

Contemplative development mapping project

ABSTRACT:

Background

Meditation practices once limited to monks, nuns, and dedicated hermits have recently entered mainstream culture in Europe and the United States. The rise of Mindfulness-Based Interventions has led to meditation now being disseminated in health care and education and has been subject to scientific scrutiny. Despite the Buddhist roots of mindfulness, very little is known about the broad range of effects associated with meditation practices.

Aims

To understand the range of meditation-related experiences associated with different types of Buddhist meditation practice, and in particular to identify experiences reported as challenging, difficult, distressing, functionally impairing, or otherwise in need of additional support.

Method

60 Buddhist meditation practitioners and 32 experts (Buddhist meditation teachers and clinicians) from the United States, Canada, and Europe were interviewed. The semi-structured interview queried 1) meditation-related challenges; 2) causal attributions and interpretations; and 3) risk factors and remedies for navigating meditation-related challenges. Interviews were transcribed and coded according to qualitative content analysis methodologies.

Results

Qualitative coding yielded a taxonomy of 59 distinct experiences across seven domains of human experience: cognitive, perceptual, affective, conative, somatic, social, and sense of self. Because very few experiences were universally reported as negatively valenced, difficult, or impairing, a secondary analysis of “influencing factors” aimed to determine the variables that practitioners and teachers attributed as either causal risk factors for a meditation-related challenge or remedies that helped for the management or alleviation of such challenges. Qualitative coding yielded a taxonomy of 26 influencing factors: practitioner-level variables, practice-related variables; relationships; and health behaviors. A follow-up survey provided quantitative assessments of causality, impairment and other demographic and practice-related variables.

Conclusions

The practice of meditation can be associated with intense, transformative experiences that for some practitioners are associated with significant levels of distress and even functional impairment. This study has documented and classified the types of experiences that are reported as difficult and has also identified a number of variables that influence the nature, duration, and trajectory of a meditator’s contemplative development. In addition to the qualitative analysis, these data allow us to create hypotheses about why meditation would lead to these types of experiences and under what circumstances. This research also calls attention to the sociocultural

dimensions of appraising and making meaning out of anomalous experiences. Finally, the taxonomy of experiences serves as the basis for the development of a validated questionnaire to be used in future meditation research to identify potential meditation-related adverse effects.

Keywords

Meditation, Experiences, Challenges, Adverse effects

Published Work:

Lindahl, J. R. (2017). Bodily energies and emotional traumas: A qualitative study of practice-related challenges reported by Vajrayana Buddhists. *Religions* 8(8): 153. doi:10.3390/rel8080153

Lindahl, J., Fisher, N., Cooper, D. J., Rosen, R. K., & Britton, W. (2017). The varieties of contemplative experience: A mixed-methods study of meditation-related challenges in Western Buddhists. *PLoS ONE*, 12(5): e0176239. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0176239

Researchers' Contacts:

Willoughby Britton, Ph.D.
willoughby_britton@brown.edu

Jared Lindahl, Ph.D.
jared_lindahl@brown.edu