Interpersonal Effects of Meditation
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Introduction

Meditation increases positive affect and mindfulness (May et al., 2014; Snippe et al., 2015). Both positive affect and mindfulness promote “upward spirals” of personal and interpersonal well-being through their influence on numerous emotional, cognitive, and social processes (Fredrickson, 2001; Garland et al., 2015; Ramsey & Gentzler, 2015). Moreover, personal well-being (and the factors and dynamics constituting well-being) can ripple out to influence others as many as three degrees removed (e.g., a friend’s friend’s friend; Fowler & Christakis, 2008). These observations suggest that there may be a diffusion of influence of meditation practice. Here, we tested the hypothesis that meditation has corresponding effects on non-meditating friends and romantic partners.

Method

- We recruited pairs of participants (53 dyads, \(n = 106\)) who interact with each other “every day, on average”.
- Every evening for 8-weeks, participants were sent a 44-item survey assessing a host of variables, including facets of mindfulness and positive/negative affect.
- Within each dyad, one participant was randomly selected to receive mindfulness meditation training. The other was told they were a control participant, which was necessary to disentangle the effects of the daily survey from the meditation practice. This explanation was intended to veil our hypothesis regarding interpersonal effects.
- We utilized an ABAB replicated single-subject experimental design. After an initial two-week baseline period (A), participants assigned to the meditation condition received meditation training and were instructed to meditate every day for 15 minutes using a provided audio file for the next two weeks (B). Participants were then asked to discontinue meditating for two weeks (A), before resuming daily practice during the final two weeks of the study (B).

Analytic Procedure

- A subset of results are presented for two dyads.
- Single-subject designs permit visual analyses of the phase transitions for one subject (or dyad in our case).
- Each time-series in the figure to right were fit with a 5\textdegree polynomial, having up to 3 inflection points. We expected changes in concavity/convexity to correspond to the changing experiment phases (A-B-A-B).
- We specifically hypothesized that the non-meditating partner would exhibit dynamic changes yoked to the meditation phases of their partner.

Results

How are you doing?: To this single-question item, the non-mediator reported doing slightly better during phases when their partner mediated. (dyad 1).

Sense of Awe: On this single-question item, both the meditator and non-meditator experienced more awe, or a sense of wonder, during meditation phases. Initially overlapping responses in the first study phase diverged as the meditator began to practice. (dyad 1).

Non-Judging: Interestingly, while there were not visually discernible changes in the levels of non-judging in the meditator across meditation phases, the non-meditator still demonstrated an increase in non-judging during their partner’s meditation periods. (dyad 2).

Mindfulness: The meditator exhibited both clear phase differences in mindfulness during meditation periods and a general linear trend upward across the study. The non-meditating partner’s mindfulness however, remained stable until the final phase. This suggests that some non-meditators may only be effected after a certain duration or level of increased mindfulness in their partner. (dyad 1).

Discussion

Meditation can impact a non-meditating partner. We showed that meditation in one person improved how a relationship partner reported they were doing, increased their sense of awe, inversely impacted levels of positive and negative affect, decreased negative judging, and may increase overall mindfulness.

These results do not speak to differences between individuals and dyads. Therefore, it is not yet clear how likely these effects are to occur. Likewise, the results do not directly indicate effect sizes for different variables. To address both of these open issues, data collection and quantitative analyses for 53 dyads are ongoing.

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References


