



How Meditation is Used Matters!

Evaluating Purpose Behind Meditation and Its Impact on a Range of Psychosocial Outcomes



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Introduction

- Meditation practices are very old. But it has taken thousands of years for such practices to become widely available and acceptable in Western society and psychotherapy.
- Mindfulness meditation is associated with many positive outcomes including decreased stress, anxiety, depression, and increased happiness and well-being (Baer, 2003). Technology (e.g., smartphone apps), media (e.g., podcasts, publications, audio/video), and news outlets have promoted the benefits of meditation practice, thus increasing their popularity.
- With the widespread use and availability of meditation practices there is a risk that it may be used to control or avoid unwanted emotional experiences. This is a radical departure from how meditation has been taught traditionally and may contribute, in part, to disappointing outcomes when meditation is used as a form of experiential avoidance (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2011).
- This study seeks to understand how undergraduates use meditation. That is, are undergraduates using meditation as traditionally practiced, or as a means of controlling or avoiding unwanted emotional experiences?
- Further, we sought to evaluate whether how meditation is used matters in terms of its relation with unpleasant emotions.

Methods

- Participants ($N = 395$) were undergraduate psychology students who completed a battery of questionnaires including background and demographics, questions regarding if they meditate, how they use meditation (as a control strategy to make negative emotions go away or as traditionally practiced to allow experience), meditation type, frequency, and impact.
- Participants rated the degree to which they see stress, anger, depression, anxiety, and unpleasant thoughts as problematic in their lives on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all problematic*) to 5 (*extremely problematic*).
- Participants completed the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI; Beck & Steer, 1993), Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996), and Difficulties with Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004).
- A MANOVA was conducted to test group differences in how participants ($n = 75$) use meditation (**control strategy vs. traditional**) on the degree that stress, anger, anxiety, depression, and unpleasant thoughts are problematic. Scores on BAI, BDI-II, and DERS were entered as covariates to control for levels of depression, anxiety, and emotion regulation.

Results

Table 1. Frequencies, Means, and Standard Deviations of Background and Demographics

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	Meditation type			
					Control		Traditional	
			<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Age	19.6	4.0						
Gender (Female)			49	65.3				
Ethnicity								
American Indian			1	1.3				
Asian			15	20.0				
Black			13	17.3				
Hispanic or Latino			13	17.3				
White			33	44.0				
Do you meditate?								
Yes			75	19				
No			320	81				
Why meditate?								
Control			44	58.7				
Traditional			31	41.3				
Regular Practice?								
Yes			26	34.7				
No			49	65.3				
Impact								
Not at all helpful			0	0			1	3.2
A little			6	13.6			6	19.4
Somewhat			13	29.5			6	19.4
Moderately			17	38.6			5	16.1
Very Helpful			8	18.2			13	41.9
Months of experience	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	17.1	18.6	19.7	27.9				

Results (cont.)

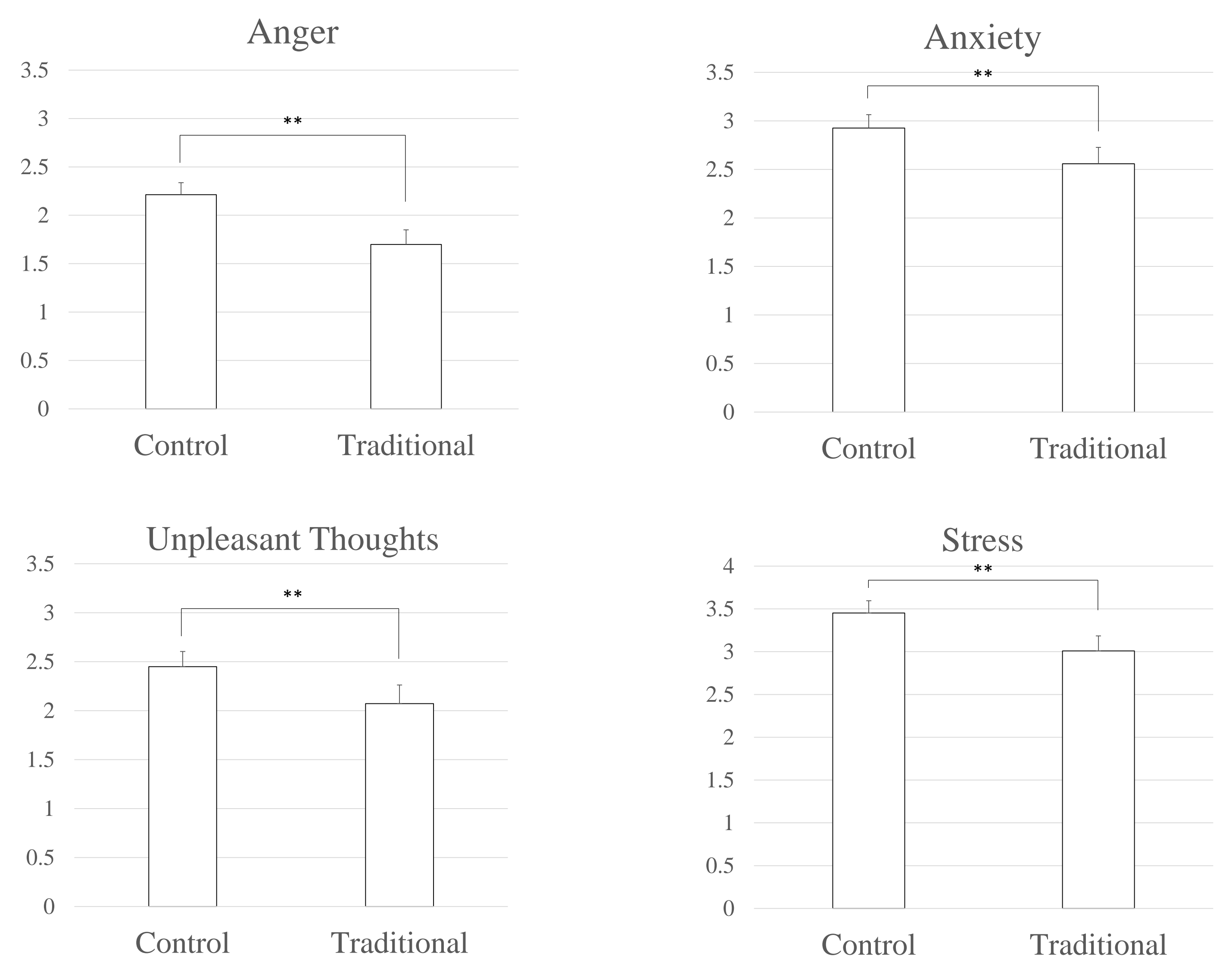
Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Dependent Variables

	Control ($n = 44$)		Traditional ($n = 31$)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Anger	2.30	0.98	1.58	0.72
Depression	2.68	1.33	2.13	1.31
Anxiety	3.16	1.26	2.23	1.06
Unpleasant Thoughts (UT)	2.66	1.26	1.77	0.92
Stress	3.66	0.94	2.71	1.01

Table 3. MANOVA Tests of Differences Between Meditation Intention

	Wilks' Criteria	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	partial η^2	95% CL	
						Lower	Upper
Omnibus	.71	5,66	5.52	< .001	.29	.08	.41
Univariate							
Anger		1,70	11.56	.001	.14	.02	.29
Depression		1,70	1.19	.279	.02	.00	.11
Anxiety		1,70	9.62	.003	.12	.02	.27
UT		1,70	7.89	.006	.10	.01	.24
Stress		1,70	13.07	.001	.16	.03	.31

Figures 1-4. Adjusted Marginal Means with Standard Error Bars



Note. ** indicates $p < .01$

Discussion

- Approximately 19% of college students indicate that they practice meditation. Of those, 59% report using meditation as a means of controlling unwanted emotional experiences.
- Use of meditation to control unwanted experience is associated with participants viewing anger, anxiety, unpleasant thoughts, and stress as more problematic in their lives compared to those who practice meditation with traditional intentions.
- Participants who rate negative emotions as more problematic may engage in more maladaptive emotion regulation strategies; conversely, those who practice meditation as a means of controlling unwanted experiences may report emotions as more problematic.

References

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