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## Loneliness among young adults: The role of affect balance and mindfulness

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### Abstract

Loneliness has emerged as a prevalent and critical issue that can negatively impact the well-being of college students. To study the relationship between mindfulness, loneliness, and affect balance in young adults from a university context, this study was conducted. The study involved 150 university students aged between 17 and 25 who completed three scales: the scale of positive and negative experiences by Diener *et al.* (2009), the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire by Baer, Carmody, & Hunsinger (2012), and the UCLA Loneliness Scale by Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson (1978). The outcomes demonstrated a significant correlation between loneliness and non-judgmental inner experiences and affect balance. Additionally, the study found a strong negative relationship between loneliness and the two facets of mindfulness: non-judgmental inner experiences and aware actions. The results indicate that higher levels of affect balance, aware actions, and non-judgmental inner experiences were related to lower levels of loneliness among students. This research highlights that mindfulness may play a role in alleviating loneliness and fostering emotional equilibrium among college students.

**Keywords:** Mindfulness, affect balance, positive emotions, negative emotions, and loneliness

### Introductions

#### Loneliness

Loneliness is a common problem that negatively affects well-being. It is characterized by feelings of emptiness, longing for connection, and difficulty forming relationships. Loneliness is prevalent among youth and can negatively impact physical, psychological, and academic well-being. The issue of loneliness has gained importance due to the pandemic-induced social isolation, with many studies investigating its correlates and links to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Preece *et al.* 2021 <sup>[15]</sup>). Previous studies have demonstrated that loneliness is linked to many issues like depression, anxiety, and stress, but mostly the population were older adults. The prevalence of loneliness among youth varies depending on the population and study, but it is generally considered to be a common problem. Research has shown that loneliness is prevalent among both adolescents and young adults, with estimates ranging from 20-40% of youth reporting feelings of loneliness (Holt-Lunstad, 2021) <sup>[7]</sup>. Factors such as social media use, bullying, and mental health conditions can contribute to loneliness among youth. Loneliness can have negative effects on physical, psychological, and academic well-being, is important for parents, educators, and healthcare professionals to be aware of its prevalence and take steps to address it. Social isolation and loneliness were already a concern prior to the pandemic, but recent trends suggest that it has become a pressing public health crisis. Social connections have a powerful impact on health and longevity, and a lack of social connections is considered a risk factor for premature mortality. Despite this, social factors are often overlooked in medical and healthcare practice. (Holt-Lunstad, 2021) <sup>[7]</sup>. Loneliness is associated with low levels of positive emotion and high levels of negative emotions such as dissatisfaction and sadness. Self-esteem and social support can influence the affect balance, and increase the positive affect and decrease loneliness feeling among young adults. Lindsay *et al.* (2019) <sup>[10]</sup> proposed that for individuals to feel less lonely and make more social connections, they must learn to be open and accepting of their current circumstances.

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a process that involves being attentive to the present moment in a non-judgmental manner. The Five Factor Model of Mindfulness is a way to measure how mindful a person is. It looks at five different aspects of mindfulness. The first is the ability to pay attention to what's happening around you and inside of you without judging it (observing). The second is being able to describe what you're feeling. The third is being able to do things while being aware of the present moment (acting with awareness). The fourth is not getting caught up in negative thoughts and emotions (non-judging of inner experience). The fifth is not getting too caught up in any thoughts or emotions and just letting them pass (non-reactivity to inner experiences). The FFMQ is a questionnaire that helps measure these five aspects of mindfulness. Mindfulness practices have been found to be effective in reducing loneliness and increasing social connection by improving emotional regulation, increasing self-compassion, promoting presence and engagement in social interactions (Miralles-Armenteros, Chiva-Gómez, Rodríguez-Sánchez, & Barghouti, 2021) [12], and by identifying and addressing negative thought patterns that may contribute to loneliness. It can also help in reducing stress and anxiety, fostering empathy and compassion, and improving the quality of relationships (Pérez-Aranda *et al.*, 2021) [14]. Mindfulness techniques can be a useful tool for enhancing social connection and reducing feelings of isolation. Mindfulness practices are positively associated with psychological well-being, cognitive function, physical health, social connection, and spiritual well-being. Mindfulness training is effective in reducing loneliness levels in students. (Zhang *et al.*, 2018) [18] Mindfulness practices have been found to improve emotional regulation, self-compassion, and cognitive function, reduce stress, and inflammation, improve immune function, improve relationship satisfaction, and increase a sense of connectedness. (Lal & Jayan, 2019) [9]. Mindfulness has been found to be an effective tool in reducing feelings of loneliness and negative affect. Mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to improve emotional regulation and reduce negative affect. Furthermore, research has found that practicing mindfulness can help mitigate the negative effects of loneliness on academic performance. One of the ways that mindfulness is thought to be helpful in reducing loneliness and negative affect is by promoting self-awareness and helping individuals develop a more accepting and non-judgmental attitude towards their thoughts and emotions. Mindfulness practice seems to increase positive emotions by changing the activity in particular brain regions. Positive emotions are associated with better physical health, better social relationships, and stress resilience (Alexander *et al.*, 2021) [11].

## Affect balance

A balance between positive and negative affect is represented by affect balance, which indicates the emotional aspect of subjective well-being. People with low amounts of social support are more likely to feel negative emotions than those with higher levels of such support, suggesting that social support plays a critical role in enhancing people's affect balance. A balance of positive and negative affect is thought to be important for overall well-being (Luque *et al.*, 2020) [11]. People who experience a higher balance of positive affect tend to have better overall well-being, greater

life satisfaction, and fewer mental health problems. On the other hand, people who experience a higher balance of negative affect tend to have lower overall well-being, lower life satisfaction, and more mental health problems. (Dogan, Totan, & Sapmaz, 2013) [3]. Factors that can influence affect balance include genetics, life events, personality, and coping styles (Yıldırım, Arslan, & Wong, 2022) [17]. Interventions that focus on increasing positive affect, reducing negative affect, and improving emotional regulation may be effective in reducing loneliness among adolescents (Goossens, 2020) [6]. Emotions in adolescents tend to be more frequent, intense, unstable, and less clear than emotions in adults, and emotional intensity and instability were linked to a variety of negative outcomes in adolescents, such as depression, anxiety, and poor academic performance. Emotional clarity might be a protective factor for adolescents, as it is linked to better social functioning, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping skills. (Bailen, Green, & Thompson, 2019) [2].

Mindfulness practices, which have been found to be effective in increasing positive affect and reducing negative affect, can be used as a tool to improve affect balance. (Economides, Martman, Bell, & Sanderson, 2018) [4].

**Aim:** The aim of the study is to find out the relationship between loneliness, affect balance, and mindfulness in young adults and whether the balance between positive and negative experiences and mindfulness impacts the level of loneliness in students.

## Objectives

1. To study the relationship between mindfulness and loneliness among young adults.
2. To study the relationship between mindfulness and affect balance among young adults.
3. To study the relationship between affect balance and loneliness among young adults.
4. To study the impact of mindfulness and affect balance on loneliness among young adults.

## Hypotheses

1. There will be a negative correlation between mindfulness and loneliness among young adults.
2. There will be a positive correlation between mindfulness and affect balance among young adults.
3. There will be a negative correlation between affect balance and loneliness among young adults.
4. There will be a significant impact of mindfulness and affect balance on loneliness among young adults.

## Method

**Participants:** The study's sample comprised 150 students aged between 17 and 25, conveniently sampled from a university setting. The participants were recruited through announcements in classes. The sample size was determined based on the availability and willingness of participants to participate in the study.

**Procedure:** Prior to their participation, informed consent was obtained from the participants. The participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the study, and they were assured that their participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were maintained throughout the study.

**Data Collection**

Data collection was carried out through online and offline methods using the scales included FFMQ by, UCLA loneliness scale by Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson (1978), and the scale of positive and negative schedule by Diener *et al.* (2010). The online data were collected through a google form consisting these scales.

**Measures**

- Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) by Bear (2006) was used to measure the participants' level of mindfulness. The FFMQ is a 15-item self-report measure that assesses five facets of mindfulness: observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging of inner experience, and non-reactivity to inner experience.
- The scale of Positive Affect Negative experiences (SPANE) by Biswas-Diener (2009) was used to measure the participants' affect balance. The SPANE is a 12-item self-report measure that assesses the balance of positive and negative affect.

- UCLA Loneliness Scale. The UCLA Loneliness scale Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson (1978), is a 20-item self-report measure of loneliness. Items are answered on a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of loneliness.

**Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using SPSS version 25 with appropriate statistical techniques, such as descriptive analysis, correlation, and regression analysis, to examine the relationships between mindfulness, affect balance, and loneliness.

**Results & Discussion**

**Table 1:** Descriptive values of loneliness, affect balance, and mindfulness among young adults

	Mean	SD
Loneliness	30.1200	13.10613
Affect balance	5.2533	8.71178
Mindfulness	44.3533	7.13545
n=150		

**Table 2:** Correlation values among loneliness, affect balance, and mindfulness

Variables	Loneliness	Positive affect	Negative affect	Affect balance
Observing	-.420**	.411**	-.296**	.388**
Describing	-.194*	.198*	-.103	.164*
Acting with awareness	-.480**	.253**	-.344**	.332**
Non-judging inner-experience	-.193*	.276**	-.074	.188*
Non-reactivity to inner experience	-.438**	.377**	-.454**	.461**
loneliness	1	-.422**	.345**	-.422**

\*\*p<.01  
\*p<.05

**Table 3:** Regression analysis of loneliness, affect balance, and mindfulness among young adults

Predictors	Coefficient	Standard error	t-value	p-value
Affect balance	-.348	.119	-2.920**	0.004
Mindfulness	-.776	.145	-5.432**	0.000
Constant	67.754	6.428	10.541**	0.000

R-square=0.322	
f=23.104**	0.000

\*\*p<.01  
\*p<.05

The findings suggest a significant negative correlation between loneliness and affect balance, as well as all dimensions of mindfulness measured, among college students. The results suggest a strong association between loneliness, affect balance, and mindfulness, with higher levels of mindfulness being associated with lower levels of loneliness and negative affect, and higher levels of positive affect. The results of the analysis indicate that mindfulness and affect balance can explain the changes in the loneliness level, and they were significantly effective factors in the regression pattern. The study found a statistically significant relationship between affect balance, mindfulness, and loneliness among college students. The R-squared value of .322 suggests that 32.2% of the variance in loneliness can be explained by affect balance and mindfulness. The coefficients for affect balance and mindfulness are statistically significant, with negative values indicating that loneliness decreases as affect balance and mindfulness

increase. Overall, the study highlights the importance of affect balance and mindfulness in mitigating loneliness among college students.

Previous research has suggested a negative association between loneliness and affect balance as well as mindfulness (Jin *et al.*, 2020<sup>[8]</sup>; Lindsay, 2019<sup>[10]</sup>; Zhang *et al.*, 2018<sup>[18]</sup>). The results of the present study suggest that there is a significant relationship between mindfulness, affect balance, and loneliness. Specifically, participants who scored higher on measures of mindfulness tended to have better emotional balance and lower levels of loneliness. This finding is consistent with previous research that has demonstrated a positive relationship between mindfulness and emotional well-being (Jin, Zhang, Wang, & An, 2020<sup>[8]</sup>; Galla *et al.*, 2020<sup>[5]</sup>; Tang, Tang, & Gross, 2019)<sup>[16]</sup>. Mindfulness has been shown to promote emotional regulation and self-awareness, which may in turn lead to improved affect balance and reduced feelings of loneliness (Lindsay *et al.*, 2019<sup>[10]</sup>; Jin *et al.*, 2020<sup>[8]</sup>; O'Day *et al.*, 2019)<sup>[13]</sup>. It is also important to consider the potential limitations of this study. The sample size of the study is small, and it is based on self-reported measures of mindfulness, affect balance, and loneliness. This study provides further evidence that mindfulness is associated with improved emotional well-being. The results suggest that interventions that aim to increase mindfulness may be beneficial for reducing loneliness and improving emotional balance. Loneliness can have a significant impact on emotional balance of individuals because it influences their

emotional regulation strategy which may overall affect the balance of emotions (Preece *et al.*, 2021)<sup>[15]</sup>.

### Conclusion

The aim of the study was to study the relationship between affect balance, mindfulness, and loneliness among young adults. The results indicate that higher levels of mindfulness and affect balance are associated with lower levels of loneliness among young adults. Increasing mindfulness and affect balance through targeted training may be effective in reducing loneliness and promoting overall well-being. These findings have important implications for mental health professionals working with young adults who experience loneliness.

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