

Original Article (Quantified)

The role of psychological flexibility and mindfulness in predicting the level of tolerance for psychological distress in postgraduate students of Payam Noor University of Isfahan

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to investigate the role of psychological flexibility and mindfulness in predicting the level of psychological distress tolerance in Isfahan Payam Noor postgraduate students. The research method is applicable in terms of its purpose, quantitative in terms of its implementation method, and descriptive-correlational in terms of its nature and method. The statistical population of this study is all Isfahan Payam Noor postgraduate students in 2025, which according to university information is 7562. The statistical sample of the study consists of 365 people selected based on the Morgan table and determined by the available sampling method. The data collection tools in this study were Beck and Steer's Anxiety Questionnaire (1981), Cohen et al.'s Perceived Stress (1983), Beck's Depression (1966), Dennis and Vanderwal's Cognitive Flexibility (2010), and Bauer et al.'s Mindfulness (2006). SPSS26 software was used to analyze the data. The results showed that psychological flexibility and mindfulness are able to predict anxiety ($p < 0.05$), with a negative contribution of 16% for psychological flexibility and 27% for mindfulness. The results also showed that psychological flexibility and mindfulness are able to predict stress ($p < 0.05$), with a negative contribution of 26% for psychological flexibility and 40% for mindfulness. The results also showed that psychological flexibility and mindfulness are able to predict depression ($p < 0.05$), with the contribution of psychological flexibility being 25% negative and the contribution of mindfulness being 28% negative.

Keywords:

Psychological flexibility, mindfulness, anxiety, stress, depression

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Extended abstract

Introduction

With the increasing challenges of academic and social life, students, especially in graduate school, are faced with increasing levels of psychological stress, which can lead to the emergence or exacerbation of problems such as anxiety, stress, and depression. These psychological disturbances not only reduce the individual quality of life of students (Soheilipour et al., 2023), but also negatively affect their academic performance, career decisions, and interpersonal relationships. Since the postgraduate stage is a crucial stage in determining an individual's future career and social path, ignoring the psychological state of this group can have long-term consequences for the higher education system and society (Aghli & Shirvani Karr, 2024).

In today's complex and fast-paced world, psychological disorders such as anxiety, stress, and depression are known to be common phenomena that affect the mental health of individuals, especially students (Carozza et al., 2014). Psychological flexibility and mindfulness are recognized as two central constructs in positive psychology approaches and third-wave therapies (Ramaci et al., 2019). These two constructs not only play a role in coping with everyday stresses, but are also effective in empowering individuals to accept difficult realities and manage negative emotions (Hasani et al., 2024).

Psychological flexibility refers to the ability of an individual to accept difficult internal experiences without trying to control or avoid them, as well as to commit to purposeful actions in line with personal values. This concept, which has been considered more in the context of acceptance and commitment therapy, is associated with improving psychological adjustment and reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Beygi et al., 2023). Mindfulness allows an individual to respond to their experiences with active acceptance and observation, instead of impulsive and emotional reactions. Much evidence also indicates that mindfulness exercises lead to a reduction in anxiety, stress, and depression, and also increase self-awareness and emotion regulation (Ferreira et al., 2022). Currently, many psychological interventions in the country's educational system are designed based on traditional and general approaches, which sometimes do not have the necessary effectiveness without taking into account the individual and contextual characteristics of students. The lack of accurate knowledge of constructs such as mindfulness and psychological flexibility and their role in predicting an individual's response to stress and anxiety has led to the inability of preventive or therapeutic interventions to have a sustainable and effective performance. Therefore, the need for research that can examine the relationships between these variables in a predictive model is felt more than ever. Thus, this study seeks to answer the question: do psychological flexibility and mindfulness play a role in predicting the level of tolerance for psychological distress in Isfahan Payam Noor postgraduate students?

Theoretical Framework

Psychological Flexibility

Psychological flexibility is one of the key components in contemporary psychological theories, especially in the third wave of psychotherapy such as acceptance and commitment therapy. This construct is linked to an individual's ability to accept negative experiences and simultaneously move toward valuable goals and is considered an important factor in coping with anxiety, depression, and stress (Beygi et al., 2023; Doorley et al., 2020).

Mindfulness

Mindfulness means paying attention in a specific way. That is, attention and focus, which involve three elements: Mindfulness is an important underlying factor for achieving liberation, because it is an effective and powerful way to turn off and stop the pressures of the

world or one's own mental pressures. Being mindful means that one focuses their awareness from the past and future to the present (Marsh et al., 2018).

Zhang et al. (2025) investigated the effect of mindfulness on student depression: the mediating role of psychological resilience and the moderating role of gender. By examining 963 Chinese students from three universities in Jiangxi Province, they concluded that in the mediation effects model, the direct effect of mindfulness on levels of academic depression was significant. The indirect effect of mindfulness on college depression through psychological resilience was also significant. The interaction effect of mindfulness and gender in the mediation model with moderation was also significant.

Zhao et al. (2024) investigated the relationship between physical activity and depression in college students: The mediating role of mindfulness and meaning in life. By examining 954 people with the Physical Exercise Rating Scale, they concluded that: (1) physical exercise can significantly predict mindfulness and meaning in life and significantly negatively predict depression. (2) The direct effect of exercise on college students' depression is not significant, but its indirect effect is significant. It can predict college students' depression through the independent mediating effect of mindfulness and meaning in life, and it can also predict college students' depression through the mediating effect of mindfulness and meaning in life.

Research Methodology

The research method is applicable in terms of its purpose, quantitative in terms of its implementation method, and descriptive-correlational in terms of its nature and method. The statistical population of this study is all postgraduate students of Payam Noor University of Isfahan in 2025, which is 7562 according to university information. The statistical sample of the study consists of 365 people selected based on the Morgan table and using the available sampling method. The data collection tools in this study are Beck and Steyer's Anxiety Questionnaire (1981), Cohen et al.'s Perceived Stress (1983), Beck's Depression (1966), Dennis and Vanderwal's Cognitive Flexibility (2010), and Bauer et al.'s Mindfulness (2006).

Research Findings

SPSS26 software was used to analyze the data. The results showed that psychological flexibility and mindfulness are able to predict anxiety ($p < 0.05$), with the contribution of psychological flexibility being 16% negative and mindfulness being 27% negative. The results also showed that psychological flexibility and mindfulness are able to predict stress ($p < 0.05$), with the contribution of psychological flexibility being 26% negative and mindfulness being 40% negative. The results also showed that psychological flexibility and mindfulness are able to predict depression ($p < 0.05$), with the contribution of psychological flexibility being 25% negative and mindfulness being 28% negative.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the role of psychological flexibility and mindfulness in predicting the level of psychological distress tolerance in Isfahan Payam Noor postgraduate students. These results are consistent with the results of Hasani Jabdaragi et al. (2024), Rostami Varnosfaderani et al. (2024), Talebi (2021), Maarefvand & Shafiabady (2020), Safari Mousavi et al. (2019), Salibi & Zolfaghari Sharif (2018), Zhang et al. (2025), Zhao et al. (2024), Tingaz et al. (2023), An (2022), and Ozcan (2019). Talebi (2021) concluded in his research that psychological flexibility and spiritual health can negatively predict anxiety and depression caused by the coronavirus.

According to the results of the research, the following suggestion is made:



Given that psychological flexibility acts as a protective factor against anxiety and stress; therefore, flexible people have a greater ability to cope with life's problems and challenges and are less susceptible to these disorders, it is recommended that necessary training be provided in this field.