The Meaning Connection Between Mindfulness and Happiness

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This article proposes a humanistic-oriented theoretical foundation for meaning in life as a mediator between mindfulness meditation and happiness. Three main functions of mindfulness are introduced: nonidentification, choice, and compassion. These functions are examined through the lens of meaning in life theory. Implications for humanistic counselors are discussed.

Keywords: meaning in life, mindfulness meditation, happiness

Contemporary researchers are busy examining connections that link mindfulness meditation practice to happiness and greater life satisfaction (Galante, Galante, Bekkers, & Gallacher, 2014). Harvard Medical School (see R. Siegel, 2013) published an overview of how mindfulness meditation is connected to happiness through the perspective of positive psychology. In 2012, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) was added as an evidence-based program to the U.S. government’s National Registry of Evidence-Based Practice and Programs (2014). In addition to MBSR, the registry also includes the following interventions that are based on, or include, mindfulness meditation practice: mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (Kuyken et al., 2008), dialectical behavior therapy (Linehan et al., 1999), acceptance and commitment therapy (Bond & Bunce, 2000), acceptance-based behavioral therapy for generalized anxiety disorder (Roemer, Orsillo, & Salters-Pedneault, 2008), and a gender-responsive treatment program (Helping Women Recover and Beyond Trauma; Messina, Grella, Cartier, & Torres, 2010). Internationally, Pak, Ahmadian, and Rahimi (2013) showed that mindfulness meditation significantly increased happiness in a sample of pregnant women with diabetes in Sanandaj, Iran.

Mindfulness meditation has been shown to be a successful intervention for depression (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2007), anxiety (Orsillo & Roemer, 2011), and addiction (Miller, 2014). Practitioners of mindfulness meditation are often perceived as happier by outside observers (Choi, Karremans, & Barendregt, 2012), and contemporary mindfulness meditation teachers are promising “real happiness” (see Salzberg, 2011) as a result of daily practice.

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According to Galante et al. (2014), the quality of mindfulness meditation research and training programs has improved greatly over the past decade. As a result, mindfulness-based techniques have become integrated into mainstream health care settings.

With the strength of the link between mindfulness and happiness made, the next layer of research is to explore how exactly one moves from mindfulness meditation to happiness. How might a humanistic counselor conceptualize and use an in-depth understanding of the connection between mindfulness meditation and happiness? This article theoretically explores how mindfulness links to happiness through the humanistic construct of meaning in life. First, mindfulness meditation is explicated in light of neuroscience and humanistic theory. Next, I introduce the construct of meaning in life. In the final section, I elucidate the bridge between mindfulness meditation practice and meaning in life, specifically with the humanistic counselor in mind. The purpose of this article is to explore the functions of mindfulness meditation in a way that will be of practical value to counselors working with clients, by introducing mindfulness meditation as a meaning-centered intervention that can potentially enhance real happiness (Salzberg, 2011).

DEFINING MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

According to Baer, Smith, and Allen (2004), mindfulness meditation “is generally defined to include focusing one’s attention in a nonjudgmental or accepting way on the experience occurring in the present moment” (p. 191). This definition lacks specificity in what actually occurs internally and externally while someone is practicing mindfulness meditation. For humanistic counselors who might use mindfulness meditation in their clinical work, a deeper understanding is needed to track the holistic experience of clients undertaking a mindfulness practice. I therefore turn to a more nuanced definition, which appears in neuroscience literature. According to DeRobertis (2014), neuroscience and humanistic psychology have a lot to be gained in their unique observations of human phenomena. Through the exploration of mindfulness meditation, and later, meaning in life, the utility of wedding these two seemingly divergent perspectives will become evident.

Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, and Davidson (2008) stated that mindfulness meditation includes a variety of practices that all contain two distinct elements of focused attention (FA) and open monitoring (OM). FA is when a practitioner of mindfulness chooses a specific object, physical or conceptual, for sustained attention. A common focus or anchor is the breath. In the FA phase of mindfulness meditation anchored on the breath, practitioners focus their attention on their breath coming in and out of their body. When the attention wavers away from the breath, practitioners will return their attention to the breath as soon as they notice that their attention has lapsed. Therefore, according to Lutz et al. (2008),
[FA cultivates] the acuity and stability of sustained attention on a chosen object, [and] this practice also develops three skills regulative of attention: the first is the monitoring faculty that remains vigilant to distractions without destabilizing the intended focus. The next skill is the ability to disengage from a distracting object without further involvement. The last involves the ability to redirect focus promptly to the chosen object. (p. 164)

The other element of mindfulness meditation, OM, becomes more available to practitioners when their minds have been calmed through FA.

[In OM,] one aims to remain only in the monitoring state, attentive moment by moment to anything that occurs in experience without focusing on any explicit object. . . . [The goal of OM] is to gain a clear reflexive awareness of the usually implicit features of one’s mental life. It is said that awareness of such features enables one more readily to transform cognitive and emotional habits. In particular, OM practice allegedly leads one to a more acute, but less emotionally reactive, awareness of the autobiographical sense of identity that projects back into the past and forward into the future. Finally, heightened sensitivity to body and environment occurs with a decrease in the forms of reactivity that create mental distress. (Lutz et al., 2008, p. 164)

Thus, mindfulness meditation is a two-tiered process whereby practitioners first cultivate one-pointed attention, which results in a calm and less distractible mind. Once this anchored attention is established, practitioners can open their awareness to whatever arises in their sense experience (including thinking) without emotional reactivity. There is also a lessening of a perceived self that is responsible for what is being experienced. The potential in OM is to notice and break unhealthy habits and patterns that cause suffering.

The expanded definition of mindfulness meditation by Lutz et al. (2008) lends to a humanistic-experiential understanding of what mindfulness practice entails. The processes of FA and OM speak to the moment-to-moment experience of someone practicing mindfulness meditation and to the challenges that arise in attempting to sustain this practice. The definition also summarizes what occurs internally for the mindfulness practitioner.

In the next section, I explore how these internal cognitive changes seem to connect with affective and external behavioral changes that appear to improve the quality of life for people who practice mindfulness meditation. Following this, the construct of meaning in life is introduced as a humanistic-oriented construct that seems to bridge the cognitive faculty with the phenomenon of wellness and happiness. Thus, humanistic counselors may look to meaning in life as a mediating factor in understanding the bridge between mindfulness meditation and happiness.

MINDFULNESS, COGNITION, AND HAPPINESS

In research delving into the question of how mindfulness meditation works and leads to happiness, attention and cognitive flexibility have surfaced as key factors (D. Siegel, 2009; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). Moore
and Malinowski (2009), for example, found that the participants in their study who reported higher levels of mindfulness showed greater attention and cognitive flexibility on cognitive-processing and endurance tests. They concluded, “The gained cognitive flexibility provides the mental space to detect incorrect and unwholesome cognitive evaluations, which would usually go unnoticed and would lead to mistaken attitudes and emotions, which in turn would affect our well-being” (p. 184).

Similarly, Holas and Jankowski (2013) proposed a cognitive model of mindfulness, whereby mindfulness meditation strengthens the awareness of one’s executive functioning (metacognition), including attention and self-reflection. They surmised that “with the gradual deepening of mindfulness practice . . . a range of positive cognitive, emotional, behavioral and interpersonal effects emerge” (p. 235). They wrote, “It is postulated that these effects are mediated through several processes, in which particular emphasis is laid on decentering, decreasing the self-focus of attention, and developing a self-compassionate stance” (p. 235).

Holas and Jankowski’s (2013) model leads to two important points of consideration. First, they peered into mindfulness meditation and highlighted its cognitive functions, which have the potential to create lasting change in practitioners. Second, they named three resulting functions that serve as proposed mediators to beneficial effects: (a) decentering, (b) decreasing the self-focus of attention, and (c) developing a self-compassionate stance. Decentering is characterized by attending to the ever-changing nature of the internal experience. Decreasing the self-focus of attention is seen as a reduction of identifying with one’s own thoughts, feelings, and sensations. The final resulting function of mindfulness that leads to positive effects is a self-compassionate stance, or “a caring and kind stance towards oneself” (p. 240).

Similarly, Brown, Ryan, and Creswell (2007) summarized the evidence for the salutary effects of mindfulness meditation. They stated that although mindfulness meditation may lead to greater well-being directly, by adding clarity and vividness to current experience and encouraging closer, moment-to-moment sensory contact with life, that is, without a dense filtering of experience through discriminatory thought it may also operate indirectly, through the enhancement of self-regulated functioning that comes with ongoing attentional sensitivity to psychological, somatic, and environmental cues. (pp. 219–220)

Brown et al.’s (2007) discussion of the benefits on mental health focused on cognitively rooted attention and affect regulation. As I turn now to an exploration of the fullness of meaning in life, these cognitive processes are expressed through a humanistic lens with greater relevance to clinical work and the life of clients.
THE FULLNESS OF MEANING IN LIFE

Steger (2012) defined meaning as

the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future. Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years. (p. 165)

In Steger’s definition, the humanistic leap from cognitive processes is made. People start with their mental capacity to understand the relationship between themselves and the world around them. The result is a transcending of the direct cognition, a sense that people are more than the sum of their seconds, days, and years. Park and Folkman (1997) elucidated the nuances of moving between cognitive processes to the humanistic experience of life as meaningful in their meaning appraisal model.

Meaning Appraisal Model

According to Park and Folkman’s (1997) meaning appraisal model, individuals possess an internalized global meaning framework made up of their values, beliefs, and ingrained patterns of seeing the world. This is similar to Piaget’s concept of schema (see Berk, 2012), which is core to his theory of cognitive development. A person’s global meaning framework shapes how she or he interprets life experiences. As situations arise, the global meaning framework can be confirmed or challenged by the meaning attributed to these situations. Individuals are thus in a constant state of meaning appraisal, matching up situational meaning against their global meaning framework (Park & Folkman, 1997).

When a person’s global meaning is challenged, the appraisal process can become more pronounced and a source of major conflict. The conflict can be understood as moving away from the presence of meaning and toward a search for meaning (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). Higher scores for searching for meaning tend to correlate with greater distress, for example, when one experiences a significant loss or a challenge to one’s identity. Again, reminiscent of Piaget’s model of cognitive development (Berk, 2012), resolution to a period of searching for meaning can happen when the meaning attributed to a conflicting situation is reappraised and assimilated into or accommodated by one’s global meaning framework (Park & Folkman, 1997).

For example, an individual might grow up with a global meaning framework that dictates that homosexuality is wrong. If that person then experiences same-sex attraction, a painful search for meaning may ensue (Halbertal & Koren, 2006). In assimilation, the person might hold onto the belief that this attraction is wrong, although it exists, for example, to
teach a lesson about facing one’s desires. In accommodation, the global meaning framework will be altered and the same-sex attraction may be embraced without shame. From the meaning appraisal model, it can be seen that meaning in life is an ongoing internal cognitive process that affects an individual in a holistic way.

Existential Meaning: Doing and Being

Meaning in life can be seen as a bio-psycho-social-spiritual phenomenon that extends beyond the meaning felt from one’s life accomplishments (Bellin, 2012). Meaning in life is a socially constructed concept that is tied to biological drives and is rooted in the core being experience of each individual. A full picture of meaning in life can only be grasped when one considers meaning through doing and meaning through being in the world (Bellin, 2013). Returning to Steger’s (2012) earlier definition of meaning in life, meaning through being is the part of meaning in life that transcends internal cognitive processes to the experience of mattering, not because of something external that a person did but rather because the meaning is tied to the person’s very existence. Thus, the term existential meaning has been used as early as Viktor Frankl, the father of the modern-day meaning movement, to describe this holistic phenomenon (Heintzelman & King, 2014).

Meaning in Life and Happiness

Frankl (1984, 1986) conceptualized happiness as a by-product of meaning in life. More recently, in a 666-participant study completed by Delle Fave, Brdar, Freire, Vella-Brodrick, and Wissing (2011), meaningfulness and happiness showed a strong quantitative and qualitative connection across seven countries. In their review of literature on meaning in life, Heinztelman and King (2014) reported a comprehensive list of happiness-related benefits associated with, or predicted by, meaning in life. These included higher levels of self-reported quality of life, superior self-reported health, slower age-related cognitive decline and decreased risk for Alzheimer’s disease, lower incidence of suicidal ideation, and a greater likeliness to rely on adaptive coping strategies. Similarly to the case of mindfulness meditation presented earlier, it would be hard to deny that meaning in life affects one’s experience of happiness. Additionally, by looking at both mindfulness meditation and meaning in life from a humanistic perspective, counselors gain greater insight into how each concept connects to the fundamental essence of the human experience and to a client’s potential for transformation. For the remainder of this article, I discuss the main theme of conceptualizing meaning in life as a mediating factor between mindfulness meditation and happiness.
HUMANISTIC FUNCTIONS OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

With meaning in life established as a holistic construct that spans the inner workings of cognition and the full experience of human existence, one can now begin to understand mindfulness meditation as a practice that enhances meaning in life. Meaning in life might then be understood as an appropriate bridge between the cognitively rooted practice of mindfulness meditation and the experience of happiness. Indeed, within the scope of meaning in life, mindfulness meditation can be seen as a humanistic practice that can elicit change throughout the entire person. To understand mindfulness meditation as a practice of meaning in life cultivation, I explore three main humanistic-oriented functions of mindfulness practice: nonidentification, choice, and compassion. Within each function, I include a proposed explanation of the meaning in life underpinnings of that function.

As previously mentioned, mindfulness meditation can strengthen certain cognitive functions, such as decentering, decreasing the self-focus of attention, and developing a self-compassionate stance, which have been theorized to lead to enhanced well-being (Holas & Jankowski, 2013). In the spirit of humanism, it is impossible to capture the fullness of mindfulness meditation through a thin lens of cognitive capacities, and there has been a strong response toward rethickening the exploration of mindfulness meditation, especially within the field of mental health (Khong, 2009; Rosenbaum, 2009). To that end, the following functions of mindfulness meditation are presented within the principles of humanism (DeRobertis, 2014)—considering mindfulness meditation as a practice that is holistically immersive and unique to humanity.

The humanistic-oriented functions of mindfulness practice (described below) have been compiled through contemporary mindfulness literature and my first-hand experience as a practitioner of mindfulness meditation. For ethical reasons related to scope of practice, mindfulness meditation should be taught and framed by those who practice it (Rosenbaum, 2009). As previously stated, it is my goal to explore the functions of mindfulness meditation in a way that will be of practical value to working with clients, by introducing mindfulness meditation as a meaning-centered intervention that can potentially enhance real happiness (Salzberg, 2011).

The following literature was reviewed in preparation for this discussion on the humanistic functions of mindfulness meditation: Real Happiness (Salzberg, 2011), A Path With Heart (Kornfield, 1993), Be Still and Get Going (Lew, 2005), How to Meditate (Brach, n.d.), and Peace Is Every Step (Thich, 1992). These texts come from two related traditions, Vipassana and Zen Buddhism. Both espouse a practice of silent sitting as a core to sustained mindfulness, although they by no means limit mindfulness to sitting meditation. In addition to these popular practice texts, I also cite peer-reviewed articles from the humanistic literature.
Nonidentification

Brach (n.d.) shared a basic mindfulness practice instruction called RAIN, which stands for recognize, allow, investigate, and nonidentification. The idea behind this practice is that when a sensation arises in the present moment, whether it is a physical sensation, emotion, or thought, the practitioner first recognizes the presence of that sensation. In the recognition, it can be helpful to label the sensation with emotions such as sadness, fear, joy, and so on. The recognition establishes a grounding framework to increase the mindful attention to what has arisen. In the second step, allow, the sensation is given permission to be fully experienced as it arises, sustains, and usually passes at some point, rather than being ignored, pushed away, or exacerbated. A critical part of the allowing step is to notice if the sensation is welcome/unwelcome or pleasant/unpleasant. At times, a practitioner will remain present with an unwelcome sensation, coupled with the felt sense of aversion toward the sensation. This too is part of the practice.

In the third step, the practitioner can investigate the experience of the sensation more fully with a sense of kindness and curiosity (Johnstone, 2013). For example, a tightness in the chest may warrant an investigation into the parallel emotional sensation being processed at that moment, or shameful thinking can be broadened by gently investigating what physical sensations are present in the body. The step of investigation also reveals that sensations are not static but wax and wane from moment to moment in intensity and frequency (Brown et al., 2007). Witnessing this change allows the final step, nonidentification, to occur (Brach, n.d.). A practitioner may find herself or himself consumed with fearfulness in one moment but may be tinged with joy at the next moment. The mind can bring stories that seem very real, only to be discounted when the practitioner realizes that they are not true.

Because one’s experience and perception of the world are utterly dynamic, sustained practice reveals how hard it is to keep one’s finger on what defines one’s being. In the step of nonidentification, the practitioner releases, over and over again, any sensation that takes momentary hold on defining who one is at any given moment. A humanistic way to conceptualize nonidentification is through Edmund Husserl’s concept of epoché, “the attempt to put all one’s assumptions about the matter being studied in abeyance” (see Khong, 2009, p. 122). In nonidentification, practitioners bracket any assumptions that arise with the direct experience, even the assumption about the one who is experiencing. Thus, a function of mindfulness, through the instruction of RAIN or similar practices, is to boil down one’s sense of being to an observable and constant flow of sensation. One can gain a greater understanding of the connection between the function of nonidentification and happiness through the lens in meaning in life.

Nonidentification through meaning in life. The relinquishing of the idea of a static and definable being is, at first glance, a challenge to a sense of
meaning in life. Antonovsky (1979) defined meaning in life as a sense of coherence. Accordingly, meaning in life is experienced when one can trace a sense of self through a logical flow of time. If mindfulness aims to lull the sense of a singular being flowing through time, it appears that meaning in life is in danger.

If one takes into account only the doing side of meaning in life, this contradiction would be insurmountable. When one includes the presence of meaning through being (Bellin, 2013), however, the contradiction can be resolved. With nonidentification, one releases an attachment to the self-identifiers that are actually ever-changing. For example, “I cannot be defined by my anger, because my anger fades. I cannot be defined by my job, because my job fades. I cannot be defined by my relationship, because my relationship fades too.”

What the practitioner is left with is a consistent sense of awareness and presence. No matter what arises and fades away, there is some part of the person that bears witness. This observer quality stays consistent throughout life and creates a sense of coherence that stands up to the ever-changing flow of internal and external sensations. From a meaning perspective, with the technique of RAIN, the practitioner transcends a tenuous coherence that is held victim to the dynamicity of time and embraces a more subtle sense of continuity that is actually constant. One’s sense of meaning in life gains stability when it rests on the unavering pillars of presence and witnessing.

Choice

A key principle of mindfulness practice is not to clear the mind but rather to stay present to whatever sensation is arising in the moment (Khong, 2009). Again, sensations can be physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual. They can be external and internal. Because the draw of the mind away from the present moment is so powerful, a basic instruction of mindfulness practice is to pick an anchor, or a point of focus, so it is easier to notice when one’s attention has lapsed (Lutz et al., 2008). The anchor can be the breath, external sounds, physical sensations, thoughts that arise in the mind, or the entire present moment itself (Rosenbaum, 2009). One’s strength of practice is not in how long one can focus on the anchor but whether one can realize that one’s attention is off the anchor, and then choose to return to one’s point of focus. It is the act of returning to the point of focus, again and again, that creates many small moments of wakefulness (Lew, 2005). Mindfulness meditation reveals that even in the face of severe distraction, moments always arise when one has the ability to choose where one wants to focus one’s attention (Brown et al., 2007). The result is an enhanced flexibility to respond with skillfulness to what arises in one’s experience (Khong, 2009). One can gain a greater understanding of the connection between the function of choice and happiness through the lens in meaning in life.
Choice through meaning in life. The humanistic function suggested by the necessity to constantly return to one’s anchor cultivates the sense that no matter how chaotic one’s experience seems, moments of choice do arise. During mindfulness practice, this choice is usually between staying lost within a certain sensation and returning to one’s anchor. For Frankl (1972), the ability to choose is the final reserve of one’s meaning in life.

Frankl (1984) wrote about the defiant power of the human spirit, which allows individuals to choose the attitude toward their own suffering. Frankl saw this power as rooted in the spiritual (noetic) being of an individual, and he conceptualized that this power manifested as the root of human creativity. For Frankl, meaning in life is experienced in response to a person creating something, experiencing something, or choosing one’s attitude toward something. Frankl’s account of living in a concentration camp exemplified his theory. The Nazis blocked his ability to access meaning through creation and experience, but they were not able to confiscate the meaning in life that was inherent in choosing his attitude toward his suffering.

In its relationship to mindfulness, this defiant power of the human spirit can be cultivated in the subtle, though relentless practice of returning. That is, when practitioners of mindfulness meditation realize that their awareness has shifted from a chosen anchor and return to it, they activate their noetic defiance by choosing a different path of focus. The choice to return is a small act of meaning cultivation, because it primes the practitioner to access this ability to choose in more significant being-defining moments. For example, when civil rights activist Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the bus for a White man, her defiance was an act that displayed the strength of her character and the values for which she stood. Her choice helped to define generations to come.

Another meaning connection to be made with the function of choice is seen in the meaning appraisal model (Park & Folkman, 1997), introduced earlier. The ability to choose where to focus one’s attention in each moment, which is cultivated through the return aspect of mindfulness practice, plays an important role in the meaning appraisal model. At every moment, individuals have multiple choices of how to appraise the meaning of a situation. In general, individuals engage in a streamlined process as their global meaning framework dictates the meaning given to a situation. For the most part, one is served by this automatic process. With mindfulness practice, one learns about the limits of this benefit.

There is a danger of living life on complete autopilot (Lew, 2005). For example, systems of oppression are perpetuated when people do not question the status quo (Greenleaf & Bryant, 2012). Practitioners of mindfulness see their automated patterns. They understand that without choosing to pay attention to how their mind interprets life situations, they can easily perpetuate unhealthy and harmful ways of being in the world. By learning to return to a chosen anchor, they may cultivate the ability to be more conscious when assessing situational meaning. Thus, mindfulness meditation
can aid in the process of meaning formation to ensure that the practitioner sees the world through a more personally integrated and values-aligned perspective (D. Siegel, 2009). Humanistic counselors, who bring client empowerment to the forefront of their work (Dollarhide & Oliver, 2014), can benefit from this understanding of the relationship between mindfulness meditation and the meaning in life potential in choosing to return.

Compassion

In practicing mindfulness meditation, when a sensation of any kind arises that is positive or negative, one remains open to the experience and slowly cultivates a sense of equanimity (Brown et al., 2007). This sense of equanimity, similar to being even-keeled or even-tempered, does not mean that one’s senses are dampened. Quite the opposite, with increased attention, practitioners of mindfulness may notice that their sense of feeling intensifies. With continued practice, the person becomes aware of certain qualities of being alive that are shared by all life, and a sense of compassion blossoms (Kornfield, 1993).

As practitioners stay mindful, they perceive shortcomings about themselves. They see how they are often locked into patterns of behavior that have caused them to act in ways that are perceived as shameful or harmful. With practice, they may see that no matter how hard they attempt to sway certain patterns, they are powerless to force change. In fact, to change certain behaviors, they need to use sustained long-term attention for months or even years. They can clearly see how unstable their experience of the world is, with sensations rushing in and out of consciousness like waves breaking on the shore and receding toward the horizon. The human system is wired for unavoidable suffering (Khong, 2009; Lew, 2005).

Compassion arises when practitioners of mindfulness meditation look outside of themselves, to the people around them. They realize that the same conditions that are true for them are true for everyone else (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). People are locked into patterns of being in the world, patterns that often need enormous effort to change. The mind of each person presents a never-ending erratic array of sensations that take hold of perception. The inner life of almost anyone is sure to be quite exasperating. As the often quoted Rumi (n.d.) poem goes:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

When the practitioner of mindfulness realizes the sameness of the human condition, compassion arises. One can get painfully caught in one’s own experience, but realizing the sameness of the human condition allows for
the possibility of greater understanding and caring. From a humanistic perspective, interpersonal virtues connected with humanity and justice seem to surface through sustained mindfulness practice (Niemiec, Rashid, & Spinella, 2012). People can gain a greater understanding of the connection between the function of choice and happiness through meaning in life.

Compassion through meaning in life. With continued mindfulness practice and clearly seeing into one’s own suffering, one’s connection and caring slowly arise toward the suffering of others (Kornfield, 1993). According to Frankl (1986), the sense of compassion toward another, expressed in responding to suffering in some small or large way, is another key to meaning in life. Frankl wrote passionately about how meaning in life is sustained with a sense of responsibility toward something outside oneself. He taught that if individuals want to know their purpose, they must ask what the world needs from them in any given moment. As individuals connect deeper with a sense of caring and responsibility toward others, they stand more firmly in their sense of meaning in life. The cultivation of compassion, through mindfulness practice, drives the practitioner toward the meaning found in a service-oriented lifestyle. The benefit for clients, to engage more fully in the world around them, connects with the social justice current in humanistic counseling (Lewis, 2011).

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FURTHER STUDY

A main implication for humanistic counseling is that this article further demonstrates a needed relationship between neuroscience and humanism. Historically, these two fields have been pitted against each other (DeRobertis, 2014), but upon further investigation, neuroscience and humanism have a lot to gain from maintaining a relationship. The current article added to this relationship by exploring the connection between mindfulness meditation and meaning in life. Both of these constructs have foundations in cognitive and social neuroscience (D. Siegel, 2009) and in the principles of humanism (Chen, 2001; Khong, 2009).

Another implication is that by presenting a picture of mindfulness meditation through an expanded view of meaning, counselors who introduce mindfulness practice to their clients can have a deeper grasp of the whole being intervention that they are offering. Mindfulness meditation as an intervention can be much more than attention training and mental flexibility. Within a humanistic framework, mindfulness meditation can offer clients infinite moments of sustainable being affirmation, which is key to an experience of meaning in life.

The main limitation of this study is that it is theoretically based on my interpretation of mindfulness texts and personal practice. This limitation points the way to further study. Also, the word happiness was used quite broadly to include well-being, life satisfaction, and other similar terms that have more distinct characteristics within research literature.
The next phase of examining the link between mindfulness and happiness through meaning in life would be a larger scale qualitative study to understand the phenomenon of mindfulness as a meaning-cultivation practice. This study would allow for a deeper understanding of how practitioners gain a sense of meaning in life through their practice. Such an exploration might also yield evidence to the contrary—that mindfulness meditation practice challenges or frustrates meaning in life. Thus, a more complete picture of the mindfulness–meaning link can be understood.

In addition to a qualitative study, an empirical study can be implemented using valid and reliable meaning scales, such as the Purpose in Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964) or the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006), for pre- and postmeasurements with participants in a controlled versus mindfulness intervention group. This kind of research can be used to examine whether there is a statistically significant relationship between mindfulness and meaning in life cultivation. In the long term, statistical models can be tested to see if the cultivation of meaning in life does mediate the relationship between mindfulness meditation and happiness.

CONCLUSION

This article proposed a theoretical link between mindfulness meditation and happiness through the cultivation of meaning in life. Mindfulness is a phenomenon generally understood in cognitive terms, although it has a holistic impact on an individual’s being. Meaning in life is seen as a construct that expands beyond what a person does in life (meaning through doing), but it also depends on each person’s relationship with her or his essential being (meaning through being). I introduced and examined three main humanistic-oriented functions of mindfulness (nonidentification, choice, and compassion) in light of meaning in life theory. The presented scope of mindfulness through a meaning lens seems supported by the writings of contemporary mindfulness teachers and peer-reviewed literature.

REFERENCES


