



The Essence of Life: A comparative study on Existential Anxiety, Mindfulness, Spirituality and Life Satisfaction among Monks and Non-Monks

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 Pandemic played havoc around the globe in the year 2020-21 bringing life to a temporary halt backed by several unanticipated changes. The human mind questioned a multitude of facets about life with its meaning being the prime one, wherein anxiety about existence and life satisfaction centered at the very core. Alongside came the need to be in the moment, as being quite preoccupied with the unpredictable future does no good, and the enigma of connection with the transcendent forces. Monks are deeply immersed in the search for meaning and being at peace and one with the self which stands in stark contrast with the general society which is absorbed by the duties everyday life. The current research aims at tracing the differences between monks and non-monks in the light of such questions during the COVID period. Standardized tools were administered to measure Mindfulness, Existential Anxiety, Spirituality, and Life Satisfaction. The study was conducted on a sample of 60 participants with 30 monks and 30 non-monks in the age range 20-50 years. The findings revealed surprising results with monks being much lower on mindfulness and spirituality compared to non-monks while existential anxiety was much lower in non-monks. Furthermore, existential anxiety is negatively correlated with mindfulness, life satisfaction, and spiritual well-being. On the other hand, mindfulness is positively correlated with life satisfaction and spiritual well-being. Implications include offering social and emotional support to monks and their problems must be traced owing to the effect of the COVID pandemic.

Key Words: Existential Anxiety, Spirituality, Mindfulness, Life Satisfaction, COVID-19, Monks, and Non-Monks

Introduction

“As for the future, it remains unwritten. Anything can happen, and often we are wrong. The best we can do with the future is to prepare and savor the possibilities of what can be done in the present.” - Todd Kashdan

As per Emanuel et al., (2020) COVID-19 pandemic is a state that has given way to an environment where one's existence has become feeble and further escalated the levels of existential fears and terrors. Moreover, COVID-19 can aggravate the fear in individuals of protecting themselves and their loved ones which can give way to loneliness and panic in people (Yip & Chau, 2020). Since the imposition of lockdown, man has pondered over several unexplored questions resulting from a brief pause in his fast-paced life. One such question revolves around the search for the reason for one's existence by digging out, tapping, and extracting the real essence of life. This new normal has brought in numerous changes, thereby affecting every arena of mankind ranging from personal to professional. Besides adjusting ourselves to this novel way of living, philosophical questions have gained ground in terms of being rooted in the present by acknowledging the same as it comes and realizing the importance of invincible powers. Hence, this research focuses on the role of mindfulness, existential anxiety, spirituality, and life satisfaction among monks and non-monks during the pandemic. This study is vital to trace the importance of positive psychology during the hardest of times and if different groups vary in their way of dealing with such unanticipated situations.

A study carried out recently backed the claims that COVID-19 led suffering drastically reduced the meaningful aspect of life from pre-pandemic times January 2020 to the mid-pandemic one June 2020 (VanderWeele et al., 2020).

A considerable amount of literature also provides that, greater the life satisfaction and meaning in life, the better is one's health both mentally and physically and so is the case with social and cognitive functioning (Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014; Diener & Biswas-Deiner, 2008; Haidt, 2006; Hicks & Routledge, 2013; Seligman, 2002). A large amount of research highlights a positive association between mindfulness and numerous well-being indicators, life satisfaction per se (Brown et al., 2009; Howell et al., 2008; Schutte & Malouff, 2011). As far as an individual's well-being is concerned, mindfulness incorporates a spiritual attitude towards the same which is experienced via the body (McGuire, 2003).

Another study focused on the aged population revealed that, as the satisfaction with life increases, death anxiety moves in an opposite direction i.e., reduces (Given & Range, 1990). Kelley and Miller (2007) conducted a study on adolescents of several religious and nonreligious denominations and it was found that most dimensions of religiosity were associated with life satisfaction.

As per the study conducted (Aglozo et al., 2019) spirituality and meaning in life positively relate to satisfaction which follows an inverse relation as far as negative affect is concerned.

Mindfulness

Being mindful implies living in the moment and acknowledging the thoughts without passing any judgment about them; however, most of us either brood over the past or remain preoccupied with the future.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally”.

According to American Psychological Association (APA, 2012), mindfulness is “a moment-to-moment awareness of one’s experience without judgment. In this sense, mindfulness is a state and not a trait. While it might be promoted by certain practices or activities, such as meditation, it is not equivalent to or synonymous with them.”

The term mindfulness is said to originate from the Pali word ‘Sati’ which implies awareness, attention, and remembering (Didonna, 2008). In the ancient text SatipatthanaSutta, a link has been traced between mindfulness and Buddhism and it is during vipassana that mindfulness and concentration develop. ThichNhatHanh began imparting the concept of mindfulness in the mid-1970s and is said to be the one, responsible for popularizing this concept in the West, while in the East the credit is attributed to religious and spiritual institutions and primarily bears roots in Hinduism and Buddhism. Those who are already indulged in practicing mindfulness are more inclined towards higher concentration, which in turn enables them to focus on microscopic elements of life and even view the wider aspect amidst which the phenomenon takes place (Brown et al., 2007).

A study conducted on female university students revealed that mindfulness training significantly reduced the anxiety levels of those who were already high on worry and further improved the functioning of physiological and emotional regulatory systems as opposed to those with the problem of chronic worry (Delgado, Guerra, Perakakis, Vera, et al., 2010).

Numerous studies have even depicted that a person’s ability to perceive emotions and its effective regulation rests in mindfulness which in turn encourages life satisfaction. This clearly shows how mindfulness relates to emotional intelligence (Coffey & Hartman, 2008; Coffey, Hartman and Fredrickson, 2010; Schutte&Malouff, 2011; Wang & Kong, 2013).

Mindfulness has also been found to be efficacious especially when it comes to dealing with traumatic events. During the therapeutic sessions with the veterans who underwent trauma, mindfulness served as a productive tool (Lukoff and Strozzi-Heckler 2017), besides being a defensive measure against mortality salience which causes existential anxiety (Niemiec et al., 2010).

Existential Anxiety

Morse (1998) defines existential anxiety as, “a deep concern whether or not one is living a meaningful and fulfilling life.”

Lacking meaning in life as per Frankl (1997) is the major cause that underlies existential anxiety. This strongly differs from person to person and it is not primarily concerned with the general meaning but a special one that is embedded in a particular period. Hence, humans must have special interests, friends, occupations, and ideals.

The issue of anxiety faced by humans specifically associated with isolation, meaninglessness, freedom, death, and emptiness is unavoidable (Temple et al., 2016). In the view of Yalom (1980), one aspect that carries an ability to save us is the idea of death owing to its potential to add a more authentic element to our lives besides satisfaction with the same. Though the negative association has been depicted between death anxiety and spirituality by some studies (Rasmussen & Johnson, 1994), others reveal no link between the two (Wink, 2006).

A study conducted on a sample of 386 people of the Gulf Coast revealed that several elements of existential anxiety were linked variedly with psychological symptoms. Furthermore, a strong correlation was evident between existential concerns and psychological distress in response to a natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina (Scott & Weems, 2013). As per Routledge and Juhl (2010) death anxiety is escalated following mortality salience; however, this remains applicable to just those who do not find much meaning in their lives.

Another study by Norenzayan& Hansen (2006) demonstrates that participants who had a religious affiliation demonstrated greater belief in God and other spiritual entities linked with religious faith following the activation of the thoughts of death. This further adds more to religion as a cosmic meaning provider and safeguards people from death anxiety. Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis (1993) demonstrated a strong link between religious beliefs and existential well-being besides a reduced level of death anxiety.

The desire for higher levels of meaning in life spring from thoughts concerning death as is evident via a study by Landau, Kosloff, and Schmeichel (2011) who showed how exposure to an existential threat cause people to infuse their everyday actions with meaning in expansive terms. Actions were viewed in terms of why rather than how they were carried out as a consequence of mortality salience. This showed growing relation between imperative future aspirations and actions at present.

Life Satisfaction

In the words of Diener (1984), “Life Satisfaction is an overall assessment of one’s feelings, attitudes, behaviors by one’s own from ranging positive to negative.”

Shin and Johnson (1978) defined life satisfaction “as a global assessment of person’s quality of life by his own according to his or her own settled criteria of success.”

As per Lane (1994), Buddhism not only leads to desire fulfillment but also places one towards the path of enlightenment. An everyday practice can certainly enable one to emerge stronger and lead a winning life, which implies the ability to put up with problems effectively.

A few studies found that the unavoidability of death was linked to the discovery of meaning and purpose in life (Taubman-Ben Ari, 2011). Furthermore, an important relation was found between meaning in life and life satisfaction as the former predicted the latter (Steger, 2012).

Research (King et al., 2003) focused on adults revealed that certain levels of life satisfaction is a result of life experiences, primarily the positive ones, besides personality attributes. Positive outcomes lie in several areas ranging from interpersonal, educational to intrapersonal.

Research on life satisfaction depicts a pattern wherein, satisfaction with life is higher among those below 25, plunges modestly especially in middle age, and further surges in the latter part of life. Concerning societies like Japan and Hungary, life satisfaction is higher among those above the age of 65 in the former case owing to greater respect rendered to them by the virtue of their age, while the case with the latter is in stark contrast with the younger group reporting higher life satisfaction relative to the aged population (Diener, 1999).

Another study comes from Fournier and Guiry (1993) that focused primarily on the relationship between life satisfaction and materialism. The study comprised 120 participants of different ages, incomes, and education levels. The task involved describing the wish list as consumers and consequently, a negative relation was evident between life satisfaction and the number of possessions mentioned on the wish list.

Spirituality

The word spirituality originates from Spiritus, a Latin word implying spirit, which refers to an important part of the individual (Piles, 1990) and it is something that carries control over the mind and in turn controls the body (Neuman, 1995).

Vaughan et al., (1996) defined spirituality as “a subjective experience that exists both within and outside of traditional religious systems”.

Sussman et al. (1997) defined spirituality as “subjectively experiencing a life force”.

Definitions of such kind point towards a link with something that goes far beyond human, physiological and psychological experience. The transcendent nature of experience is much linked to the relational aspect of spirituality (Vaughan et al., 1996)

As per one of the studies (Carson & Green, 1992), spiritual well-being and hardiness were regarded to be significantly linked with each other among those so was the case existential well-being and hardiness. This study indicates that spirituality provides resilience especially in the face of stressful life events.

About the benefits of spirituality, a study comes from Walker (1992) focused on women which centered around three areas: personal, family and friendship. It was found that, as a common theme, foundation and relationship bond dominated these arenas which further shows that spirituality leads towards connectedness and man's innate desire to search for meaning and purpose in life.

As per the findings of Emmons, Cheung, and Tehrani (1998) higher levels of life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and sense of purpose in life bear a strong association with spiritual strivings. Furthermore, beneficial consequences of such strivings are linked with psychological health owing to its impact on a sense of meaning and empowerment besides fewer goal conflicts (Emmons, 1999).

Purpose

The research aims to make a comparative study of monks and non-monks concerning Existential Anxiety, Mindfulness, Spirituality, and Life Satisfaction during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hypothesis

- There will be a significant difference between monks and non-monks concerning existential anxiety, mindfulness, life satisfaction, and spirituality.
- There will be a positive correlation between mindfulness and life satisfaction as well as between life satisfaction and spirituality for both groups.
- There will be a negative correlation between existential anxiety and life satisfaction and as well as between existential anxiety and spirituality for monks and non-monks.
- There will be a positive correlation between spirituality and mindfulness and a negative correlation between existential anxiety and mindfulness.
- Monks will be higher in life satisfaction, mindfulness, spirituality, and lower on existential anxiety and as compared to non-monks.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of a total of 60 participants (N=60) of which (Monks=30 & non-Monks=30) from Himachal Pradesh and Tri-city in the age range 20-50 years.

Measures

The following standardized tests were employed:

1. **The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)** given by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) comprises 5 items designed to measure global cognitive judgments of one's life satisfaction. It makes use of a seven-point Likert-type scale giving the respondents the options ranging from 'Strongly Disagree-1' to 'Strongly Agree-7'.
2. **The Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS)** given by Brown and Ryan (2003) comprises 15 items and uses a 6-point Likert-type scale with the options ranging from 'Almost Always-1' to 'Almost Never-6'.

3. **The Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ)** given by Weems, Costa, Dehon, and Berman (2004) comprises 13 items designed to measure levels of existential anxiety. The respondents rated the statements as either 'True' or 'False'.
4. **Spirituality Index of Well Being** given by Daaleman and Frey (2004) comprises 12 items designed to measure one's perceptions of their spiritual quality of life. It is divided into two subscales: 1). Self-Efficacy and 2). Life-Scheme and makes use of a 5-point Likert-type scale with the options ranging from 'Strongly Agree-1' to 'Strongly Disagree'.

Procedure

The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the questionnaires were filled via the use of Google forms for which their consent was sought and confidentiality of responses was also assured. Participants were given standardized psychological tests.

Analysis of Data

Results

N, Mean and Standard Deviation is shown in table 1, while Table 2 depicts the correlation between existential anxiety, mindful awareness, life satisfaction, life scheme, Self-efficacy, and spiritual well-being. Table 3 highlights the effects of existential anxiety, mindful awareness, life satisfaction, life scheme, self-efficacy, and spiritual well-being.

Table 1 shows N, Mean and Standard Deviation of all the variables

	Group	Satisfaction with life	Mindful Awareness	Total Spiritual Well Being	Self-Efficacy Sub Scale	Life Scheme Sub Scale	Existential Anxiety
N	M	30	30	30	30	30	30
	NM	30	30	30	30	30	30
Mean	M	20.7	3.32	37.4	18.8	18.6	2.97
	NM	21.8	4.03	43.5	21.2	22.2	1.60
Standard deviation	M	8.67	1.30	11.4	6.07	6.42	1.63
	NM	6.95	1.20	11.9	5.75	6.53	1.33

Table 2 shows the correlation of all variables

	Satisfaction with life	Mindful Awareness	Total Spiritual Well Being	Self-Efficacy Sub Scale	Life Scheme Sub Scale	Existential Anxiety
Satisfaction with life	—					
Mindful Awareness	0.645 ***	—				
Total Spiritual Well Being	0.543 ***	0.687 ***	—			
Self-Efficacy Sub Scale	0.492 ***	0.649 ***	0.935 ***	—		
Life Scheme Sub Scale	0.529 ***	0.646 ***	0.948 ***	0.775 ***	—	
Existential Anxiety	-0.091	-0.342 **	-0.398 **	-0.361 **	-0.387 **	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3 shows Independent T-Test

	Group	N	Mean	SD	p
Satisfaction with Life	M	30	20.67	8.67	0.578
	NM	30	21.80	6.95	
Mindful Awareness	M	30	3.32	1.30	0.031
	NM	30	4.03	1.20	
Total Spiritual Well Being	M	30	37.40	11.36	0.048
	NM	30	43.47	11.90	
Self-Efficacy Sub Scale	M	30	18.80	6.07	0.116
	NM	30	21.23	5.75	
Life Scheme Sub Scale	M	30	18.60	6.42	0.034
	NM	30	22.23	6.53	
Existential Anxiety	M	30	2.97	1.63	<.001
	NM	30	1.60	1.33	

Discussion of Results

The results found that there is a significant positive correlation between mindful awareness and life satisfaction ($r=0.645$, $p<.001$) as well as between spiritual well-being and life satisfaction ($r=0.543$, $p<.001$). Furthermore, results found a non-significant negative correlation between existential anxiety and life satisfaction ($r= -0.091$) and a significant negative correlation between existential anxiety and spiritual well-being ($r= -0.398$, $p<.01$). The results also point towards a significant positive correlation between spiritual well-being and mindful awareness ($r= 0.687$, $p<.001$) and a significant negative correlation between mindful awareness and existential anxiety ($r= -0.342$, $p<.01$).

The results also showed a significant difference between monks and non-monks concerning Mindful awareness ($t=0.031$), wherein the latter group is comparatively higher than the former. Both the groups significantly differed on spiritual well-being ($t=0.048$) with non-monks being higher on it as opposed to the monks as well as life scheme (subscale) with ($t=0.034$) whereby, non-monks were higher on life scheme in comparison to the monks. Regarding existential anxiety, both monks and non-monks differed significantly ($t= <0.001$) with monks comparatively being higher than the non-monk group.

Though individuals are likely to experience greater subjective well-being which raises life satisfaction, resulting in less negative feelings (Moore and Diener, 2019); however, COVID 19 experience lowers well-being and gives way to distress and negative emotions (Arslan et al., 2020; Yildirim et al., 2020).

The support for our results comes from a study in a non-Muslim country that pointed towards the relationship between death anxiety and spirituality in a negative direction (Rasmussen & Johnson, 1994; Wink, 2006). Another study suggests the importance of mindfulness as far as spiritual development is concerned (Walsh, 1992; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006).

A study found an association between meditation experience and mindfulness in a positive direction concerning Buddhist people (Brown and Ryan 2003; Lau et al., 2006); however, this stands inconsistent with our study as monks are much lower on mindful awareness compared to non-monks.

Conclusion

The study aimed at discovering the difference between monks and non-monks regarding mindfulness, existential anxiety, spirituality, and life satisfaction especially during the trying times of COVID 19. A total of 60 participants were a part of this investigation with 30 monks and 30 non-monks. The data yielded astonishing results wherein monks were much higher on existential anxiety and lower on mindfulness and spirituality, while vice versa was true for the non-monks. This can be attributed to the pandemic wherein having social support in comparison to being all by oneself, especially during the period of lockdown which implies isolation, can be a huge contributing factor. Furthermore, efforts can be made to discover the unspoken issues that the monk population might have undergone during this period and more support can be extended to them. This even helps us understand that despite the COVID situation, the mental health of non-monks was far better, the principal reason for which rests in the quality time that families got to spend with each other.

A major limitation of this research is related to its sample size owing to limited access which further reduces its generalizability and hence, a future study can focus on a larger population. This study did not run any gender difference regarding the concerned variables, which further provides scope for future studies to undertake the same.

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