The Attenuating Effects of Mindfulness on State Shame and Guilt

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Shame and guilt are negative affective states that are generally triggered by 'moral lapses', or a failure to uphold a moral standard, thus shame and guilt are often considered moral emotions. Shame and guilt are rooted in a negative internal attribution following a perceived wrongdoing, however they differ in that shame focuses on the global self, while guilt focuses on a specific behavior (Lewis, 1971). Mindfulness is "the state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present" (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 822). Previous research suggests that dispositional mindfulness may help individuals avoid negative affective states and more effectively regulate emotions. Given previous findings, we predicted that individuals higher in trait mindfulness would experience less state shame and guilt after an experimental manipulation than those lower in trait mindfulness. We conducted a cross-sectional study that examined the effects of dispositional mindfulness, as measured by scores on the FFMQ (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006) and MAAS (Brown & Ryan, 2003), on feelings of guilt and shame after a guilt/shame induction. Participants (N = 200) were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group; the experimental group was asked to write for five minutes about a time when they had felt ashamed due to an interpersonal offense, while the control group wrote about an ordinary day. All participants completed measures of dispositional mindfulness, and state shame and guilt. To test our hypotheses, we ran separate linear regressions for guilt and shame for those participants in the experimental condition. Both the MAAS and the FFMQ negatively predicted feelings of shame, but did not significantly predict guilt. A multiple regression was run to control for each measure's individual effect on shame. When controlling for the FFMQ the MAAS still negatively predicted shame, however when controlling for the MAAS there was no longer a significant effect of the FFMQ. Overall, the results partially supported our hypotheses, mindfulness significantly predicted feelings of shame but did not significantly predict feelings of guilt. Participants higher in mindfulness reported less shame after an experimental induction than those lower in mindfulness. This research shows that mindfulness can successfully predict discrete emotional states and highlights specific ways in which mindfulness may help individuals avoid negative affective experiences.