Mindful Eating and It’s Relationship with Mental Well-Being

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to study the relationship between mindful eating and mental well-being, two variables which have been shown to be associated through previous work studying mindfulness and facets of positive mental health. The hypothesis thus stated that there would be a significant positive relationship between mindful eating and mental well-being. The measure that was used to tap mindfulness was the Mindful Eating Questionnaire (Framson et al. 2009), while mental well-being was measured through Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (Tennant et al., 2007). A sample of 309 participants (males = 93, females = 216) was used, which was collected through an online survey method. As predicted, the results showed that there is a significant positive relationship between overall mindful eating and mental well-being ($r = .291$, $p < 0.05$). Significant positive relationships were also found between four of the five mindful eating sub domains and mental well-being (Awareness: $r = .221$, $p < 0.05$, Distraction: $r = .105$, $p < 0.05$, Disinhibition: $r = .208$, $p < 0.05$, Emotional Response: $r = .189$, $p < 0.05$) while a non significant negative relationship was found between the remaining sub domain (External Cues) and mental well-being ($r = -.063$, $p < 0.136$).

Further avenues for research were also suggested in light of the presented results.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Eating, Mental well being

1. Introduction

“Mindful Eating” although a seemingly unremarkable topic for many, food and eating are a major part of every human being’s life. Mindfulness in its most basic form is the practice of paying attention to the activity at hand. By experts it has been described as, “bringing one’s complete attention to the present experience on a moment to moment basis” (Marlatt & Kristeller, 1999) or even as “an open-hearted, moment-to-moment, non-judgmental

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awareness” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). However, here ‘paying attention’ means focusing on what one is doing while simultaneously being aware of thoughts, feelings, and memories that come up in that moment, and also noticing when the mind wanders so that it can be refocused (Baer & Krietemeyer, 2006). This is in contrast to when one’s state of mind is such that attention is not focused on the present. Rather, it is fixed upon day dreaming, worries, plans, etc, which is what causes humans to act mechanically, with mindless habits and behavior patterns which are unhealthy, and a general unawareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003). It is based on traditional mindful meditation but as a psychological concept is independent of spiritual beliefs and Buddhist practices (Kabat-Zinn 1982). Mindful eating is conceptualized as being aware in the present moment when one is eating; paying close attention to the senses, including physical and emotional sensations (Albers, 2008). Although mindful eating is the approach being introduced to dieting, it focuses on the process of eating, not what is eaten and there are no rules to be followed. As stated by Albers (2008), the first step involves noticing all of the senses, tastes, smells, and textures to the food eaten. The second is recognizing repetitive habits such as eating while multitasking and eating on autopilot without being aware consciously. The third is being aware of what triggers the initiation and stopping of eating.Barbra Fredrickson’s ‘Broaden and Build’ theory (2004) focuses on a heightened awareness leading to acquisition of more knowledge and subsequently more life enhancing tools and skills. This lends theoretical support to this paper as it shows the link between being mindfully aware and wellness in life. For most of its history, psychology has focused on mental health in a way that it studied what occurred in the instance of illness or deficiencies. Now, however, there is a trend of an increase of interest in the other side, which is the concept of positive mental health. The World Health Organisation (2004) has declared positive mental health to be the ‘foundation for well-being and effective functioning for both the individual and the community’ and defined it as a state ‘which allows individuals to realize their abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and make a contribution to their community.’ This definition is used by Tennant et al. (2007) in the construction of the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMBS), which is used for the purposes of conducting this study.There is no shortage of studies assessing the negative mental health of people in Pakistan. However, there is a contrasting dearth of studies in the area of studies of positivity. An example of one of the few studies conducted in the area was carried out by Sohail and Chaudhry (2004). The study focused on the prevalence and predictors of subjective well-being in Eastern Muslim culture, Pakistan. It also aimed to compare results with ratings from other parts of the world as well. The purpose of this study is to further explore the domain of mindful eating specifically in relation to mental well-being. The idea is to discover more ways in which the common man can derive more satisfaction out of ordinary life experiences, and thus possibly achieving overall happiness instead of completely changing a person’s lifestyle in order to achieve better health. Mindful eating studies may also be relevant to Pakistan as they may already be engaging in these practices as characteristics of mindfulness regarding food are taught in the culture, such as to always be gratuitous, remain silent, engage in no other activity meanwhile, avoid wastage, etc. It will also be useful to examine the prevalence of mental well-being in the nation. In light of literature review it was hypothesized that higher levels of mindful eating will be significantly positively correlated with higher levels of mental well-being.

2. Method

Participants: Using online survey method, a sample of 467 participants was collected. They were contacted through online food discussion groups based in Karachi, Pakistan. Out of this number 309 of the responses met the exclusion criteria. 216 of the participants were females while 93 were males. The ages of the participants ranged from 18-54 (157 were from the 18-25 age group, while 116 participants belonged to the 26-35 age group, and 36 belonged to the 36-54 age group) with a mean age of 27.7. All participants were residents of Karachi.

2.1 Measures

The Mindful Eating Questionnaire (MEQ) (Framson et al. 2009) was posted in order to measure mindful eating. The 28 items are Likert scale questions anchored by never/rarely, sometimes, often, and usually/always. Each of the five subscales is measured with three to eight items, with the overall summary score calculated as the mean of the five subscales. Framson et al. (2009) demonstrated that the questionnaire was a valid measure with adequate construct validity and reliability. Subscale scores also had good internal consistency reliability: disinhibition (0.83),
awareness (0.74), external cues (0.70), emotional response (0.71), and distraction (0.64). The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (Tennant et al., 2007) was used to measure mental well-being. The WEMWBS consists of 14 items measuring feelings and thoughts related to various facets of positive mental health, incorporating psychological functioning (psychological well-being), affective and cognitive-evaluative elements. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (none of the time to all of the time). The scale has been shown to have a Cronbach’s alpha score of 0.91 with good content and criterion validity, and high test–retest (0.83) and internal consistency reliability.

### 2.3 Procedure

As the MEQ and WEMWBS are copyrighted scales, permission from their authors was taken for their use. The online survey tool ‘SurveyMonkey’ was used to post the questionnaires on the online food discussion groups, along with an explanation of the purpose of the research. If they wished to participate, the posted link automatically directed them to the informed consent form. The concept of confidentiality with respect to their responses was explained and assured to them through this form. They were then directed to the MEQ and WEMWBS. Along with a thank you note for participation, the researcher’s contact details were provided at the end of the questionnaire, in case of any questions the participants might have.

### 3 Results

Using Pearson correlation tests the relationships between variables were analyzed. There was a significant positive correlation between overall mindful eating score and mental well-being score ($r=0.29; p<0.01$). Upon further analysis it was also found that there were significant positive correlations between mental well-being score and the awareness subscale score ($r=0.221; p<0.01$), the distraction subscale score ($r=0.105; p<0.05$), the disinhibition subscale score ($r=0.208; p<0.01$), as well as the emotional subscale score ($r=0.189; p<0.01$). There was a non significant negative correlation between mental well-being score and the external subscale score ($r=-0.063; p<0.136$).

### 4. Discussion

Mindfulness is a concept which is already currently under scrutiny, and mindful eating is a variable which has come to researchers’ attention even more recently. Many studies have looked at the benefits of mindfulness and meditation, but there has been a need to examine ways in which these practices can realistically be incorporated into one’s life, and whether or not these practices when looked at in isolation have a significant impact on one’s mind. Hence, the purpose of this research was to investigate the relationship between mindful eating, which is sometimes termed ‘food meditation’ and mental well-being. In this sample, overall mindful eating was positively correlated with mental well-being, suggesting that those with higher levels of mental well-being are more mindful eaters. The hypothesis was thus supported. These findings are also consistent with the body of work on mindfulness and meditation. However the strength of the correlation ranges from weak to medium. Significant positive correlations of four of the sub domains of the MEQ existed with mental well-being, while for the external subscale the correlation was not significant but inverse and close to zero. This highlights how the relationship people share with food is not very straightforward. Eating is an inevitable daily activity, and is also a regular source of sensory pleasure for many. The results observed with regard to various subscales shed some light on the phenomena. The ‘Awareness’ subscale also has a significant positive relationship with mental well-being ($r=0.221, p<0.05$). This can relate to a complete anchoring in the present which mindful eating principles teaches through being non-judgmentally aware of how food impacts senses and internal states (Fletcher, 2010). It inculcates non-reactive attention to the present moment which leads to acceptance of experience, rather than constant evaluation, which is related to mental wellness. This is illustrated in the study by Kirby (2012), which talks about mindfulness promoting positive psychological functioning. The ‘Disinhibition’ subscale is amongst those with a significant positive relationship with mental well-being ($r=0.208, p<0.05$). Learning to identify hunger and its types and recognizing satiety cues, and then to act according to these factors is what this subscale relates to. As an element of self-regulation can be seen here, it is clear why this is related to mental well-being. A study by Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) also brings focus how self-regulation is related to proactive coping, a factor which may affect the mental well-being of a person. A study by
Brown and Ryan (2003) also highlighted how mindfulness may predict self-regulated behavior and positive emotional states. Various foods are also said to conjure different emotions in peoples’ lives, with many reacting to feelings by feeding themselves, which is termed ‘emotional eating’. The ‘Emotional Response’ subscale is positively correlated with mental well-being ($r=.189$, $p<0.05$), and the items assessing this are reverse scored, which means that people who are less likely to eat in reaction to negative emotions are more likely to be mentally well. This coalesces with existing findings that mindfulness has been shown to be positively correlated with rational coping (Palmer & Rodger, 2009). The ‘Distraction’ subscale was significantly positively correlated with mental well-being, but the strength of the relationship was very weak ($r=.105$, $p<0.05$). If one is engaged in or simply thinking about other things while eating, it is difficult to practice mindfulness and thus there will be no effect on mental well-being. This reiterates the repeatedly mentioned points about paying attention to what one is doing and remaining in the present. The ‘External Cues’ subscale showed a negative correlation with mental well-being ($r=-.063$, $p<0.136$). This implies that paying attention to external cues, such as realizing that being in the environment of a movie theater has resulted in popcorn cravings, is related to lower levels of positive mental health. Although the strength of the correlation seems to be very weak, the fact that it appears to be negative might be attributed to the fact that constantly analyzing one’s motives may lead to over thinking and eventually lower levels of mental well-being (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2006). The non significance of the data could be due to cultural reasons, where the sampled population might not have been taught to analyze hunger or cravings in a way that they pay attention to subtle environmental cues. Bringing attention to the strength of the relationship of overall mindful eating scores and mental well-being, it leans towards the weaker side which could be due to other reasons. One factor could be how engaging in mindfulness can maybe sometimes lead to more escapism from stressful life factors which could then manifest in maladaptive ways, as suggested by DelMonte (2011). Although this was more in reference to ‘immature and traumatized’ people, it is not difficult to apply this idea to the Pakistani population which treats food and eating as its highest and most reliable form of recreation. Especially as the time during which the research was conducted was when the country’s elections were near, it is easy to see that eating may have become a method of escape from the surrounding unrest and instability in the environment. The presented results have possibly important implications. Mental well-being, as shown is a factor which affects every aspect of a human beings life, from general coping, to productivity and contribution to community. Interestingly, after filling in the questionnaires, many participants chose to give feedback on the researcher’s provided email address. Many stated that the mindful eating questions ignited their interest in the topic, and brought attention to their own eating habits. Several reported that filling in the questionnaire brought about profound changes in their daily eating habits and expressed gratitude for having been introduced to the concept. The findings have especially important implications in clinical settings with regard to treating eating disorders. The same was illustrated by Albers (2010) in treating a case of Anorexia Nervosa through mindful eating techniques. The study showed positive and promising outcomes. Limitations and Recommendations: Several factors could be affecting the presented results in a limiting way. Firstly, there were no measures taken to determine whether the participants had any existing knowledge of mindfulness or mindful eating. Hence, if they did score higher than others on the mindful eating questionnaire, they ironically may not be conscious of their practices. The results at hand seem to be more relevant for young adults, as this was the age group with most participants. Moreover, the method of online administration of questionnaires does have its limitations. The survey tool used recorded completion times as well as IP addresses to remove the possibility of a single person attempting the questionnaire more than once. Conclusion, overall, it was found that there was a significant positive relationship between mindful eating and mental well-being. The same was also true for four of the five mindful eating subscales. These results are on the whole consistent with previous research about mindfulness and positive mental health. Keeping in sight the beneficial potential for such research, it is recommended that additional studies be conducted in order to further elucidate the relationship between these variables.

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