Introduction

Yet where an equal poise of hope and fear
Does arbitrate the even, my nature is
That I incline to hope, rather than fear,
And gladly banish quaint suspicion.
Milton Camus (1637)

Mindfulness-based interventions are increasingly referenced in social work literature (Rosenbaum, 2014; Turner, 2009; Hick, 2009). Because of mindfulness’ increased popularity within social work, Garland (2013) has called on social workers to play a role in furthering theory development and research into the mechanisms of mindfulness.

Probably owing to mindfulness’ origins in Buddhism, some current efforts to explain the mechanisms of mindfulness include references to spiritual components (Gethin, 2011; Parker, 2009). However, a growing body of research indicates that mindfulness is linked to improvements in the control of information processing, particularly in regard to attention control (Sari, Sheppes, and Gross, 2013; Teper & Inzlicht, 2013; Jha; Höfzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago, & Ott, 2011).

Hope theorists consistently note that hopeful thinking also has an important attention control element, namely that hopeful thinking involves focusing attention on positive future outcomes. Brown (2000) offers a description of the role attention plays in promoting hope, stating, “…the hopeful person refocuses attention on task completion, rather than ruminating on the inability to complete tasks and other self-deprecating beliefs” (p. 311). Cognitive states of dysphoria have also been associated with lessened attention control. For instance, chronically anxious individuals exhibit attentional bias towards threat (e.g., Bar-Haim et al., 2007; Ohman, Flykt, & Esteves, 2001).

A better understanding of the relationship between mindfulness and hope would optimize interventions based on either theory (Kazdin & Kendall, 1998). As suggested by the quotation from Milton above, we hypothesize that hope and mindfulness are linked by the ability to better control attention. Thus we posed the following research questions:

1.) Does a mindfulness intervention reduce stress and increase hope?
2.) Consistent with mindfulness operating as attention control, do mindfulness scores mediate the relationship between stress and hope?

Methods

A quasi-experimental design was used to test the efficacy of a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) on the variables of mindfulness, stress and hope. Participants were administered pretests, posttests, and 30 day follow ups on the Freiburg Mindfulness Scale, the Hope Scale, and Perceived Stress Scale.

Participants in the treatment group were provided a 2-hour MBSR session, once a week, for 6 consecutive weeks, combined with one 4-hour session on a weekend morning. Each session consisted of exercises that included awareness-of-breath meditation, listening meditation, eating meditation, and walking meditation. Yoga practice also occupied about 30 minutes of each class.

Thirteen participants from the treatment group completed pre and posttests, while 17 participants in the control completed pre and posttests. Of those who completed pre and posttests, 11 from the treatment group went on to complete the 30 day follow-up test while 16 from the control group completed the 30 day follow-up.

To test for differences in scores on our variables of interest between the treatment and control group, end point multivariate analysis of covariance’s (MANCOVA) were used on posttest scores and 30 day follow-up scores using the pre-test scores as covariates.

A mediation analysis was also performed to explore the role of mindfulness as a mediator between stress and hope, consistent with mindfulness operating as a form of attention control.

Results

Reliability scores on all scales were > .70. Using Pillar’s Trace for interpretation, results of our MANCOVA on posttests scores indicated a significant difference between groups among the variables of interest (V = 0.253, F(3, 23) = 2.59, p = .039). Specifically, for posttest scores, the treatment group demonstrated significantly higher adjusted mean scores on hope, mindfulness, and lower stress scores. Notably, the effect size for differences between groups on stress was “large”, while group differences on hope and mindfulness were “moderate” according to the accepted heuristics of the social sciences (Cohen, 1988). The MANCOVA on 30 day follow up scores demonstrated similar results. See Table 1 for complete results.

Conclusions

Results indicate that a MBSR intervention resulted in increases in states of mindfulness and hope and reductions in stress. Furthermore, mindfulness scores mediated the relationship between stress and hope.

Results are consistent with mindfulness being a state of attention control. Additionally, participants increased in mindfulness in order to better control attention away from stress inducing stimuli to hope inducing stimuli.

References


