



# A Model of Connections Between Positive Characteristics: Emotional Intelligence Links Mindfulness to Positive Characteristics with Emotion Elements

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## Abstract

This research examined a model positing that mindfulness is a foundation for the development of emotional intelligence and other positive characteristics with emotional elements; these characteristics include self-compassion, gratitude, empathy, resilience, and forgiveness. The model further postulates that adaptive emotional processing, as operationalised by emotional intelligence, may connect mindfulness to positive characteristics with emotion elements. Participants completed trait-level measures of mindfulness, emotional intelligence, self-compassion, gratitude, empathy, resilience, and forgiveness. Greater trait mindfulness was significantly associated with higher levels of emotional intelligence as well as more compassion, gratitude, resilience, and forgiveness. Higher levels of emotional intelligence were significantly associated with more self-compassion, gratitude, empathy, resilience, and forgiveness. Emotional intelligence significantly mediated, or connected, the relationship of mindfulness with gratitude, empathy, resilience, and forgiveness. The results overall support a theoretical model that proposes that mindfulness and emotional intelligence may be foundational for the development of positive characteristics with emotion elements.

**Keywords** Emotional intelligence · Empathy · Forgiveness · Gratitude · Mindfulness · Resilience · Self-compassion

Positive psychology focuses on human strengths and characteristics (Seligman & Pawelski, 2003). As Lomas et al. (2021) pointed out, fields such as positive psychology evolve through progressive waves of theoretical development, with a third wave of positive psychology emerging. According to Lomas et al. (2021), the first wave of development included identifying positive phenomena, including emotion-related

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characteristics. According to Lomas et al. (2021), the second wave of development included identifying and studying the interplay between positive phenomena and negative phenomena, such as poor mental health. The third emerging wave of development in positive psychology involves broadening of scope of the field and increasing complexity in theory and research relating to positive characteristics, their contexts, and their interplay (Lomas et al., 2021). The theoretical model proposed and tested in the present study may represent a direction in this third wave of theoretical development.

The proposed theoretical model investigated in the present study posits that mindfulness is a foundation for the development of emotional intelligence and other positive characteristics with emotional elements, and further proposes that the positive characteristic of emotional intelligence may link mindfulness with other emotion-related positive characteristics. An empirical model-testing study examined the connections between mindfulness and selected emotion-related characteristics, namely emotional intelligence, self-compassion, gratitude, empathy, resilience, and forgiveness. As emotional intelligence was expected to link mindfulness with the other selected positive characteristics, the associations between emotional intelligence and these other characteristics were examined. Finally, the mediating function of emotional intelligence in the connection between mindfulness and the selected emotion-related characteristics was tested.

Mindfulness involves awareness of experiences in an open and non-judgemental manner; this awareness includes focus on inner experiences, such as emotions (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Mindfulness can be a momentary state as well as a dispositional characteristic or trait (Bravo et al., 2018). Trait mindfulness is significantly connected to emotion. For example, in a meta-analysis of the results of 15 studies with over 4000 participants, Giluk (2009) found that higher levels of trait mindfulness were significantly associated with higher levels of positive affect, at  $r=0.34$ , and with lower levels of negative affect, at  $r=-0.39$ . An emotion processing element of emotion, emotional intelligence, is also associated with mindfulness. Emotional intelligence consists of adaptive emotional functioning, which includes accurate perception of emotion, drawing on emotion to assist decision-making, understanding the development of emotions, and regulating emotion (Mayer et al., 2016). Emotional intelligence can be both a trait and an underlying ability (O'Connor et al., 2019). In a meta-analysis of 19 samples, including over 4700 participants, Miao et al. (2018) found that higher levels of mindfulness were associated with greater emotional intelligence at  $r=0.41$ .

As well as being associated with affect and emotional intelligence, mindfulness is connected to a variety of beneficial characteristics and outcomes. For example, greater mindfulness is related to more autonomous motivation (Donald et al., 2020), healthy exercise, nutrition, and sleep-related behaviours (Sala et al., 2020), and self-compassion (Golden et al., 2021). We propose that adaptive emotional processes encapsulated by emotional intelligence may connect mindfulness with other beneficial characteristics and outcomes.

The proposed connecting, or mediating, function of emotional intelligence may be especially strong for characteristics with emotional elements, such as self-compassion. Neff (2003) described self-compassion as consisting of treating

oneself with kindness through an emotionally positive self-attitude. The emotion perception, understanding, and regulation comprising emotional intelligence may facilitate such a positive self-attitude. In support of the proposition that emotional intelligence competencies are connected to self-compassion, Di Fabio and Saklofske (2021) found strong associations between greater emotional intelligence and more self-compassion.

A number of other beneficial characteristics have emotion elements. These characteristics include gratitude, empathy, resilience, and forgiveness. Gratitude involves appreciation and thankfulness for aspects of one's life, with a positive affective response coupled to these cognitions (Emmons & McCullough, 2004). Across studies, both mindfulness and emotional intelligence have been found to be associated with gratitude (Schutte et al., 2021). Using meta-analytic structural equation modelling, Schutte et al. (2021) found evidence that emotional intelligence may connect mindfulness with gratitude. However, to date, no empirical studies have directly examined this mediating function of emotional intelligence.

Empathy involves viewing the world from another person's perspective and includes an emotional reaction to that perspective (Davis, 1983). Herrman et al. (2011) described resilience as positive adaptation, including through effective emotional regulation, to challenging circumstances. Forgiveness involves a change in motivation, cognitions, affect, and behaviour towards another who is perceived to have caused harm or committed a transgression (McCullough, 2001). For some of these characteristics, there is evidence for links with mindfulness, such as associations between greater mindfulness and more empathic perspective taking (Cooper et al., 2020), mindfulness and greater resilience (Anasori et al., 2020), and mindfulness and forgiveness (Karremans et al., 2020). Similarly, there is some evidence for links between emotional intelligence and empathy (Hajibabae et al., 2018), emotional intelligence and resilience (Sarrionandia et al., 2018), and emotional intelligence and forgiveness (Carvalho et al., 2010).

Self-compassion, gratitude, empathy, resilience, and forgiveness all have emotion elements. Thus, links between mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and these characteristics may be in part due to emotion processing facilitation qualities of mindfulness and emotional intelligence.

## Hypotheses

The aim of the present research was to examine a model proposing that adaptive emotional processes encapsulated by emotional intelligence may connect mindfulness with other beneficial characteristics and outcomes with emotion elements. These other characteristics and outcomes included self-compassion, gratitude, empathy, resilience, and forgiveness. This aim resulted in the hypotheses that

- 1) Greater trait mindfulness is associated with higher levels of emotional intelligence.

- 2) Greater trait mindfulness is associated with higher levels of (a) self-compassion, (b) gratitude, (c) empathy, (d) resilience, and (e) forgiveness.
- 3) Higher levels of emotional intelligence are associated with greater (a) self-compassion, (b) gratitude, (c) empathy, (d) resilience, and (e) forgiveness.
- 4) Emotional intelligence mediates or connects the association between mindfulness and (a) self-compassion, (b) gratitude, (c) empathy, (d) resilience, and (e) forgiveness.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

The study received approval from the institutional review board, and participants provided informed consent. A convenience sample of 136 mature-aged Australian students participated in the study. They were recruited from a site that listed a number of possible studies in which students could participate out of interest and allowing earning of points towards class credit. The study was presented with the innocuous title of ‘Your View of Yourself’ to avoid experimenter demand effects.

The number of participants provided power at 0.90, with alpha at 0.05, for mediation-based regression analyses with three variables. The mean age of participants was 33.71 ( $SD=11.33$ ). Participants included 107 women and 25 men, with the remainder not indicating gender. Participants completed measures on line using the Qualtrics research platform.

### Measures

The following measures were presented randomly to participants.

#### Mindfulness

The Short Freiburg Mindfulness Scale (Kohls et al., 2009; Walach et al., 2006) assesses trait-level mindfulness (Kohls et al., 2009; Walach et al., 2006). The conceptualisation of mindfulness underlying the scale is that mindfulness consists of presence, non-judgemental acceptance, openness to experiences, and insight. The scale consists of 14 items, with four response options, ranging from ‘rarely’ to ‘almost always’ representing how well an item describes a respondent. Representative items include ‘I am open to the experience of the present moment’ and ‘I watch my feelings without getting lost in them’. The scale has previous evidence of validity and reliability (Kohls et al., 2009; Walach et al., 2006). In the current study, reliability was  $\alpha=0.84$ .

#### Emotional Intelligence

The Assessing Emotions Scale (Schutte et al., 1998) measures trait-level emotional intelligence. The scale is based on the conceptualisation of dimensions of emotional

intelligence proposed by Mayer et al. (2000) that comprise recognition, understanding, utilisation, and management of emotion in the self and others. The scale consists of 33 items, with five response options indicating level of agreement with how well items describe respondents. Representative items include ‘When I experience a positive emotion, I know how to make it last’ and ‘I arrange events others enjoy’. The scale has prior evidence of reliability and validity (Schutte et al. (2009), and in the current study, reliability was  $\alpha=0.91$ .

### **Self-Compassion**

The Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form (Raes et al., 2011) conceptualises self-compassion as the tendency to view one’s suffering with warmth and concern. The scale has evidence of reliability and validity (Raes et al., 2011). The scale consists of 12 items, with five response options indicating frequency of experience described by an item, ranging from almost never to almost always. A representative item is ‘When I’m going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need’. In the current study, reliability was  $\alpha=0.89$ .

### **Gratitude**

The Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough et al., 2002) assesses experience of gratitude in daily life. The six-item scale has seven response options, which assess level of agreement with each item. A representative item is ‘I have so much in life to be thankful for’. The scale has previous evidence of reliability and validity (McCullough et al., 2002), and in the current study, reliability was  $\alpha=0.83$ .

### **Empathy**

The empathic concern and perspective taking dimensions of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, which have prior evidence of reliability and validity (Davis, 1983), assess empathy through reported ability to take others’ perspective, comprising seven items, and feel concern for others, comprising seven items. Respondents use a 5-point scale to indicate how well each item describes them. Representative items include ‘try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement before I make a decision’ and ‘I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me’. In the current study, reliability of the combined dimensions was  $\alpha=0.87$ .

### **Resilience**

The short Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, which has previous evidence of reliability and validity (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007), assesses general resilience. Resilience is conceptualised as the ability to adapt to change and adversity. The scale consists of 10 items, with respondents using a 5-point scale to indicate how true each item is for them. A representative item is ‘I am able to adapt to change’. In the current study, reliability was  $\alpha=0.88$ .

## Forgiveness

The Heartland Forgiving Others Scale, which has shown evidence of validity and reliability (Thompson et al., 2005), assesses forgiveness through several dimensions, including forgiving the self, the dimension assessed in the present study. Respondents rate how true each of the six forgiving the self items is for them on a 7-point scale. A representative item is ‘Learning from bad things that I’ve done helps me get over them’. In the current study, reliability was  $\alpha = 0.89$ .

## Relationship of Demographic Variables with Characteristics

Age was not significantly associated with any of the assessed characteristics. Women scored significantly higher on gratitude (mean = 36.06,  $SD = 5.03$ ) than men (mean = 32.91,  $SD = 6.91$ ) ( $t(129) = 2.52$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). There were no significant differences between women and men for other characteristics.

## Results

Bivariate correlation analyses using SPSS with 2000 bootstraps, which minimise reliance on assumptions regarding the distribution of data, tested the first three hypotheses. In support of the first hypothesis, greater trait mindfulness was significantly associated with a higher level of emotional intelligence as shown in Table 1. Greater trait mindfulness was significantly associated with more self-compassion, gratitude, resilience, and forgiveness, supporting the second hypothesis with regard to those characteristics. However, greater trait mindfulness was not significantly associated with more empathy. In support of the third hypothesis, a higher level of

**Table 1** Associations between trait mindfulness, emotional intelligence, self-compassion, gratitude empathy, resilience, and forgiveness

Characteristic	Mindfulness	Emotional intelligence	Self-compassion	Gratitude	Empathy	Resilience	Forgiveness
Mindfulness	–	.58**	.67**	.38**	.11	.60**	.34**
Emotional intelligence		–	.49**	.57**	.54**	.63*	.33**
Self-compassion			–	.45**	.25*	.61**	.35**
Gratitude				–	.55**	.54**	.25*
Empathy					–	.32**	.35**
Resilience						–	.31**
Forgiveness							–
Mean	20.68	122.92	34.92	35.48	55.62	36.46	28.49
<i>SD</i>	4.34	14.29	8.22	5.53	7.43	6.23	7.91

$N = 136$ ; \* $p = .01$ ; \*\* $p = .001$

emotional intelligence was significantly associated with more self-compassion, gratitude, empathy, resilience, and forgiveness.

To test the fourth hypothesis, regression-based mediation analyses using the PROCESS macro with 2000 bootstraps examined whether emotional intelligence mediated or connected mindfulness to positive characteristics with emotion elements. Emotional intelligence significantly mediated the association of mindfulness with gratitude ( $b=0.40$ , 95% CI (0.23, 0.58)), empathy ( $b=0.35$ , 95% CI (0.22, 0.48)), resilience ( $b=0.34$ , 95% CI (0.18, 0.51)), and forgiveness ( $b=0.21$ , 95% CI (0.03, 0.42)), but not with self-compassion ( $b=0.16$ , 95% CI (-0.04, 0.37)). Thus, the model-derived hypothesis that emotional intelligence is a path in the relationship between mindfulness and positive characteristics with emotion elements was supported for four of the five characteristics examined.

## Discussion

The present research empirically investigated a theoretical model positing that mindfulness and emotional intelligence are foundational for other positive characteristics with emotion elements. The theoretical model further posits that emotional intelligence may connect mindfulness with other positive characteristics that have emotion elements. Overall, the results of the study supported this theoretical model.

The results of this study enhance understanding of the connections between mindfulness, adaptive emotional functioning, operationalised by emotional intelligence, and positive characteristics with emotional elements. Consistent with previous research (Miao et al., 2018), greater trait mindfulness was associated with higher levels of emotional intelligence. Also, consistent with some previous research (Anasori et al., 2020; Carvalho et al., 2010; Cooper et al., 2020; Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2021; Golden et al., 2021; Hajibabaei et al., 2018; Karremans et al., 2020; Sarrionandia et al., 2018; Schutte et al., 2021), both mindfulness and emotional intelligence were connected to positive characteristics with emotion elements. The characteristics associated with mindfulness were self-compassion, gratitude, resilience, and forgiveness. Positive characteristics associated with emotional intelligence were self-compassion, gratitude, empathy, resilience, and forgiveness.

In line with a new theoretical model positing that connections in the nomological net of positive characteristics associated with mindfulness may flow through adaptive emotional functioning, as operationalised by emotional intelligence, emotional intelligence mediated the association between mindfulness and all positive characteristics other than self-compassion. Thus, mindfulness and emotional intelligence may be a foundation for the development of positive characteristics with emotion elements.

The present research focused on trait-level measures of mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and positive characteristics with emotion elements. Results for the association of temporary states of these characteristics may differ from results assessed at the trait level. For example, mindfulness can be assessed as a temporary state as well as a characteristic that manifests across different settings and circumstances (Kiken et al., 2015). Future research might investigate the relationships between the characteristics included in the present study at a state level of mixes of trait and state-level manifestations. Future research might also explore further the specific connecting links between mindfulness and self-compassion.

In regard to limitations, some caution should be used in interpreting the results of the present study. First, in regard to the proposed model, even though overall the results supported the proposed model, the association between mindfulness and empathy was not significant and emotional intelligence did not significantly mediate between mindfulness and self-compassion. Future research might examine these relationships further, perhaps with different demographic cohorts or alternative measures.

The results of the present study were based on concurrent data, limiting conclusions regarding causality. Both future longitudinal designs and experimental designs might provide more information regarding the causal impact of mindfulness on positive characteristics with emotion elements. Some previous intervention research (e.g. Galante et al., 2018) has found that increasing mindfulness results in increases in positive characteristics such as resilience. Future research might use such experimental methods involving random assignment of participants to either a mindfulness training condition or a control condition to further investigate the causal connections between mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and various positive characteristics with emotion elements.

Participants were university students and were from one country. Future research might investigate how the overall findings of the present study replicate with other groups in different cultural contexts. As well as serving as replication studies, such studies could lead to comparative analyses of cultural factors. Future research could investigate the impact of age further by drawing on a wider range of ages, such as by including adolescents. Future research might also investigate how the findings replicate when characteristics are assessed with different measures. Objective measures in addition to self-report measures might be especially informative.

In regard to implications, the results of the study have practical as well as theoretical implications. The model positing that mindfulness is a foundation for positive characteristics with emotion elements and that emotional intelligence connects mindfulness with such positive characteristics may be useful in designing programs intended to enhance positive characteristics. For example, a component of mindfulness training programs might target non-judgemental acceptance of perception of emotion in the self and others. This training might enhance the emotion perception component of emotional intelligence and through this strengthening of an aspect of emotional intelligence optimise the impact of such a mindfulness training program on outcomes such as resilience. Such programs could be implemented and tested in a variety of settings, ranging from clinical, to educational, to occupational settings.

In conclusion, as part of the third wave of theory development in the area of positive psychology, as proposed by Lomas et al. (2021), the present study tested a model positing that mindfulness is a foundation for the development of emotional intelligence and other positive characteristics with emotion elements, and that further proposes that the positive characteristic of emotional intelligence may link mindfulness with other emotion-related positive characteristics. The empirical study based on this model for the most part provided support for the proposed model. The model and associated findings may have utility in the further development of theory in the area of positive psychology and the application of positive psychology in various settings and contexts.



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**Data Availability** Data is stored on Open Science Framework under Mindfulness and Positive Characteristics at <https://osf.io/e2c9g/>.

## Declarations

**Consent to Participate** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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