

Relationship between Mindfulness and Mental Health in Older Adults

Ruirui Li, Haiqing Wang*

School of Psychology, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, Gansu, 730070, China

*Corresponding author: Haiqing Wang, 1871229497@qq.com

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Abstract: Objective: To explore the relationship between mindfulness and mental health among older adults, and to further examine the predictive effect of mindfulness on mental health. **Methods:** Based on the original survey data, 301 retired older adults aged over 60 years were selected as participants, and only two core variables, mindfulness and mental health, were retained for analysis. The Chinese short form of the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire was used to measure mindfulness, and the psychological sub-health subscale of the Sub-health Rating Scale was used to measure mental health. SPSS was used for descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and simple linear regression analysis. **Results:** Mindfulness was significantly and positively correlated with mental health among older adults ($r=0.933$, $p<0.001$). Further simple linear regression analysis showed that mindfulness significantly and positively predicted mental health ($\beta=0.933$, $t=44.830$, $p<0.001$). **Conclusion:** Higher mindfulness is associated with better mental health in older adults. As a psychological resource emphasizing present-moment awareness, nonjudgmental acceptance, and emotion regulation, mindfulness may help older adults better cope with physical and psychological changes, life stress, and emotional distress during aging. Improving mindfulness may be an important approach to promoting mental health and active aging.

Keywords: Mindfulness; Older Adults; Mental Health; Psychological Sub-health

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1. Introduction

As population aging continues to deepen, the mental health of older adults has become an important issue in public health and social governance. Later life is not only associated with chronological aging and changes in physical functioning, but also involves retirement adjustment, role transition, reduced close relationships, increased risk of chronic disease, and reconstruction of life meaning. When facing these changes, some older adults may experience anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep disturbance, low mood, and social withdrawal. Declining mental health may affect subjective well-being and quality of life, and it may also increase risks related to physical illness, care dependence, and impaired social functioning. Therefore, helping older adults maintain good psychological adjustment during aging is an important component of healthy and active aging.

In recent years, mindfulness has gradually become an important concept in research on mental health in older adults. Kabat-Zinn defined mindfulness as paying attention to present-moment experience intentionally and nonjudgmentally^[1]. Different from simple relaxation or positive thinking, mindfulness emphasizes awareness of current bodily sensations, emotions,

thoughts, and the external environment, while avoiding excessive involvement, avoidance, or judgment of these experiences. For older adults, the significance of mindfulness lies not only in relieving temporary tension, but also in helping individuals face physical decline, life changes, and emotional fluctuations in a more accepting and stable way. Older adults with higher mindfulness tend to be more aware of their psychological states, less trapped in repetitive worry and negative evaluation, and more able to maintain emotional stability in daily life.

Recent studies have increasingly examined the relationship between mindfulness and mental health in later life. Verhaeghen, Aikman, and Mirabito reported in a meta-analysis that mindfulness interventions have positive effects on mental health and well-being among older adults^[2]. Ye et al. also found that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy had effects in reducing depressive and anxiety symptoms in late life^[3]. Bhattacharya and Hofmann suggested that mindfulness-based interventions have been widely used to improve anxiety and depression, and that their core mechanisms are related to attention regulation, decentering, acceptance, and reduced emotional reactivity^[4]. Lantheaume et al. further found that mindfulness-based programs could sustainably improve mental health, and that changes in mindfulness practice and cognitive fusion may be important mechanisms^[5]. These findings indicate that mindfulness is not merely a psychological training technique, but also a stable psychological resource that may influence emotion regulation and psychological adaptation.

From the perspective of older adults' life circumstances, mindfulness has special value for mental health. Older adults often need to face realistic pressures such as declining physical function, chronic pain, bereavement, reduced social participation, and changes in daily rhythm. If individuals cope with these changes through avoidance, complaint, or repeated worry, negative emotions may continue to accumulate. Mindfulness emphasizes awareness and acceptance of present experience, enabling older adults to better identify their emotional states and bodily signals while reducing excessive entanglement with events that cannot be changed. Aldahadha found that mindfulness was associated with happiness and psychological well-being^[6]. Simmons, Ferry, and Christopher also reported significant relationships between mindfulness and mental health outcomes^[7]. Although these studies were not limited to older adults, they collectively suggest that mindfulness may promote a more positive psychological state by improving individuals' responses to emotions and stress.

In the assessment of mental health, the present study used the psychological sub-health subscale as the measurement tool. Psychological sub-health refers to a state in which individuals have not reached the diagnostic criteria for mental disorders, but already show declines in emotion, cognition, sleep, stress experience, and psychological adjustment. Compared with measuring only depressive or anxiety symptoms, psychological sub-health is more suitable for reflecting the overall psychological state of older adults in daily life. For most community-dwelling older adults, they may not necessarily have a diagnosed psychological disorder, but may still experience low mood, reduced interest, increased fatigue, decreased attention, or lower life satisfaction. Therefore, examining the relationship between mindfulness and mental health helps clarify psychological health risks among older adults at an earlier and more everyday level.

Existing studies have mainly focused on the effects of mindfulness interventions on depression, anxiety, stress, and sleep problems. However, further evidence is still needed regarding the association between mindfulness and mental health in general older adult populations. In Chinese community samples, mindfulness may be closely related to daily experience, leisure participation, emotion regulation, and self-rated health. Baer et al. proposed a five-facet structure of mindfulness, including observing, describing, acting with awareness, nonjudging, and nonreactivity^[8]. The Chinese short form of the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire revised by Hou et al. also provides an effective instrument for assessing mindfulness in Chinese populations^[9].

Based on the above background, this study used original survey data and focused only on two variables: mindfulness and mental health among older adults. Other variables in the original model, such as leisure activities, psychological resilience, and self-rated health, were excluded. This study aimed to answer two questions: first, whether mindfulness is significantly related to mental health among older adults; and second, whether mindfulness significantly predicts mental health. Through this analysis, the present study seeks to further clarify the role of mindfulness in maintaining mental health in later life and to provide references for community psychological services, health education for older adults, and active aging practice.

2. Research methods

2.1 Participants

This study was based on the reorganization and analysis of original survey data. The original survey targeted retired older adults aged over 60 years and collected questionnaires through both online and offline channels. A total of 307 questionnaires were collected. After excluding questionnaires that were incomplete, completed in an excessively short time, or obviously invalid, 301 valid questionnaires were finally obtained, with an effective response rate of 98.05%. The mean age of the participants was 62.19 ± 2.01 years. Among them, 165 were male, accounting for 54.82%, and 136 were female, accounting for 45.18%. In terms of household registration, 137 participants had rural household registration, accounting for 45.51%, and 164 had urban household registration, accounting for 54.49%.

2.2 Measures

Mindfulness was measured using the Chinese short form of the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire. The original scale was developed by Baer et al.^[8] and later revised into a Chinese short form by Hou et al.^[9]. The scale used in this study included 20 items and covered five dimensions: observing, describing, acting with awareness, nonjudging, and nonreactivity, with four items in each dimension. The scale was scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true). Higher total scores indicated higher levels of mindfulness. In this study, the Cronbach's α coefficient of the scale was 0.845, indicating good internal consistency.

Mental health was measured using the psychological sub-health subscale of the Sub-health Rating Scale^[10]. This subscale assesses health status in terms of emotional state, cognitive state, perceived stress, and psychological adaptation. It is scored on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating better psychological health. In this study, the Cronbach's α coefficient of this subscale was 0.950, indicating high reliability in the present sample.

2.3 Data Processing

SPSS 26.0 was used for data processing. First, descriptive statistics were conducted for the valid sample. Second, Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between mindfulness and mental health. Finally, simple linear regression analysis was conducted to further test the predictive effect of mindfulness on mental health among older adults. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$. Because this paper focused only on mindfulness and mental health, other variables from the original study were not included, and mediation or moderation models were not tested.

3. Results

3.1 Correlation Analysis of Mindfulness and Mental Health

The Pearson correlation analysis showed that mindfulness was significantly and positively correlated with mental health among older adults, with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.933$ and $p < 0.001$. This finding indicates that older adults with higher mindfulness levels also had better mental health. Because higher scores on the mental health subscale indicate better psychological health, the result suggests that mindfulness may be an important protective psychological resource for mental health in older adults.

Table1: Correlation analysis of mindfulness and mental health in older adults ($N = 301$)

Variables	1	2
1 Mindfulness	1	
2 Mental health	0.933***	1

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

3.2 Predictive Effect of Mindfulness on Mental Health

To further examine the predictive effect of mindfulness on mental health among older adults, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted with mindfulness as the independent variable and mental health as the dependent variable. The results showed that mindfulness significantly and positively predicted mental health, with a standardized regression coefficient of $\beta = 0.933$, $t = 44.830$, and $p < 0.001$. Overall, mindfulness was very closely related to mental health among older adults, indicating that higher mindfulness was associated with a more positive mental health state.

Table2: Regression analysis of mindfulness predicting mental health in older adults (N=301)

Predictor	Dependent variable	β	t	p	R^2
Mindfulness	Mental health	0.933	44.830	<0.001	0.870

4. Discussion

4.1 Mindfulness Was Significantly Related to Mental Health in Older Adults

This study found a significant positive correlation between mindfulness and mental health among older adults. In other words, older adults with higher mindfulness levels tended to show better mental health. This result is generally consistent with mindfulness theory and previous findings. Mindfulness emphasizes awareness, acceptance, and a nonjudgmental attitude toward present-moment experience, which helps individuals reduce overreaction to negative experiences. When older adults face changes in physical functioning, social role transition, and life stress, a higher level of mindfulness may help them become aware of and accept their experience, become less trapped in repetitive worry, complaint, and emotional reactivity, and thus maintain a better psychological state.

The significance of mindfulness for mental health in later life is first reflected in emotion regulation. Older adults may face pressures related to chronic disease, sleep problems, retirement adjustment, intergenerational relationships, and reduced social participation. Higher mindfulness can help individuals recognize the emergence and change of emotions instead of being immediately driven by negative emotions. Through observing and describing emotions, older adults can better understand their psychological responses; through nonjudging and nonreactivity, they can reduce secondary evaluation and continuous involvement in negative emotions. This psychological process may help reduce anxiety, depression, and irritability.

Second, mindfulness may promote mental health by improving self-acceptance. After entering old age, individuals inevitably experience declining physical function, changes in life rhythm, and reduced social roles. If they respond to aging with resistance or denial, they may be more likely to experience loss, helplessness, and reduced self-worth. The acceptance emphasized by mindfulness is not passive resignation. Rather, it involves viewing one's current state with less judgment and taking adaptive action based on reality. This attitude may help older adults reduce resistance to age-related changes and enhance a sense of stability and control in life.

4.2 Mindfulness Had a Significant Predictive Effect on Mental Health

This study further found that mindfulness significantly and positively predicted mental health among older adults, with a relatively high model explanatory rate. This indicates that mindfulness is not only correlated with mental health, but may also be an important psychological factor for understanding individual differences in mental health in later life. Although cross-sectional research cannot strictly prove causality, the theoretical mechanisms of mindfulness and existing intervention studies provide strong support for its positive role in mental health. Verhaeghen et al. reported that mindfulness interventions had positive effects on mental health and well-being in older adults^[2], and Ye et al. found that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy improved depression and anxiety in late life^[3]. These findings support the results of the present study.

In terms of specific mechanisms, mindfulness may affect mental health among older adults in three ways. First, mindfulness can improve attention regulation, enabling individuals to place more attention on present activities and actual experience, thereby reducing repetitive thinking about past regrets and future worries. Second, mindfulness can enhance emotional awareness, allowing individuals to identify signals of anxiety, low mood, and anger earlier and adopt more timely regulation strategies. Third, mindfulness can promote psychological distance and decentering, helping individuals realize that thoughts are psychological events rather than facts that must be fully identified with or obeyed. For older adults, these abilities may help reduce psychological stress and improve life adaptation.

It should be noted that mental health in this study was measured using the psychological sub-health subscale, which reflects general psychological status rather than clinical diagnosis of mental disorders. Therefore, the findings are more suitable for explaining everyday mental health among community-dwelling older adults. In other words, mindfulness may not only be a technique used in clinical treatment, but also a positive psychological resource in daily life. By cultivating mindfulness, older adults may better cope with emotional fluctuations, physical discomfort, and life changes, thereby maintaining a better mental

health state.

4.3 Implications for Community Mental Health Services for Older Adults

First, communities may incorporate mindfulness training into mental health services for older adults. Compared with complex psychotherapy, basic mindfulness practices are flexible, low-cost, and easy to promote. Community workers can help older adults understand the basic ideas of mindfulness through mental health lectures, group activities, meditation experiences, breathing awareness training, and similar approaches. For older adults without mindfulness experience, simple breathing awareness, body scan, and mindful walking exercises can be used as starting points to gradually cultivate attention to present-moment experience.

Second, health education for older adults should emphasize emotional awareness and acceptance. Many older adults may habitually suppress, deny, or repeatedly complain when facing anxiety, loneliness, or loss. Mindfulness training can help them learn to observe emotions in a gentler way and recognize that negative emotions are psychological processes that can be noticed and regulated. By reducing excessive judgment of emotions, older adults may be more likely to form a stable psychological state.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

This study measured mindfulness and mental health using self-report questionnaires, which may be affected by social desirability, memory bias, and subjective judgment. Future studies may combine interviews, behavioral tasks, physiological indicators, or longitudinal diary methods to more comprehensively understand mindfulness experience and mental health among older adults. This paper retained only two variables, mindfulness and mental health, and did not include factors such as physical health, social support, loneliness, life events, and leisure activities. Future research may build a more complete model while retaining the core role of mindfulness, so as to further explain the formation mechanism of mental health in older adults.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between mindfulness and mental health among older adults. The results showed that mindfulness was significantly and positively correlated with mental health, and mindfulness significantly and positively predicted mental health. That is, older adults with higher mindfulness levels were more likely to show better mental health.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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