

Mindless monitoring: When does attention help or hurt our emotional health

When it comes to anxiety and depression, a long-standing assumption is that there is something off about one's ability to effectively focus and attend to present moment situations. Prominent theories in clinical psychology propose that anxiety causes people to attend more to the uncertain future and depression causes people to dwell on past failures. To complement well-supported treatments, including cognitive behavioral therapy and pharmacotherapy, researchers have turned their efforts toward mindfulness and mind-body practices, which may offer treatment strategies that foster more adaptive, present-focused attention.

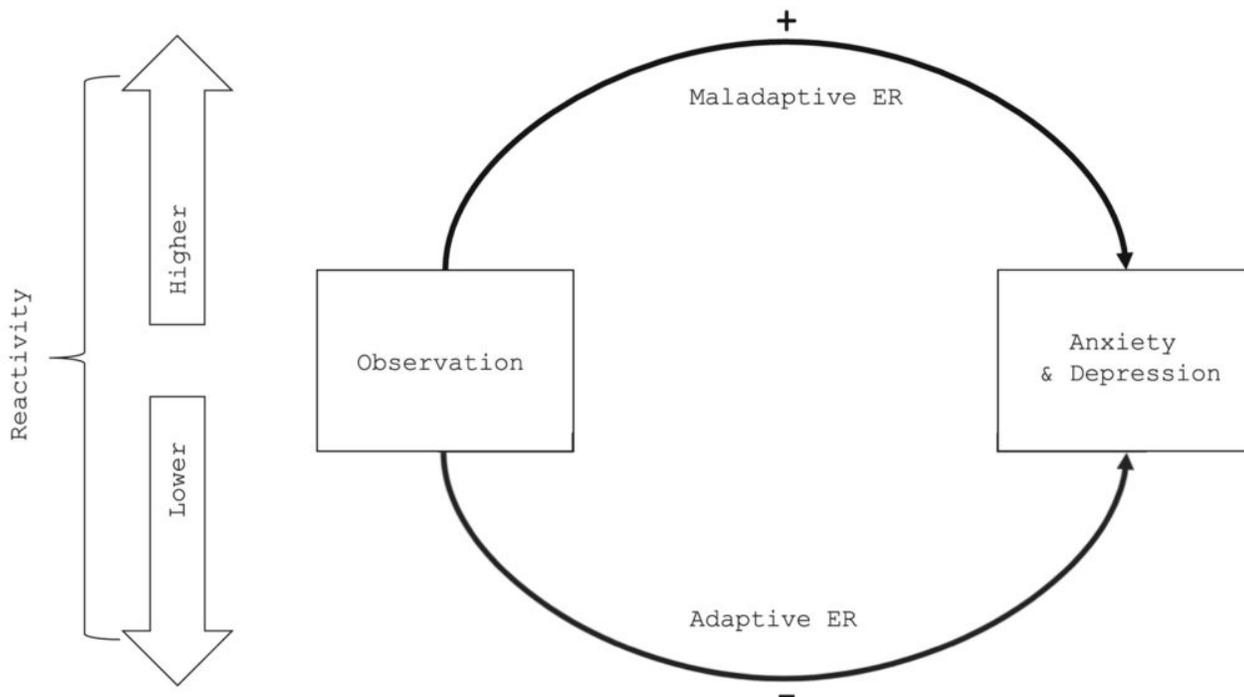


Fig. 1. Conditional Process Model of Mindfulness and Emotion Regulation.

Note: ER = Emotion Regulation.

The simple premise of relieving anxiety and depression by training people to attend to the present moment has undergone controversy. Prior studies have suggested that attention alone is unlikely to have therapeutic value. It also depends on *how* people pay attention to their day to day experiences. Synthesizing available scientific evidence, the conditional process model was proposed as a framework for understanding which circumstances and psychological process make attention helpful or harmful to our emotions (Fig. 1). Specifically, the conditional process model assumes that attention is associated with less anxiety and depression when people use attention

non-reactively. That is, when people observe their thoughts and experiences without feeling the need to engage with and respond to every aspect of their mental activity, present-moment attention can be a helpful way to combat future-oriented anxiety and past-oriented depression. Mindlessly engrossing oneself in future worries or past failures is a less effective way to use attention.

The conditional process model also posits that non-reactive attention will lead to less anxiety and depression by promoting better strategies to cope with emotions. By being non-reactive and more mindful, people have a better opportunity of getting enough distance from their stressors to reappraise and re-evaluate their situation, rather than try to rigidly control or suppress how they feel.

The current study provided support for the central tenets of this model. The results suggested that non-reactive observation was associated with less anxiety and depression, whereas reactive observation was related to greater psychological distress. Furthermore, the results indicated that someone with higher levels of non-reactivity was better able to use observation and attention to reappraise life stressors, which was associated with less depression and anxiety. Future research will be required to replicate this study to demonstrate that the results generalize across different samples and cultures. Nevertheless, the current study suggests that this model provides a useful framework for understanding how attention can be helpful or harmful to our mental wellbeing.

Joshua Curtiss

Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Boston University, USA

Publication

[The conditional process model of mindfulness and emotion regulation: An empirical test.](#)

Curtiss J, Klemanski DH, Andrews L, Ito M, Hofmann SG

J Affect Disord. 2017 Apr 1