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A Correlational Study on Psychological Distress, Mindfulness and Meaning in Life among Young Adults

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Abstract

Young adulthood is a developmental stage during which the young adults engage in important developmental activities that allow for self-discovery and identity construction and are usually expected to take on responsibilities as active and engaged members of the community. Sometimes these expectations lead to mental burden known as psychological distress. The present study aims to investigate the correlations of psychological distress, mindfulness and meaning in life among young adults. Sample of 30 young adults was collected in the age range of 18-25 years. Standardised tools were used to measure psychological distress, mindfulness and meaning in life among young adults. The results revealed a significant negative correlation between psychological distress and mindfulness. Moreover, mindfulness and presence of meaning in life were positively correlated. The present study provides recommendations and suggestions based on the results.

Keywords: Psychological Distress, Mindfulness, Meaning in Life, Males, Females, Young Adults

Introduction

Young adulthood is a critical period of development that spans from ages 18 to 25. During this time, young adults undergo significant changes in their personal and professional lives, as they move from adolescence to adulthood. Though this stage of adulthood is known for its great excitement and curiosity, it is also full of challenges and conflicts as individuals adjust to the demands of their present lives which lead to great anxiety and stress. There are many factors that can contribute to psychological distress in young adults. Some of the most common causes

include stress related to academic or work-related demands, relationship problems, financial difficulties, and family issues. Mindful techniques, like meditation, breathing exercises, and yoga can help adults to become more aware of their thoughts, feelings, and sensations, and to

greater resilience and emotional regulation. There are many benefits of mindfulness for young adults.

Meaning in life is attributed to the feeling that one's life is significant, worthwhile, and connected to something larger than oneself. Finding meaning in life is an important goal for many young adults, as it can provide a great sense of purpose, direction, and fulfillment. Investigation advocates that cherishing an impression of meaning in life can have great positive effects on mental health and well-being of individuals' especially young adults. However, finding meaning in life can be a complex and on-going process, and may involve periods of questioning, exploration, and growth.

Psychological Distress refers to a state of emotional, mental, or physical suffering experienced by an individual. It is a complicated and manifold concern that can have significant consequences for individuals. It can develop in a variety of ways which can include anxiety, depression, trauma, phobias, and substance abuse, among others. Psychological distress can be caused by a range of factors, including genetics, environmental factors, life events, and social circumstances. The causes of psychological distress can be complex and multifactorial. The consequences of psychological distress can be severe and long lasting. Individuals experiencing psychological distress may have difficulty functioning in their daily lives leading to disruption in overall quality of life. Luckily, there are a number of medication choices present for psychological distress such as psychotherapy, cognitive-behavioural therapy as well as medications and changing lifestyle, which help individuals manage their physical symptoms and enhance their whole quality of life.

Mindfulness is a capacity of consciousness that includes being fully available in the moment, concentrating on thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations without judgment. The system of mindfulness is deep rooted in the philosophy of Buddhism, where it is referred to as sati. Mindfulness involves bringing one's attention to the present moments and observing one's thoughts and feelings. The higher goal of mindfulness is to achieve greater sense of awareness and understanding of oneself, as well as around the world. One of the important elements of mindfulness is the practice of meditation. Meditation includes concentrating on one's attention on a particular object or sensation, such as the breath or a particular sound. This helps to train the mind to remain focused and present in the moment. Another key component of mindfulness is the practice of mindful breathing. By incorporating mindfulness into our daily lives,

individuals can develop a greater sense of awareness and understanding of themselves and the world around them.

The search for meaning in life is an essential human pursuit. People have been trying to find out the meaning of life for centuries, and the answer varies widely depending upon different cultural, philosophical, and religious beliefs. However, at its core, the search for meaning is a deeply personal journey that requires introspection, self-awareness, and a willingness to examine one's belief and values. At the most primary level, the meaning of life can be seen as the purpose or significance that individuals attach to their existence. The pursuit of meaning can be a rewarding and fulfilling journey that can lead to a high sense of purpose, fulfillment, and happiness. By exploring one's belief and values, one can discover their own unique path to meaning in life.

Psychological Distress

According to Cuijpers (2009), psychological distress refers to non-specific symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. High levels of psychological distress are indicative of impaired mental health and may reflect common mental disorders, like depressive and anxiety disorders. Tenants of the stress-distress model posits that the defining features of psychological distress are the exposure to stressful events that threatens the physical or mental health, the inability to cope effectively with this stressor and the emotional turmoil that results from this ineffective coping (Horwitz, 2007; Ridner, 2004). Further, Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend (1982) refer to psychological distress as a non-specific mental health problem.

A research study was conducted by Jackson and Finney (2002) among young adults from three different universities. The study was done to examine the relationship between college career stage, negative life events, and psychological distress. Life events inventory and various psychological distress scales (depression, anxiety, and anger/hostility) were used. The study concluded that unpleasant experiences in peer relationships were most predictive of distress; moreover, younger students were more prone to negative life events and were angrier/hostile about negative life events. It was assumed that there were less psychological resources of maturity and experience in young adults, and they adopt such coping strategies which are ineffective in stressful situations.

A research on short sleep duration in prevalent and persistent psychological distress was conducted in Australia by Glozier et al. (2010). Twenty thousand young adults whose ages lie between 17 to 24 years were evaluated. Standardised tools to measure psychological distress were used in the research. The outcomes of research concluded that short sleep duration was

positively related with the existence of psychological distress. Very short sleepers had an increased risk for onset of psychological distress. It was found in the study that each less hour for sleep enhances the risk of psychological distress. Moreover, adults who sleep for long hours showed no risk of distress at any point in their life.

Furthermore, Verger et al. (2009) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between psychological distress and various stressors among first-year university students. The data was collected from a large sample of university students in France, and examined the impact of socioeconomic factors, academic stressors, mastery, and social support on psychological distress in both males and females. The results showed that socioeconomic factors, such as family income and parental education, had a significant impact on psychological distress, with students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reporting higher levels of distress. Academic stressors, such as workload and difficulty of courses, were also found to be important predictors of distress. In addition, the study found that mastery, or the degree to which students felt in control of their lives, was negatively associated with psychological distress. Social support, particularly from friends, was also found to be a protective factor against distress. Females reported higher levels of distress than males, and were more affected by academic stressors. Males, on the other hand, were more affected by socioeconomic factors.

Mindfulness

“Waking up to the full spectrum of our experience in the present moment, which, as we engage in mindfulness practice, we rapidly discover is severely edited and often distorted through the routinized, habitual, and unexamined activity of our thoughts and emotions, often involving significant alienation from direct experience of the sensory world and the body.”

~ Kabat Zinn

The term “mindfulness” has been used to refer to a psychological state of awareness, a practice that promotes this awareness, a mode of processing information, and a characterological trait (Brown et al., 2007). According to Bodhi (2000), the word mindfulness originally comes from the Pali word ‘sati’, which means having awareness, attention, and remembering. Mindfulness is “wellness-oriented” and is described as a natural capacity which involves observing, participating and accepting each of life’s moments from a state of equilibrium or loving kindness (Albercht & Cohen, 2012). According to Analayo (2018), the term ‘sati’ refers to

memory; development of mindfulness requires a “deliberate paying attention similar to how we would be attentive when something takes place that we have to remember later.”

Karl et al. (2021) conducted a study to understand the relationship of personality, reinforcement sensitivity (including behavioural inhibition system and behavioural approach system) and mindfulness. A sample of 227 undergraduate students was collected and they were studied for 8 months using a random-intercept cross-lagged panel. The results showed that mindfulness showed stronger longitudinal effects on personality; moreover, a negative relationship was observed between reinforced sensitivity and mindfulness facts. The study also resulted in a positive relationship among non-judging mindfulness facets and in conscientiousness. Similarly, higher levels of describing mindfulness led to rise in neuroticism.

Another study was conducted to understand the relationship of mindfulness and emotional regulation in older and younger adults. Research used self-report methods to collect data from 50 older and 50 young adults. The investigation aimed to study the role of cognitive reappraisal, experiential suppression, and thought avoidance use in mediating the relationship between mindfulness and emotion deregulation. The results showed that thought avoidance, unlike reappraisal and suppression strategies, played an important role in mediating the relationship between mindfulness and emotion deregulation. In younger adults, low mindfulness was observed with use of thought avoidance and high risk of emotion dysregulation as they had hardships in indulging in goal directed behaviour in regard to strong emotions. The study suggested that reduction in avoidance of thoughts may result in the correlation among mindfulness and increased emotion regulation (Prakash et al., 2017).

Another research done by Khaddouma and Gordon (2018), studied the mediating effect of forgiveness and mindfulness on psychological maltreatment and internet addiction. The results showed that adults who were at risk for internet addiction had higher levels of psychological maltreatment whereas; forgiveness and mindfulness had lower levels as compared to the typical sample for internet addiction. Later, a structural equation model was carried out to observe the impact of mediator variables upon addiction of the internet. Consequently, the results stated the full mediating role of mindfulness and forgiveness in regard to the impact of psychological maltreatment upon internet addiction. Hence, the study suggested that mental health services should be applied in order to lessen the detrimental effects of psychological maltreatment on internet addiction among young adults.

Meaning in Life

“Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible.”

~Frankl

According to Antonovsky (1988), meaning in life involves being able to make connections between the events and experiences in life, as well as being able to understand one's place in the grand scheme of things (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). According to Kobau et al. (2010) meaning in life is widely considered to be a critical ingredient in human well-being and flourishing. The definition of meaning has centered on two dimensions; coherence, one's comprehension and sense made of life, and purpose, or one's core aims and aspirations for life (Steger et al., 2006).

Guse and Shaw (2018) aimed to study the correlation among hope, meaning in life, and well-being. The study was done on 252 university going young adults. The goal was to counter the effect of meaning in life in the relationship between hope and well-being in both dispositional and perceived. The standardised tools that were used in the research were Mental Health Continuum – Short Form, the Adult Hope Scale, the Perceived Hope Scale, and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire. Findings revealed that meaning in life mediates the relationship in dispositional and perceived hope and well-being. Hence, hope plays the role of key element in meaningful goals and spirituality well-being, that overall leads to high meaning in life and well-being.

A correlational study on meaning in life and death anxiety was done by Lyke (2013) in young adults. The study covered two aspects of meaning in life: presence of meaning in life and search for meaning in life. 168 adults were studied and filled the questionnaires regarding the variables that were being measured. Presence of meaning and search for meaning in life were taken as independent variables and fear of death and dying as their dependent variables to apply multivariate analysis of variance. Findings concluded that search for meaning in life was significantly related to fear of dying. Steger et al. (2009) did research to study meaning in life across the life span. Two dimensions of meaning in life, presence of meaning in life and search for meaning in life were correlated to different age spans such as emerging adulthood, young adulthood, middle-aged adulthood, and older adulthood. A large sample of 8756 was examined. The results concluded a structural invariance of meaning in different stages of life. The presence of meaning in life was highly present in the older stages of life, whereas, in younger stages search for meaning in life was highly prevalent. In addition, correlation exposed that

presence of meaning in life was significantly associated with well-being across all the stages of life. To contrast, in later stages, search for meaning in life was significantly correlated to well-being.

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to investigate the correlations of psychological distress, mindfulness and meaning in life among young adults.

Hypothesis

- There will be a significant relationship between psychological distress and mindfulness.
- There will be a significant relationship between psychological distress and meaning in life.
- There will be a significant relationship between mindfulness and meaning in life.

Sample

The sample consisted of 30 young adults between the ages of 18 -25 years. The sample was collected from Tri-city (Chandigarh, Panchkula, and Mohali).

Measures

- **Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10):** The questionnaire was developed by Kessler & Mroczek (1992). The scale has 10 questions in which each question concerns an emotional state. The response choices are based on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 'All of the time' to 'none of the time', where 50 is the highest score indicating severe distress and 10 is the minimum score reflecting no distress.
- **The Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS):** The questionnaire was developed by Brown & Ryan (2003). The scale has 15 items designed to assess a core characteristic of mindfulness. The scale uses 1-6 Likert Scale which indicates how frequently or infrequently a person currently has such experiences ranging from 'Almost Always' to 'Almost Never'. The scoring is done by calculating the total scores of an individual and then simply computing a mean (average) of the 15 items. The minimum and maximum scores of an individual lie in the range of 15 to 90.
- **Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ):** The questionnaire was developed by Steger et al. (2006). The scale examines three facets of meaning in life dimensions that are:

coherence, purpose and significance. The scale has a total of 10 items which covers two dimensions: Presence of meaning in life and Search of meaning in life. There are 5 items in each subscale. There is a reverse scoring as well in the subscale of Presence of Meaning in Life. The scale uses a 7-point Likert Scale ranging from 'Absolutely Untrue' to 'Absolutely True'. Maximum scores in both the dimensions are 35 which lead to a maximum score of 70 for the total score of Meaning in Life Questionnaire.

Procedure

The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the questionnaires were filled through Google forms. Each participant was thanked for their cooperation. Standardised psychological tests were administered to the participants.

Analysis of Data

Scoring for all the given tests was done as per the scoring instructions given in the manuals. The raw scores were tabulated and subjected to various statistical analyses. Keeping in view the objectives of the study, statistical analysis Mean, Standard Deviation and Correlation Analysis was conducted. Correlation analysis was carried out to test the relationship between the variables. Before carrying out statistical tests, the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were checked. The responses that emerged through the semi-structured interview schedule were analysed qualitatively and the results are presented in the form of tables, bar graphs and pie-charts.

Results

Table 1

Mean and standard Deviation scores of 30 young adults with variables psychological distress, mindfulness, presence of meaning, search of meaning and total scores of meaning in life.

	Psychological Distress	Mindfulness	Presence of Meaning	Search for Meaning	Total Meaning in Life
N	30	30	30	30	30

Mean	26.9	3.43	23.7	24.7	48.4
Median	25.5	3.50	22.5	26.0	46.5
Standard deviation	7.71	1.02	8.19	8.14	11.4

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of Psychological Distress, Mindfulness, Presence of Meaning, Search of Meaning, and Total of Meaning in Life

	Psychological Distress		Mindfulness		Presence of Meaning		Search for Meaning		Total Meaning in Life	
Psychological Distress	—									
Mindfulness	-0.698	***	—							
Presence of Meaning	-0.340		0.426	*	—					
Search for Meaning	-0.020		-0.061		-0.022		—			
Total Meaning in Life	-0.258		0.262		0.701	** *	0.697	** *	—	
Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001										

Discussion of Results

The aim of the present study was to investigate the correlations of psychological distress, mindfulness and meaning in life among young adults. On the basis of correlation statistical analysis, the results found that there is a significant negative correlation between psychological distress and mindfulness ($r = -0.698$, $p < 0.001$). The pattern of results is consistent with the previous literature of Coffey and Hartman (2008) which confirmed that there was a negative

relationship between mindfulness and psychological distress. Correspondingly, research was done on anxiety sensitivity, experiential avoidance, and mindfulness among younger and older adults by Mahoney et al. (2015). The results showed that young adults were high on anxiety sensitivity and experiential avoidance whereas, older adults were high on mindfulness traits. In addition, significant positive correlation was found between anxiety related symptoms in individuals with anxiety sensitivity and in experiential avoidance. In contrast to this, mindfulness had an inverse relationship with anxiety sensitivity and experiential avoidance.

Moreover, a significant positive relationship was found between mindfulness and presence of meaning in life ($r = 0.426$, $p < 0.05$). Our present study is supported by the previous literature that was done by Srikumaran et al. (2022) whose findings concluded that mindfulness is positively correlated with the presence of meaning in life. Further through the results of this present study it was seen that presence of meaning ($r = 0.701$, $p < 0.001$) and search for meaning in life ($r = 0.697$, $p < 0.001$) have significant positive relationship with total scores of meaning in life.

Conclusion

Young adulthood is a transitional stage of life where they are usually expected to become financially independent and take on responsibilities as active and engaged members of the community. Sometimes these expectations lead to mental burden known as psychological distress.

The present study aimed to investigate the correlations of psychological distress, mindfulness and meaning in life among young adults. For this purpose, a sample of 30 young adults was collected in the age range of 18-25 years. In addition to this, standardised tools were used to measure psychological distress, mindfulness and meaning in life among young adults. The results found that there was a significant negative correlation between psychological distress and mindfulness. Moreover, mindfulness and presence of meaning in life were positively correlated to each other.

To overcome the emerging problem of distress among adults there are various therapies and techniques through improving one's mindfulness which helps to acknowledge emotions and their root cause and helps to examine the sensations in the very present moment. Individuals who do not have any meaning attached to their life are more prone to develop psychological distress and other psychological problems. It is important to develop meaning in life as it provides individuals a motive to go through their life.

Recommendations

Psychological distress can affect individuals in various ways, including anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders. There are some practical and effective ways to reduce psychological distress. Practicing mindfulness refers to the practice of being present and fully engaged in the current moment, without judging. Practicing mindfulness regularly can help to reduce stress and improve mental well-being. Another task is to engage in physical activity, it can help reduce stress, anxiety and depression. Exercise releases endorphins, which are natural mood boosting chemicals in the brain. Even small amounts of physical activity can make a big difference. Connecting with family, friends or colleagues can help reduce stress and improve mood. In addition to that, sleep is essential for mental and physical health.

Mindfulness is the practice of bringing one's attention to the present moment, with openness, curiosity, and non-judgment. It can help to reduce stress, increase focus, and improve overall well-being. Some detailed ways to improve mindfulness are breathing exercises. It includes focusing on one's breath, and noticing the sensation of the air moving in and out of the body. Moreover, practicing gratitude is very beneficial. Taking time to reflect on things that one is grateful for is proven to have positive effects.

Improving meaning is a personal and subjective journey that varies from individual to individual. One can improve one's meaning in life by identifying values; these are the fundamental beliefs that guide one's behaviour and decisions. Identifying values can help to clarify what is most important and it creates a sense of direction in life. By setting meaningful goals that align with one's values can give a sense of purpose and motivation. Aiming to learn new things can help grow as a person and provide a sense of achievement.

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