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Stress and ADHD: Mindfulness-based approaches to stress management

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Abstract

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders and in many cases has been associated with increased levels of stress and difficulties in the emotional and cognitive regulation of individuals. Individuals with ADHD often show an increased sensitivity to stressful situations, which may negatively affect their concentration of attention, behaviour and overall functioning. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between stress and ADHD, with a particular focus on the role of mindfulness as a supportive intervention for stress management. To this end, a literature review of studies published between 2000 and 2025 was conducted. The findings of the review make it evident that stress may exacerbate executive dysfunction, emotional dysregulation and social difficulties in people with ADHD. At the same time, mindfulness or mindfulness-based approaches appear to help reduce stress, improve attentional control and enhance self-regulation. In conclusion, the literature highlights the role of mindfulness as a valuable complementary strategy for educational and therapeutic contexts, supporting individuals with ADHD in coping more effectively with stress and improving adaptive functioning.

Keywords: ADHD; Stress; Mindfulness; Emotional Regulation; Interventions

1. Introduction

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders and is characterized by persistent patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that significantly affect daily functioning and development (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Beyond its core symptoms, ADHD has also been associated with deficits in executive functions, such as working memory and cognitive flexibility, which can negatively impact academic performance, emotional regulation, and social adjustment (Angelopoulou, Karabatzaki & Drigas, 2021).

In recent years, research has increasingly turned to the association between ADHD and stress. Individuals with ADHD often report higher levels of perceived stress and greater difficulty in managing daily demands, in part due to deficits in self-regulation and executive function (Zografou & Drigas, 2022). Stress can further exacerbate attentional difficulties, emotional instability and behavioural dysfunction, creating a reciprocal cycle in which ADHD symptoms and stress reinforce each other (Seymour et al, 2014). Furthermore, atypical stress responses in ADHD have been linked to dysfunction of stress-related biological systems, including cortisol function (Isaksson et al., 2012).

Traditional approaches regarding the treatment of ADHD have focused primarily on medication to treat the underlying symptoms. Although these interventions are in many cases highly effective in terms of improving attention and reducing hyperactivity, they do not always address the broader emotional and psychological burden associated with stress and self-regulation difficulties.

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At the same time, non-pharmacological approaches are gaining ground as complementary strategies (Vlachou et al., 2022).

Among these approaches, mindfulness has emerged as a promising intervention in both clinical and educational contexts. Mindfulness refers to intentional, present-moment, and non-judgmental awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 2023). Research suggests that mindfulness-based interventions can improve attentional control, reduce perceived stress, and enhance self-regulation in individuals with ADHD (Mitchell et al., 2015; Moraiti et al., 2023). In this context, the present study examines the relationship between stress and ADHD, with a particular focus on the potential contribution of mindfulness to stress management and adaptive functioning.

Concluding, we emphasize the significance of all digital technologies in the field of education and in ADHD training, which is highly effective and productive and facilitates and improves assessment, intervention, and educational procedures via mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [24], various ICTs applications that are the main supporters of education [25-27], and AI, STEM, and ROBOTICS that raise educational procedures to new performance levers [28-33]. Additionally, the development and integration of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and the cultivation of emotional intelligence [34-37] accelerate and further improve educational practices and results, especially for children with ADHD, across the treatment domain and its practices, such as assessment and intervention.

2. Research Questions and Methodology

2.1. Research Questions

Stress is a natural physiological and psychological response to perceived challenges or threats. However, individuals with ADHD often experience stress more acutely and frequently than their typically developing peers.

This increased reactivity to stress is largely associated with difficulties in executive functioning and emotional self-regulation, which are common features of ADHD (Zografou & Drigas, 2022).

Research has shown that children and adults with ADHD may experience difficulties in coping with daily demands such as academic responsibilities, social interactions, and time management. These challenges can lead to repeated experiences of frustration, failure and emotional overload, which can further increase perceived levels of anxiety. As a result, anxiety and ADHD symptoms often interact in a reciprocal manner, where anxiety exacerbates attention difficulties and behavioural problems, while ADHD-related challenges contribute to higher exposure to anxiety (Seymour et al., 2014).

In addition, studies examining biological responses to stress suggest that individuals with ADHD may have dysfunction in stress-related systems, particularly the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. This dysregulation may affect cortisol responses and may contribute to atypical stress responses, including either increased sensitivity or decreased stress responsiveness (Isaksson et al., 2012).

2.2. Methodology

Stress can significantly affect cognitive function, particularly processes related to attention, working memory and decision-making. For people with ADHD, who already experience difficulties in executive functions, exposure to stress can further affect their cognitive performance and reduce their ability to concentrate on tasks (Aggelopoulou, Karabatzaki & Drigas, 2021).

On an emotional level, stress can intensify emotional dysregulation, which is often observed in individuals with ADHD. Emotional dysregulation may manifest through irritability, frustration, mood swings and difficulties in managing negative emotions. These emotional challenges can affect interpersonal relationships, academic performance and overall well-being.

In addition, chronic stress has been associated with increased levels of anxiety and psychological distress. When stress becomes persistent, it can contribute to a cycle in which emotional instability and cognitive overload amplify ADHD symptoms, making it harder for individuals to effectively manage daily challenges.

3. Theoretical Foundations of Stress, ADHD and Mindfulness

3.1. Social and developmental implications

In addition to cognitive and emotional effects, stress can also affect the social functioning and long-term development of individuals with ADHD. Children with ADHD often experience difficulties in relationships with peers, which can lead to social rejection or conflict with peers. These social challenges can become additional sources of stress and negatively impact self-esteem and emotional development (Hoza, 2007).

Similarly, adolescents and adults with ADHD may face challenges in academic and vocational settings. Difficulties with organization, time management, and sustained attention can lead to lower academic performance, occupational instability, and interpersonal difficulties (Kessler et al., 2005). Over time, these experiences may increase vulnerability to stress-related conditions such as anxiety or depression.

Given the complex interplay between ADHD symptoms and stress, it becomes important to explore supportive strategies that can help individuals develop more effective coping mechanisms and improve emotional regulation. In this context, non-pharmacological approaches such as mindfulness-based interventions have gained increasing attention for their potential role in reducing stress and enhancing self-regulation skills.

3.2. Mindfulness & ADHD

The application of mindfulness-based practices in the treatment of ADHD has garnered much attention in recent years as research continues to reveal its potential in terms of enhancing attentional focus, self-regulation, reducing anxiety, reducing depressive symptoms and supporting executive function (Moraiti, Fotoglou & Drigas, 2023). Mindfulness has been shown to be particularly valuable in individuals who experience difficulties with attention concentration, impulsivity and emotional control, all key features of ADHD. Although originally developed in the context of contemplative traditions, mindfulness has evolved into a secular, evidence-based intervention used in educational, clinical and therapeutic settings.

The rationale for applying mindfulness to ADHD lies in its impact on core cognitive and affective processes. Practicing and strengthening mindfulness engages brain networks involved in distraction, working memory, and inhibition, including the prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex, which are areas that are often underactive or ineffective in individuals with ADHD (Tang et al, 2015). In addition, mindfulness has been associated with reduced activity in the amygdala, which is an area involved in emotional reactivity and stress responses (Hölzel et al., 2011). For children with ADHD, who typically show increased sensitivity to stress and experience difficulties in self-regulation, mindfulness may therefore serve as a neurologically based intervention that enhances control mechanisms universally.

In behavioral terms, mindfulness encourages a pause between stimulus and response, allowing the child to observe impulses, thoughts, or feelings before acting on them. This moment of awareness is very important for reducing impulsive behavior and promoting purposeful, adaptive responses. Over time, repetitive mindfulness practice can support the internalization of self-control strategies, improving executive functions and promoting autonomy in children with ADHD (Zylowska et al., 2008).

Several mindfulness-based interventions have been adapted specifically for children and adolescents with ADHD. One such program is Mindful Awareness Practices (MAPs) for ADHD, developed by Lidia Zylowska and colleagues (2008). It is an intervention-based programme that includes age-appropriate mindfulness exercises such as focused breathing, body pressures, mindful walking and the use of external stimuli to support attention. The structure of the intervention is flexible, incorporating shorter duration exercises, movement-based techniques and parental involvement, all of which serve the attentional and behavioral needs of individuals with ADHD.

Other programs, such as MindUP (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015) and Inner Explorer, integrate mindfulness with social-emotional learning and neuroscience education, helping children to understand how the brain works and how their emotions are regulated while fostering awareness and compassion. These approaches often use short stories, games and sensory exercises, allowing for engagement without the requirement for stillness or prolonged focus.

Of course, parental involvement is a particularly important element in mindfulness education for children with ADHD. Studies show that when parents practice mindfulness with their children, not only do children's outcomes improve, but also the level of parental stress is reduced, leading to more flexible and consistent parenting (Van der Oord et al., 2012). This is particularly important in ADHD, where family dynamics and parental stress can exacerbate symptom expression.

3.3. Mindfulness-based interventions to reduce stress

Although research on mindfulness and ADHD is still ongoing, the results are particularly promising. A meta-analysis by Cairncross & Miller (2020) found that mindfulness interventions led to significant improvements in attentional focus, inhibition, and emotional regulation in children and adolescents with ADHD. The largest effects were observed in attentional regulation, followed by reductions in hyperactivity and improved emotional stability. These findings are consistent with various forms of intervention, including group-based, school-based, and family-based programs.

Furthermore, in a randomized controlled trial (RT), Van de Weijer-Bergsma et al. (2012) implemented an 8-week mindfulness program for children aged 8-12 years with ADHD and their parents. Results showed significant reductions in parent-rated ADHD symptoms, improvements in children's executive functioning, and reductions in parental overreactivity. Follow-up evaluations 8 weeks after the intervention showed sustained benefits, suggesting that mindfulness may have a lasting impact when incorporated into the child's family routine.

In parallel, neuroimaging studies support the effectiveness of mindfulness in modulating ADHD-related brain function. Functional MRIs have shown increased activation in the dorsal prefrontal cortex and decreased amygdala reactivity following mindfulness training in both adults and adolescents, suggesting enhanced cognitive control and emotion regulation (Tang et al., 2015; Hölzel et al., 2011).

In addition, research conducted in adults has shown that mindfulness interventions can reduce ADHD symptoms, anxiety and enhance concentration of attention (Moraiti, Fotoglou & Drigas, 2023). At the same time, ICTs can greatly assist in these interventions, as they offer engaging and interesting environments, which are often personalised (Mitsea & Drigas, 2021). The theory of the *'8 pillars of mindfulness* ' provides a comprehensive guide for the development of such programmes, while new technological tools, such as virtual reality, also open up new avenues in the implementation of mindfulness programmes (Drigas & Mitsea, 2021; Mitsea, Drigas & Skianis, 2023).

Importantly, these effects are not limited to clinically diagnosed populations. Mindfulness practices have been shown to benefit even children at risk for ADHD, including those with subclinical symptoms, vulnerability to stress, or a history of trauma (Meppelink et al., 2016). This makes mindfulness a promising prevention and early intervention tool, potentially reducing the severity or chronicity of ADHD symptoms over time.

Stress has been scientifically proven to be a factor that can significantly exacerbate ADHD symptoms, contributing to emotional dysregulation, cognitive overload, and behavioral escalation. Children with ADHD often have difficulty coping with everyday stressful situations and may lack the internal strategies to regulate stress responses. Mindfulness helps in this case by promoting physiological relaxation, improving mental awareness, and 2enhancing a sense of safety and grounding in the body (Kuyken et al., 2013).

Through mindfulness practice, children learn to recognize early signs of stress, namely body tensing, anxious thoughts, rapid breathing, and are encouraged to react with nonjudgmental awareness rather than automatic reactivity. Over time, this practice leads to greater emotional resilience, improved tolerance for frustration, and reduced reliance on external cues for calm. For children with ADHD, this in practice means fewer emotional outbursts, better peer interactions and more successful classroom participation (Bögels et al., 2014).

4. Conclusions

This literature review highlights the close and multidimensional relationship that exists between stress and ADHD. Current literature suggests that individuals with ADHD are often more vulnerable to stress due to persistent difficulties in executive functioning, emotional regulation and adaptive coping. Stress, in turn, appears to exacerbate problems in attention concentration, emotional instability, and social difficulties, creating a reciprocal pattern that can negatively impact daily functioning across developmental stages.

In this context, mindfulness emerges as a promising complementary approach for stress management in people with ADHD. The results of the review make it evident that mindfulness-based practices are likely to significantly improve symptoms, as they improve attentional focus, emotional reactivity and improve self-regulation. These results are particularly important for people with ADHD, in whose cases elevated levels of stress often compound both their cognitive and emotional challenges. Rather than focusing only on symptom reduction, mindfulness appears to support a broader adaptive functioning process by enhancing awareness, emotional balance, and coping skills.

Of course, the existing literature also points to some limitations. Research findings, although quite encouraging, are not always consistent across studies and differences in intervention design, duration, age groups and assessment methods make direct comparisons difficult. In addition, the long-term effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions in people with ADHD requires further investigation. Further systematic research is needed to clarify the conditions under which mindfulness can produce the strongest and most stable effects.

In conclusion, the existing literature supports the view that mindfulness can serve as a valuable supportive strategy in both educational and therapeutic contexts for people with ADHD. Its contribution seems particularly important in the area of stress management, where improved self-awareness and emotional regulation can enhance resilience and daily adjustment. Future research should continue to examine the long-term effects of mindfulness interventions and their integration into more holistic support frameworks for ADHD.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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