



How do children understand the concept of mindfulness?

Implications for future measures

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Background

Mindfulness

- Little consensus exists in the way to define mindfulness. The definition can vary whether this concept is considered to be a trait, a state or a process.
- Generally, mindfulness can be considered to be a state of consciousness in which one's attention is directed intentionally and voluntarily on the present moment while maintaining a non-judgmental attitude.

Theoretical models and measures of mindfulness

- The majority of questionnaires and theoretical models of mindfulness target adult populations.
- The different components of mindfulness can express themselves differently in children compared to adults. As such, the current practices aiming to transfer the methods and tools used with adults to younger populations may lead to less than optimal results.

Mindfulness in children

- The application of mindfulness in a preventive or clinical context amongst children living a variety of difficulties is widespread.
- Although mindfulness interventions are generally appreciated by youth and are beneficial, the processes which underpin their effectiveness for this population remains unclear.
- Certain studies highlight variable and sometimes contradictory results regarding the effects of mindfulness interventions amongst children. Some authors suggest that this variability may be caused by a misunderstanding of the concept of mindfulness as it is operationalized in children.

Objective and Methods

Objective

- This study aims to better understand how children comprehend and describe in their own words what the concept of mindfulness is. The goal is for this increased knowledge to aid in the development of interventions and questionnaires better suited for this population, rendering them more efficient.

Participants

- A sample of 14 children in 4th and 5th grade from the primary school Val-de-Grâce (Eastman, QC) participated in the study.
- The participants had taken part in mindfulness sessions at school at the rate of one hour, once per week, prior to the study.

Procedure and measures

- Once students and their parents had given their consent to participate in the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researchers at the students' school.
- The interviews were audio-taped, done individually, and lasted approximately 30 minutes each.
- The interviews explored: (1) participants' comprehension of what is and (2) what is not mindfulness, (3) their capacity to observe, without judgment, and be attentive to the present moment, and (4) their prior experiences related to the concept of mindfulness. Participants were also asked to perform a short mindfulness exercise during the interview.

Analysis

- Thematic analysis:
 - Transcribe and read each interview verbatim
 - Define and name themes, and organize them in categories
 - Create a thematic tree of categories and themes

Results - Thematic tree

Mindfulness is...	Category	Themes (# of participants / 14)
I. Being attentive to the present moment	A) Directing one's attention to the present moment	Concentration (11/14)
		Not worrying about the past and the future (13/14)
II. Slowing down	A) Taking a pause	Stopping for a moment (10/14)
	B) Taking part in mindfulness activities	Breathing (9/14) Enjoying (6/14)
III. Observing in a different manner one's internal and external experiences	A) Accepting one's experiences without judgment	Accepting to live one's emotions (3/14) Letting go of one's thoughts (7/14)
		Being mindful (7/14)
	B) Acting in a mindful manner	Being attentive to one's physical sensations (11/14)
		Being attentive to the environnement (8/14)
		Not being on the automatic pilote (9/14)
	C) Ignoring one's experiences	Not paying attention to one's thoughts (9/14) Not paying attention to the environnement (8/14)
		Deleting one's unpleasant thoughts (9/14)
IV. A tool	A) Managing emotions	Allows for a better control of one's emotions (7/14)
	B) Managing attention	Allows for better concentration (6/14)
	C) State of calmness	Encourages relaxation (13/14)

Results - Illustrations

- Participants mentioned that to be attentive to the present moment, they had to intentionally direct their attention to one thing at a time, which required concentration, while striving to not be overtaken by their flow of thoughts pertaining to past and future events.
 - "We have to think of what we are doing right now". "Our thoughts can't go in all directions. We shouldn't be thinking of other things". "We have to be concentrated on one thing at a time".
 - "Living in the present moment is like not thinking of what will happen in the future and what has already happened". "For example, if you had an argument with your friend, instead of thinking of the things you shouldn't have done, [...] you just think of the present moment".
- Participants also explained that being mindful meant to slow down, to take the time to stop for an instant, to breath and enjoy what was taking place in the present moment.
 - "Mindfulness means to stop, to breath [...]. To breath slowly". "When we ate mindfully, we took the time to savor the food, and we could really taste it".
 - "You can do the mindfulness activities at your rhythm. You can go faster, slower. It's you that decides". When we do mindfulness activities, "we would, like, concentrate on our breathing".
- Mindfulness also meant to observe one's internal and external experiences in a certain way. For some, this meant to be more attentive to one's experiences and to accept them in a non-judgmental manner. For others, mindfulness meant to ignore one's experiences and could be used to suppress unpleasant events.
 - "[When I walk mindfully] I pay attention to the steps I take [...] I think of everything that I am doing: that I am lifting, moving and dropping my leg".
 - "Lets say you are stressed. You are going to think: I have a math exam, I have to go do the groceries, I have to do go do this other thing. Those thoughts are like a bus that you should simply look at as it passes by. You shouldn't get on that bus and dramatize those thoughts".
 - "Lets say you are sad. You can stay concentrated on that, but you shouldn't say: oh I am sad, it's of no use. Instead, you just have to say: I am sad, that's OK, I am allowed".
 - "When I am in the present moment, my head is a little empty". "While walking mindfully, I just walked, I didn't think of anything". "We don't pay attention to everything around us".
 - "[Mindfulness] helps us forget our thoughts; thoughts that weren't pleasant that we had during the day".
- Participants were adamant that mindfulness was a tool that could be used 1) to manage such things as stress, anger and sadness, 2) in school to help in concentration and 3) at bedtime to encourage a better quality of sleep.
 - "[Mindfulness] helps us be less stressed [...], more relaxed [...], and helps us fall asleep". It "helps me to not become mad and also helps for sadness" and "for concentration [...] and also for school".

Discussion

- Mindfulness appears to be a difficult concept for children to grasp, often being associated with relaxation and though suppression.
 - Although some participants were capable of describing the concept, particularly by referring to it as being in the present moment, the way they described it seemed, at times, to be a repetition of how it was explained to them in class. Therefore, their actual understanding of the concept is questionable.
- Moreover, although some participants mentioned the importance of paying attention to internal and external experiences when being mindful, when came the time to do a mindfulness exercise, a number of participants failed to put into application what they had previously described.
- Nearly all participants struggled in elaborating their ideas or giving original examples, the same examples often being said from one participant to the next.
- An important limitation of the study resides in the fact that the researchers were not present during the weekly mindfulness sessions the participants took part it. As such, it is difficult to assess precisely the type of information and exercises participants were exposed to.
 - This would have allowed for a better examination of which elements of the intervention were and were not well understood by the participants and would have possibly permitted a better comprehension and in-depth analysis of each participant's verbatim.

Conclusion

- Given that mindfulness seems to remain an abstract concept for youth that pertains to a variety of themes, some correctly and others erroneously associated to the concept of mindfulness, it appears that future measures of mindfulness would benefit from using a more precise vocabulary. Concrete illustrations of what mindfulness entails, perhaps taking the form of different scenarios, could be particularly useful.
- This study informs us of the vocabulary that is understood and used by children to describe mindfulness. These terms should be incorporated into future measures as this would likely make them more accessible and easier to understand by youth.

