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Abstract

Purpose: The COVID-19 pandemic has forced organisations to change the way they work to maintain viability, even though change is not always successfully implemented. Multiple scholars have identified employees' readiness for change as an important factor of successful organisational change, but research focused on psychological factors that facilitate change readiness is scarce. The aim of the present study was to investigate whether employee dispositional mindfulness contributes to readiness for change.

Method: Employees (n = 301) from various industries in New Zealand participated in an online survey shortly after the local COVID-19 lockdown ended. The employees' levels of mindfulness, readiness for change, well-being, and distress were assessed using well-validated psychometric scales. Multiple regression analyses tested the effect of mindfulness on readiness for change, with well-being and distress as moderating variables.

Findings: The results show that the effect of mindfulness on readiness for change is moderated by both well-being and distress. Mindfulness has a positive, significant effect on readiness for change when levels of well-being are high and levels of distress are low.

Originality: This study provides empirical evidence that dispositional mindfulness may facilitate the employees' readiness for change, but only when levels of well-being are high and distress are low.

Practical implications: These findings have important implications for organisations who aim to promote readiness for change in their employees. Even though mindfulness has been shown to be beneficial, organisations also have to consider the mental states of their employees when managing change.

Key words: Readiness for change; mindfulness, well-being, distress, organisational change

Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic has not only caused many changes in the private life of many individuals, but it also forced organisations to change the way they operate (World Health Organization, 2020). Strict hygienic rules have been put in place, and social distancing requirements have changed the way teams work together and how business is conducted with clients. Many of these changes include remote working and increased usage or implementation of novel technology and software (Semple and Cherrie, 2020). In order to ensure that organisations can operate as effectively as possible under these circumstances, it is necessary that all employees commit to the changes they face in their jobs.

Even though organisations have to deal with change frequently, a high number of change initiatives fail (Burnes, 2011), very often due to employee resistance to change (Amarantou *et al*., 2018). The challenge of successful change raises the question of how organisations can manage and facilitate organisational change more effectively. Management and business scholars have dedicated a lot of attention to processes, strategy and context-related factors that are relevant for organisational change (Bouckenooghe *et al*., 2009; Holt *et al*., 2007; Straatmann *et al*., 2016), but a major contributor to the success of change are the change recipients' reactions, beliefs, and attitude towards the change (Oreg *et al*., 2011), which indicate employee readiness for change (Bouckenooghe, 2010). Employee resistance to change can therefore be targeted by working on employee attitudes and perceptions (Amarantou *et al*., 2018) and thus creating readiness for change.

Employee readiness for change reflects the recipients' reactions and beliefs on an affective, behavioural and cognitive level and has been identified as an important component of successful organisational change (Armenakis, *et al*., 2007; Bouckenooghe, 2010; Bouckenooghe *et al*., 2009; Holt *et al*., 2007). The anticipated benefits of a change project for instance, are associated with change-supportive behaviour (Kim *et al*., 2011). While the

affective component refers to the change recipient's emotions regarding change, the behavioral component captures the employee's intentions to support and commit to the change. The cognitive component encompasses the employee's beliefs regarding the need and usefulness of change, e.g. whether the employee thinks that the change will benefit the organisation (Bouckenooghe, 2010; Bouckenooghe *et al*., 2009). Higher levels of change readiness are negatively related to intentions to leave the organisation and absenteeism (Chênevert *et al*., 2019), which ensures that organisations can retain the human capital they need to navigate through change. Moreover, employee readiness for change is associated with better organisational performance (Imam *et al*., 2013), which contributes to organisational outputs in times of change. Increasing employee readiness for change is therefore invaluable for successful organisational change. A promising construct that might potentially enhance employee change readiness and which has only received a minimal amount of attention is mindfulness (Gärtner, 2013; Gondo *et al*., 2013).

Mindfulness reflects a natural and adaptive capacity of human awareness and attention and its cultivation was originally emphasised in Buddhism and other Eastern contemplative traditions (Kang and Whittingham, 2010). Drawing from Eastern traditions, mindfulness involves a non-reactive and non-evaluative awareness of the present moment, observing and paying attention to stimuli and inner reactions without assigning labels to them (Good *et al*., 2016). Another implication of mindfulness is that one is open and accepting of all thoughts, feelings and sensations one comes across. Being accepting of one's experiences may result in less discomfort when experiencing unpleasant emotions and increases one's level of tolerance (Bishop *et al*., 2004). A very important mechanism of mindfulness is the one of reperceiving, which is the "capacity to dispassionately observe or witness the contents of one's consciousness" (Shapiro *et al*., 2006, p. 381). Reperceiving enables individuals to be more objective, non-reactive, and observational regarding their feelings, thoughts, and experiences,

allowing them to respond to a situation mindfully and not automatically. This ability to step back from feelings and thoughts gives one more freedom to act, which works in favour of better self-regulation and more flexible behaviour (Shapiro *et al*., 2006). Self-regulation refers to processes that involve the adjustment of an individual's affective, behavioural, and cognitive responses in order to achieve goals (Boekaerts *et al*., 2005). Considering that readiness for change also involves affective, behavioural and cognitive components, it becomes clear that effective self-regulation may be a key element in successfully dealing with change. Mindfulness promotes self-regulatory behaviour (Brown and Ryan, 2003) and research has shown that mindfulness can be developed and enhanced through interventions (Krägeloh *et al*., 2019), which is of value to organisations who aim to prepare employees for change. Mindfulness thus presents a capacity that deserves further attention in the process of promoting organisational change.

Mindfulness has already been shown to be a useful psychological resource in workplace settings. For instance, Dane and Brummel (2014) investigated the impact of being mindful in a dynamic work environment and found that being present in the moment and being able to pay full attention to various stimuli and events was positively related to performance at work. Moreover, mindfulness is also positively associated with creativity, affective commitment, job satisfaction and engagement (Andrews *et al*., 2014; Byrne and Thatchenkery, 2019; Malinowski and Lim, 2015; Zivnuska *et al.*, 2016). Zivnuska *et al*. (2016) argue that mindfulness enables employees to recognise and respond to various stimuli and situations more appropriately and it provides access to other psychological resources, which may work in favour of well-being and positive job-related attitudes. By the same token, mindfulness has been found to be negatively related to turnover intentions (Andrews *et al*., 2014; Dane and Brummel, 2014; Zivnuska *et al*., 2016) and counterproductive behaviour (Krishnakumar and Robinson, 2015; Schwager *et al*., 2016).

In addition to the above, mindfulness may also improve change readiness in several ways. Firstly, mindfulness involves the reduction of automatic responses to external and internal stimuli, allowing individuals to observe their reactions, feelings and mental processes, and evaluate whether they are subject to bias and inaccuracy from previous experience or attitudes (Gärtner, 2013, Good *et al*., 2016). Mindful employees are therefore expected to exhibit a greater level of flexibility in their attitudes and behaviour than less mindful employees, who react and behave as a result of automaticity (Gärtner, 2013; Shapiro *et al*., 2006). This flexibility may enable them to better deal with a changing world at all levels.

Secondly, in order to efficiently draw from psychological resources to deal with change and self-regulate accordingly, employees need to be aware of situations that require them to adjust their behaviour and be able to detect thinking patterns that do not contribute to the achievement of goals and targets (Avey *et al.*, 2008). Those with a higher level of mindfulness may be better able to identify situations that require adjustment of behaviour. Moreover, they may also be able to identify counterproductive thinking patterns and therefore show greater readiness for change through better self-regulation (Avey, *et al*., 2008).

Thirdly, employees who face change often experience fear and stress (Mack *et al*., 1998; Mosadeghrad and Ansarian, 2014). Higher mindfulness entails being nonjudgmental and nonreactional to inner experiences. Even though employees might not like the change and experience some negative feelings, they might still be able to see the necessity of this change and be more willing to commit (Gärtner, 2013). Taking all points mentioned into account, mindfulness, operationalised as a construct that characterises individuals as being observational, descriptive, nonjudgmental, nonreactional and aware of their feelings, thoughts and actions, has the potential to enhance readiness for change.

While mindfulness has been shown to be effective regarding desirable organisational outcomes, there remain concerns around the ethics of using mindfulness as a tool to optimise

business operations (Hülsheger, 2015). Due to its increased popularity and media coverage, mindfulness is now often seen as a quick fix to various health and performance-related issues in organisations (Hyland, 2015). Even though mindfulness may have shown benefits for employees and organisations, there is the risk that mindfulness is regarded as a solution for all problems without considering other organisational and individual factors that may need to be addressed more specifically (Hülsheger, 2015). This point also raises the question of which factors influence whether mindfulness has a positive effect on relevant outcome variables such as readiness for change.

One of these factors is likely to be employees' current state of mental health. Dealing with changes at work is a task that may require self-regulation (Kuntz and Gomes, 2012; Wood, 2005). Research indicates that each person's self-regulation resources are limited (Chan and Wan, 2012) and that distress and well-being may influence the availability of these resources. Distress is thought to interfere with self-regulation because affect regulation is prioritised over other forms of self-regulation (Baumeister *et al.*, 2007). On the other hand, well-being may promote self-regulatory behaviour and thereby increase readiness for change, because positive affect contributes to greater flexibility in cognitive and behavioural processes and therefore facilitates self-regulation (Aspinwall, 1998). Mindfulness is known to support self-regulation (Brown and Ryan, 2003) and the mental state of employees may therefore be a factor that influences the usefulness of mindfulness in an organisational context. This research aims to address the question of whether employee mindfulness has a positive impact on readiness for change while controlling for their levels of distress and well-being.

Method

Participants

Cross-sectional data were collected online through a survey panel. Participants were 301 employees from New Zealand with a mean age of 40.48 (*SD*=12.53) years who had worked on

average for 6.93 (*SD*=7.06) years in their current job. One hundred and forty-nine (49.5%) participants were male and 152 (50.5%) participants were female. A large majority of participants were NZ European (68.1%), the rest of the sample indicated Asian (13.6%), Māori (7%), Pasifika (1.7%), or Other (9.6%) as their ethnicity. Participants were employed in Healthcare (15%), Education (12.6%), Hospitality (9.3%), Building/Construction (8.3%), Financial/Business Services (6%), Agriculture (5.6%), Retail (5.3%), Manufacturing (4.7%), IT (4.3%), Government (4%), or other fields (24.9%), such as law, transportation, security, media, or automotive. Most participants (71.8%) were able to work at their normal workplace, the rest of the sample was either switching between office work and remote work or were working remotely completely.

Procedure

The authors' University ethics committee granted permission to conduct this study. An online survey was compiled in Qualtrics and was sent to full-time working employees in New Zealand through a survey panel during level 2 of New Zealand's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, where most businesses could operate, but with restrictions in place, such as social distancing and contact tracing measures (New Zealand Government, 2020). Prior to the start of the survey informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were informed about the aim of this research and that participation was fully anonymous and voluntary.

Measures

The following self-report measures were used to assess mindfulness, readiness for change, well-being, and distress.

Mindfulness. The Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ; Baer *et al*., 2006) was used to assess mindfulness. The measure consists of 39 items capturing the five mindfulness facets observe, describe, acting with awareness, nonjudge, and nonreact, which can be rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never or very rarely true; 5 = very often or always true). Items were

summed to get an overall scale score and higher scores indicate higher levels of mindfulness. The measure showed excellent reliability in the present study (α=.88).

Readiness for change. This construct was assessed using the readiness for change scale from the Organizational Change Questionnaire–Climate of Change, Processes, and Readiness (OCQ-P, C, R; Bouckenooghe *et al*., 2009). This scale consists of 9 items assessing affective, cognitive, and intentional facets of change readiness and can be rated on a 5-Point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Questionnaire instructions were tailored to instruct participants to consider changes in their job due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The wording of items has not been changed. All items were summed to yield an overall change readiness score with higher scores indicating a higher readiness for change. The scale exhibited good reliability in the present study (α=.81).

Well-being. The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS; Tennant *et al*., 2007) was used to measure well-being. The measure incorporates 14 items that can be rated on a 5-Point Likert scale (1 = none of the time; 5 = all of the time). Item scores were summed and higher scores indicate a higher level of well-being. The WEMWBS was found to be very reliable in the present study (α=.93).

Distress. The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995) was used to assess distress. The scale consists of 21 items, which can be rated on a rating scale with 4 categories (1 = never, 4 = almost always). All items were summed to get an overall scale score. The scale was found to be very reliable in this study (α = .95).

Data Analyses

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS v26. The dataset was screened for participants who completed the survey too quickly. All cases with a completion time faster than 50% of the median time (Greszki *et al*., 2014) were removed from the dataset to enhance quality of responses, resulting in a final dataset with 256 cases. All variables were acceptable with regards

to normal distribution, and skewness and kurtosis did not exceed the recommended conservative range of +/-1 (Muthén and Kaplan, 1985).

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine relationships between study variables. The PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2017) was used to analyse the effect of mindfulness on readiness for change while considering well-being and distress as moderators respectively. For this purpose two multiple regression models were run. Model 1 used mindfulness, well-being and their interaction term as predictor variables, model 2 used mindfulness, distress, and their interaction term as predictor variables for readiness for change. In order to visualise and interpret findings, significant interactions were deconstructed into "high" (+1SD) and "low" (-1SD) levels of centred scores from continuous predictors to create readiness for change scores.

Results

Pearson correlations (see Table 1) revealed a positive relationship between mindfulness and readiness for change r=.25, p<.01 and between mindfulness and well-being r=.49, p<.01. Mindfulness and distress were negatively correlated r=-.50, p<.01. Readiness for change is positively related to well-being r=-.36, p<.01 and negatively related to distress r=-.23, p<.01.

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Two multiple regressions were run to analyse the impact of mindfulness on change readiness while considering a moderating effect of well-being and distress. Figures 1 and 2 visualise the effects that were found. A statistically significant interaction was found between mindfulness and well-being $F(3,252)=15.23$, p<.001, R^2=.15. To aid in interpretation, the interaction terms are visualised in Figure 1 using low, mean and high levels of well-being. When well-being is

low, visualised as the lower dashed line, there is no effect of mindfulness on readiness for change, *b*= -.01, 95% CI [-.056; .044], *t*=-0.25, *p*=.80. At mean levels of well-being, visualised as the center line, the effect of mindfulness on readiness for change is also not significant *b*=.03, 95% CI [-.011; .065], *t*=1.41, *p*=.16. When levels of well-being are high, visualised as the upper dashed line, mindfulness has a positive, significant effect on readiness for change *b*=.06, 95% CI [.013; .108], *t*=2.50, *p*<.05.

A statistically significant interaction was also found between mindfulness and distress $F(3,252)=10.15$, $p<.001$; $R^2=.11$.This interaction is visualised in Figure 2. It shows that when levels of distress are low, shown as the upper dashed line, mindfulness has a positive, significant effect on readiness for change *b*=.09, 95% CI [.045; .141], *t*=3.81, *p*<.001. At mean levels of distress, visualised as the center line, mindfulness also has a positive, significant effect on readiness for change *b*=.04, 95% CI [.003; .081], *t*=2.04, *p*<.05. But when levels of distress are high, visualised as the lower dashed line, mindfulness does not have a significant effect on readiness for change anymore *b*= -.01, 95% CI [-.069; .049], *t*= -0.34, *p*=.74.

Overall, our results indicate that a significant moderating effect is evident in both regression models. Higher levels of mindfulness are positively associated with readiness for change, but only when well-being levels are high and distress levels are low. This shows that the mental health of employees is just as important as their level of mindfulness when it comes to showing readiness for change.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing many organisations to change the way they operate, and consequently a large number of employees face changes in their jobs. It is important that employees commit to those changes and show readiness for change, which is a contributor to successful organisational change (Oreg *et al.*, 2011). The aim of the present study was to investigate to what extent the psychological construct of mindfulness may help to facilitate the

employees' readiness for change.

It was found that the employees' level of well-being and distress acted as moderators in the relationship between mindfulness and readiness for change. Only when levels of well-being were high, or levels of distress were low, did mindfulness have a positive effect on readiness for change. While mindfulness promotes self-regulation (Brown and Ryan, 2003) and dealing with organisational change may require self-regulation (Kuntz and Gomes, 2012; Wood, 2005), it seems that the employees' mental state also has an impact on the effectiveness of mindfulness on change readiness.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, there is no research that investigated how well-being and distress may moderate effects of mindfulness in the context of organisational change. However, there are findings from organisational psychology, which highlight that stress may compromise self-regulation and employee performance. For instance, Chan and Wan (2012) found that employees who experience high stress suffer from higher levels of fatigue and show worse performance in tasks that require self-regulation. With respect to the present research, it is therefore possible that even mindful employees working under pressure may experience a higher degree of distress and feel too exhausted and fatigued to successfully engage in self-regulatory behaviour and thus do not show higher readiness for change. Furthermore, organisational stressors could be appraised as either a challenge or a threat. While challenge appraisal leads to more engagement, threat appraisal leads to self-regulation depletion (Mitchell *et al*., 2019). It is plausible that highly mindful employees who do not suffer from distress and feel mentally well are more likely to regard organisational change as a challenge and can exercise adequate self-regulatory behaviour. Employees with higher levels of mindfulness but also higher levels of distress might experience organisational change as more threatening, which depletes their capacity for self-regulation.

Implications

This study's findings have several implications for organisations, change practitioners and researchers who aim to use mindfulness for managing organisational change. Firstly, this research adds to the discussion around the ethics of mindfulness interventions in organisations (Hülsheger, 2015; Hyland, 2015). Mindfulness interventions should not be regarded as a tool that can address all problems at once. While mindfulness may promote the readiness for change of employees whose well-being levels are not compromised, it might not be helpful to address the change readiness of employees with mindfulness who experience distress. It would be a priority to address the distress levels of these employees first before expecting them to be able to fully commit to change. For instance, it was shown that supervisor support could replenish depleted resources of stressed employees (Chan and Wan, 2012). This finding also aligns with the body of literature in change management, which suggests that leadership and supervisor support are important predictors of readiness for change (Kirrane *et al*., 2016; Straatmann *et al*., 2016).

Our findings also highlight the importance of controlling for individual differences when conducting future studies analysing the impact of mindfulness on change readiness, especially when aiming to use interventions. Previous work has shown that individuals' dispositional mindfulness and well-being levels may impact the effectiveness of a mindfulness-based intervention (Roemer *et al*., 2020) and the present study indicates that individual levels of well-being also influence change readiness. Researchers should keep this in mind when designing and evaluating interventions, as they may not work for everyone. Organisations often prefer to apply short mindfulness training over long mindfulness training sessions because it is more practical in terms of cost and time (Jamieson and Tuckey, 2017). While short interventions may work with healthy participants, participants that experience low levels of well-being and high levels of distress may possibly need longer interventions (Roemer *et al.*, 2020).

The findings of this study have also important implications for society as a whole. Change is an inevitable feature of our daily lives rather than an exception (Mack *et al*., 1998) and continuous change is a necessity for many organisations to survive (Burnes, 2011). Examples of such change include but are not limited to advances in technology, globalisation, climate change, and/or responding to events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This requires individuals representing the society to be mindful and show awareness of situations where change is needed while being accepting of the fact that change could sometimes be the most viable option, even though it might not be easy or pleasant

Limitations and directions for future research

This study has a few limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, this was a cross-sectional study and results are therefore correlational in nature. This study should therefore be replicated with two assessment points a few weeks apart or using an experimental design to be able to draw causal conclusions. Considering this limitation, it may be valuable to assess the effectiveness of mindfulness training in an organisation when managing change. This would be another approach that allows drawing causal conclusions.

Secondly, it was found that well-being and distress acted as moderating variables and thus influence the effectiveness of mindfulness on readiness for change. Future research could assess and identify more variables that may determine the effectiveness of mindfulness with regards to readiness for change. It is possible that other individual factors concerned with health, personality or psychological resources, such resilience and optimism, may also play a significant role with respect to one's readiness for change.

Thirdly, the present sample consisted of employees from various organisations and industries and it is not known whether some of those participants were working for the same organisation. Collecting data from multiple organisations with multiple of their employees would allow the application of stronger statistical approaches such as multilevel modelling to

account for variance that occurs due to the fact that certain employees belong to the same organisation. Finally yet importantly, the current study was run during a global pandemic and the change readiness measure referred to changed due to COVID-19. This is an exceptional, unprecedented situation and results may not be generalisable to other forms of organisational change in normal circumstances. This, however, has an exceptional advantage as findings of this study conducted during pandemics are likely applicable in various emergency conditions that may occur in the future without warning, which is a manifestation of impermanence - a default condition of our existence.

Conclusion

This study provided preliminary empirical evidence that mindfulness may be beneficial with regards to the readiness for change of employees. Mindfulness might therefore be a possible tool to help employees dealing with organisational change. While this is an important finding for organisations and individuals initiating an adaptive change, the study also highlights the importance of considering employees' current mental health when aiming to use mindfulness for managing change. Employees may struggle to deal with change due to reduced capacity for self-regulation when they experience distress and compromised well-being. It is therefore also important to address mental health issues to assist employees with the challenge of change.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Author contributions: AR designed the study, collected data, conducted the data analyses and wrote the manuscript. AS collaborated with designing the study, advised on statistical analyses and edited the manuscript. OM collaborated with designing the study, advised on statistical analyses and edited the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

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Data availability statement:

Participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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Table

Table 1

Pearson correlation matrix between the FFMQ total score (mindfulness), the readiness for change scale total score, the WEMWBS total score (well-being), and the DASS-21 total score (distress).

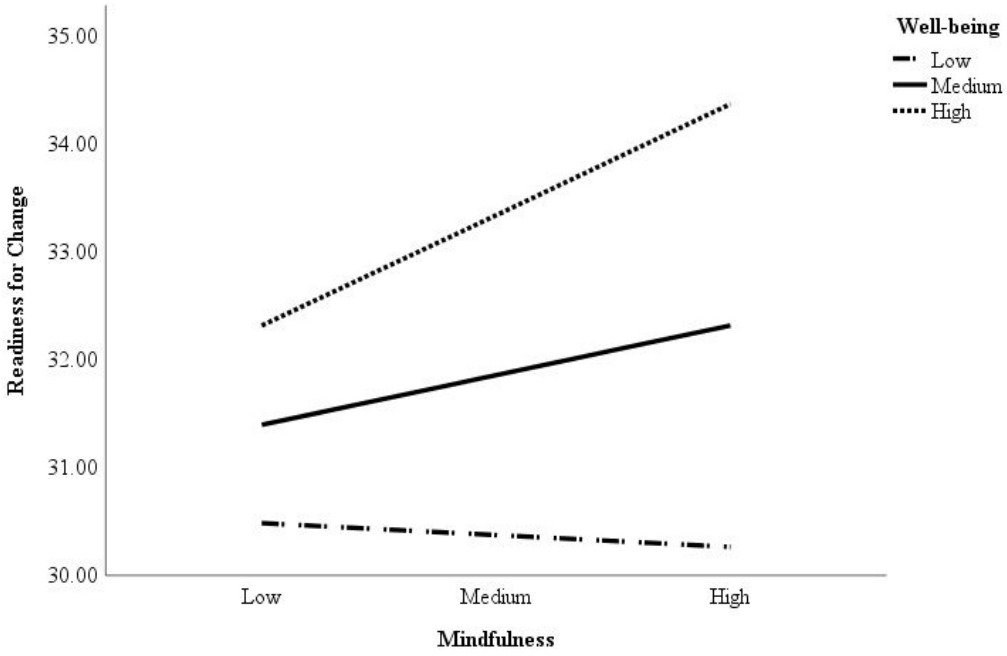
	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Mindfulness	127.58	16.94	(.88)			
2. Readiness for change	32.12	4.90	.25**	(.81)		
3. Well-being	48.95	9.21	.49**	.36**	(.93)	
4. Distress	35.13	11.96	-.50**	-.23**	-.57**	(.95)

Note: *M*=Mean; *SD*=Standard deviation. Cronbach's alpha is presented in parentheses. **$p<.01$

Figures

Figure 1

Readiness for change on mindfulness by well-being. Low and high levels of continuous predictors equal -/+ 1SD of centred scores.



Figures

Figure 2

Readiness for change on mindfulness by distress. Low and high levels of continuous predictors equal -/+ 1SD of centred scores.