al., 2014). In a study with 305 participants, with a mean age of 19.37 (SD = 1.40), Allan et al. (2014) found that mindfulness was significantly correlated with meaning in life ($r = .23, p < .01$) and all four components of authenticity: awareness, unbiased processing, behavior, and relational orientation ($r = .33, .45, .34$, and $.30$, respectively, $p < .01$). Meaning in life was also significantly correlated with all four components of authenticity, as well: awareness, unbiased processing, behavior, and relational orientation ($r = .52, .19, .35$, and $.29$, respectively, $p < .01$). However, the relationship between mindfulness and meaning in life was no longer significant once all four components of authenticity were included in the model as mediators. Awareness was the only component of authenticity that positively mediated the relation ($r = .49, p < .05$), and unbiased processing negatively mediated the relation ($r = -.14, p < .05$) between mindfulness and meaning in life. Increased self-awareness may explain the positive relationship between mindfulness and meaning in life.

Relatedly, Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt and King (2009) conducted a study with fifty-nine participants, with a mean age of 19.11 (SD = 1.12), involving their true/actual self-concepts and meaning in life. True self and meaning in life were significantly correlated ($r = .34, p < .01$).

The correlation between mindfulness as a state and meaning in life is consistent with studies linking mindfulness to purpose in life and psychological well-being; meaning in life positively correlates with well-being outcomes and negatively correlates with indicators of poor well-being (Allan et al., 2014). King, Hicks, Krull, and Del Gaiso (2006) conducted a study with 568 participants, with a mean age of 20.91 (SD = 2.00) and found that general positive affect was significantly related to general meaning in life ($\beta = .53, p < .001$).

Mindfulness-based interventions consistently have positive outcomes, suggesting that increased mindfulness is related to decreases in psychological symptoms (Baer et al., 2008). Galla (2016) conducted a study with 132 youth, with a mean age of 16.76 (SD = 1.48), who participated in a meditation retreat. Within-person change in mindful attention was associated with significant reductions in perceived stress and rumination and increases in positive affect.

By improving wellbeing, mindfulness may indirectly support meaning making as individuals move out of a “narrow and protect” mode of functioning. Thus, mindfulness may promote meaning through improved wellbeing.

Summary/Discussion

This essay conceptually reviewed how mindfulness and meaning in life are related in emerging adults in college. Mindfulness and meaning in life were defined, evidence for why emerging adulthood is a critical period of life for many young people in today’s culture was featured, and potential mediating processes were discussed. Current scientific literature does not yet know how and why mindfulness and meaning in life are related during the period of emerging adulthood. Finding out how these variables are related may have practical implications for education and prevention services. It is essential to research and understand how meaning in life can be present in the lives of young people and fostered by mindfulness practices.

The main hypothesis behind this review was that practicing mindfulness gives people a conscious space of awareness and ability to gain insight into self, others and life. As a form of receptive awareness, mindfulness may create a space where one is able to view their cognitive and behavioral options, rather than solely reacting to interpersonal events in repetitive patterns. Awareness to present experience, regulating the focus of attention, observing, and attending to one’s thoughts, feelings, and sensations from moment to moment may all provide opportunities for making meaning in life. All thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise are seen as relevant and are to be observed. This leads to an alertness of what is occurring and is often described as a feeling of being fully present and alive in the moment. In addition, the commitment to maintaining an attitude of curiosity associated with mindfulness, that stance of being non-judgmental and non-reactive, provides additional opportunities for making meaning in one’s life. While there is empirical evidence that mindfulness and meaning in life are positively correlated, a comprehensive theoretical model that explains the relationship of mindfulness and meaning in life has not yet been fully tested empirically.

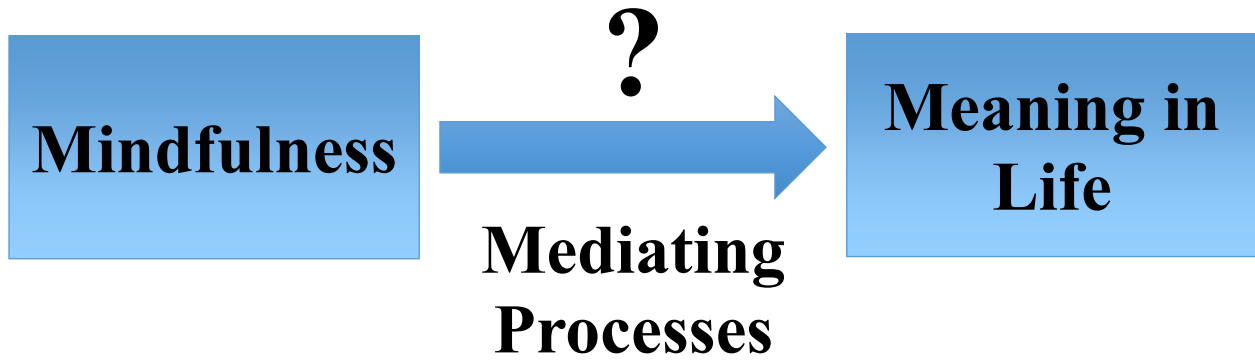
More research is needed to test a full model of mindfulness, mediating processes, and meaning in life. A future study will be conducted involving an analysis that directly tests the mindfulness and meaning in life conceptual model. A sample of first-year college students who took The Art and Science of Human Flourishing, a class that taught them mindfulness, meaning in life, and other topics related to human flourishing, will be used in this study. Students in this class will be compared to a matched set of controls who did not take the course. The data includes the constructs of mindfulness and meaning in life – the responses of the students will be analyzed and compared to matched controls in terms of positive change in these constructs over time, and in terms of the strength of their association with each other over time in the two groups (treatment, control). The Art and Science of Human Flourishing provides one quasi-experimental study that will tell us more about how we can increase both mindfulness and meaning during this key transitional period in the lifespan.

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Figure 1.



A model of mindfulness and its relationship with meaning in life; arrow denotes mediating processes.