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*Research Article*

## How Can We Feel Happy? The Examination of Relationships Among Happiness, Mindfulness and Forgiveness

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### Abstract

The goal of the present research was to investigate predictive relationships of forgiveness and mindfulness with happiness. The sample was composed of 246 university students studying at a state university in Turkey. The data was collected by using personal information form, Oxford Happiness Scale-Short Form, Heartland Forgiveness Scale, and Mindful Attention Awareness Scale. Before the analysis, data was analyzed for normal distribution. Then, correlation analysis was carried out to determine the relationships among happiness, forgiveness and mindfulness. Hierarchical regression analysis was carried out to specify predictive relationships of forgiveness, and mindfulness with happiness. The results showed that there was a positive and significant relationship among happiness, mindfulness and forgiveness subscales. Moreover, hierarchical regression analysis showed that forgiveness of situations and mindfulness predicted happiness. The results were discussed in light of the literature.

### Keywords

Mindfulness • Forgiveness • Happiness • Awareness

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A broad range of disciplines such as philosophy and psychology handled and discussed the notion of “Happiness” for decades (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Jackson, 2012; Klemer, 1971; Mathes & Kahn, 1975; Nussbaum, 2012); however, it has mostly been a subject of positive psychology in recent years (e.g., Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & King, 2009; Jose, Lim, & Bryant, 2012). Diener (2000) defines happiness as experiencing positive feelings more than negative ones (e.g., Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot, 1991) referring to subjective well-being. Similarly, Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) and Brebner (1998) emphasizes the subjective processes in happiness. Happiness has been found to be in association with personality types (e.g., Brebner, 1998; Furnham & Petrides, 2003), emotional intelligence (e.g., Chamorro-Premuzic, Bennett, & Furnham, 2007; Ruiz-Aranda, Extremera, & Pineda-Galán, 2014) and mindfulness (e.g., Campos et al., 2016; Gilbert et al., 2012) in several studies addressing subjective aspects of this notion. For example, in their study, Furnham and Petrides (2003) revealed that happiness is positively related to openness to experience. Zhu, Woo, Porter, and Brzezinski (2013) stated that individual differences shaped one’s social environments which resulted in positive or negative life experiences. Regarding mindfulness, Campos et al. (2016) revealed the predictive role of mindfulness on happiness. Similarly, in their study, Hollis-Walker and Colosimo (2011) found that mindful participants had also higher scores on well-being. These studies reveal the importance of individual differences in happiness and it may be inferred that happiness is affected by several human aspects and one of these features is mindfulness, which is one of the currently prominent subjects in the literature of psychology.

As a state of consciousness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), mindfulness, which has roots in Buddhist traditions (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006), has been to subject to numerous studies in association with attachment (Arpacı, Baloğlu, Özteke-Kozan, & Kesici, 2017; Pepping, Davis, & O’Donovan, 2013), decision-making processes (Deniz, Ari, Akdeniz, & Özteke, 2015; Ruedy & Schweitzer, 2010) and self-compassion (Raab, 2014) in recent years. The term “mindfulness” refers to paying attention to the present reality in a non-judgmental way (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). In another definition, it refers to “keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality” (Hanh, 1976, p. 11). In the definition of this term, there exist three points which need to get attention. These are intention, attention, and attitude (Shapiro et al., 2006). According to Germer (2009), mindfulness emphasizes feeling pain in the present time. Recent studies have revealed the importance of mindfulness-based interventions on some psychological problems such as obesity-related eating behaviors (e.g., O’Reilly, Cook, Spruijt-Metz, & Black, 2014), social anxiety (e.g., Goldin & Gross, 2010) and aggression (e.g., Singh, Wahler, Adkins, Myers, & Mindfulness Research Group, 2003). All these findings point out the therapeutic role of mindfulness in behaviors.

Another mechanism that may be thought of as effective on happiness is forgiveness as a developmental process, essentially based on emotional and moral response to others’ unfair treatments (Fitzgibbons, Enright, & O’Brien, 2004). In other words, it refers to a process in which negative feelings such as anger, anxiety or sadness decrease, whereas positive emotions and thoughts increase (Fitzgibbons, 1986; Freedman, 2000; Freedman & Knupp, 2003; Wade, Bailey, & Shaffer, 2005). Forgiveness refers to a therapeutic process that decreases anger. First, it helps individuals to forgive painful experiences; second, it helps repair the relationships and third, it reduces the possibility of anger among people (Fitzgibbons, 1986). In dealing with the process of forgiveness, Enright and Human Development Study Group (1996) proposed a four-phase model and the first phase of this model is called uncovering phase in which the person becomes aware of the problem and feels the negative emotions. The second phase is called the decision phase and in this phase, the person tries to understand what

forgiveness is and decides to forgive the injurer. The third phase is named as the work phase in which reframing occurs. In this phase the person gains perspective toward the injurer and positive emotions such as empathy increase. The last phase in the forgiveness process is called the outcome and through this phase, the person becomes stronger and achieves a new perspective. Personal growth occurs in the last phase of forgiveness.

The forgiveness process includes interpersonal, intrapersonal or situational factors (Thompson et al., 2005) and Bugay (2010) emphasized that interpersonal forgiveness involves one's negative emotions toward others; on the other hand, intrapersonal forgiveness includes one's negative reactions toward oneself. Forgiveness of self refers to decreased anger and resentment which result in a rise in positive feelings toward oneself, which is different from interpersonal forgiveness that relates to other people (Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1996). Dispositional forgiveness, on the other hand, is related to the "situations" and the "source of transgression". In this process, people have negative attitudes toward unique situations such as illness and people may forgive these situations by transforming their negative attitudes into positive ones (Thompson et al., 2005).

In sum, in the current study, we aim to reveal the predictive role of two therapeutic mechanisms – mindfulness and forgiveness- on happiness. The term "happiness" has been discussed for decades and questions such as "How can we be happy?" or "What are the sources of happiness" have been asked by philosophers and researchers. In the current study, we revealed the predictive role of mindfulness and forgiveness on happiness which is a unique study in the literature that will shed light on the literature. Therefore, we asked two questions in line with the theory:

1. Is there a significant correlation among happiness, mindfulness and forgiveness levels of participants?
2. Do mindfulness and forgiveness significantly predict the happiness levels of participants?

## Method

### Participants

Correlational research was used in this study in order to investigate the predictive relationships among happiness, mindfulness and forgiveness. This research was conducted on university students studying at a state university in Turkey in the 2018-2019 spring semester. Two hundred and forty-six participants were included in this study, and 63 of these participants (25.6 %) were male, and 183 (74.4 %) were female ( $M = 24.41$ ,  $SD = 3.90$ ).

### Data Collection Tools

**Personal Information Form.** To gather data about participants' gender and age, a personal information form was created.

**Oxford Happiness Scale-Short Form.** The scale was developed by Hills and Argyle (2002), and the Turkish validity and reliability study was carried out by Doğan and Akıncı Çötök (2011). The scale is a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *I completely disagree* (1) to *I completely agree* (7) and consists of 7 items. The scale's Cronbach alpha values were found to be .74, and the test-retest score was found to be .85. This scale's Cronbach alpha coefficient was found to be .78 in this research.

**Heartland Forgiveness Scale.** The scale was developed by Thompson et al. (2005) and the Turkish adaptation study was conducted by Bugay and Demir (2010). The scale is a 7-point Likert scale ranging from

*almost always false of me* (1) to *almost always true of me* (7) and consists of 18 items under three factors, namely forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situation. Cronbach alpha values were found to be .64 for forgiveness of self subscale, .79 for forgiveness of others subscale, .76 for forgiveness of situation subscale and .81 for whole scale. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of this scale was calculated as .63 for forgiveness of self subscale, .71 for forgiveness of others subscale, .69 for forgiveness of situation subscale and .79 for whole scale in this research.

**Mindful Attention Awareness Scale.** This scale was developed by Brown and Ryan (2003) and the Turkish adaptation study was conducted by Özyeşil, Arslan, Kesici, and Deniz (2011). The scale is a 6-point Likert scale ranging from *almost always* (1) to *almost never* (6) and consists of 15 items. The scale's Cronbach alpha values were found to be .80, and the test-retest score was found out as .86. This scale's Cronbach alpha coefficient was found to be .75 in the present study.

### Procedure

Before the data collection, informed consent form was distributed to use the data collected from the participants, and volunteering participants signed this form. Then, three different questionnaire booklets were created for considering the order effect. The data gathering process took approximately 15 minutes. To examine the relationships among happiness, forgiveness, and mindfulness, Pearson correlation analysis was carried out. After the correlation analysis, hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to specify predictive relationships among happiness, mindfulness and forgiveness.

### Results

The results of the statistical analysis are given in this section. Before the analysis, normal distribution of variables was examined, and these results were given in Table 1.

Table 1

*Mean, Median, Mode, Skewness and Kurtosis Values of the Variables Used in this Research*

Variables	Mean	Sd	Median	Mode	Skewness	Sd	Kurtosis	Sd
HAP	20.45	3.04	20.00	20.00	-.037	.155	.065	.309
MIND	59.65	9.30	60.00	63.00	-.147	.155	.266	.309
S-F	26.98	5.02	27.00	26.00	-.086	.155	-.008	.309
O-F	24.99	6.20	25.00	24.00	-.243	.155	.348	.309
SIT-F	26.99	5.16	27.00	28.00	-.121	.155	.270	.309

*Note.* HAP: Happiness, MIND: Mindfulness, S-F: Forgiveness of self, O-F: Forgiveness of others, SIT-F: Forgiveness of situation

It was found that mean, median, mode, skewness and kurtosis coefficients of the variables (happiness, mindfulness and forgiveness sub-dimensions) were normally distributed. According to this information, parametric tests were used. In order to determine the relationships among happiness, mindfulness and forgiveness sub-dimensions, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The relationships among happiness, mindfulness and forgiveness sub-dimensions were given in Table 2.

Table 2

*The Relationships among Variables Used in this Study*

	1	2	3	4	5
Happiness	-	.24***	.26***	.27***	.31***
Mindfulness		-	.27***	.11	.26**
Forgiveness of Self			-	.23***	.59***
Forgiveness of Others				-	.42***
Forgiveness of Situation					-

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

According to Table 2, there are positive and significant relationships between happiness and respectively forgiveness of self ( $r = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ ), forgiveness of others ( $r = .27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and forgiveness of situation ( $r = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, there is a positive and significant relationship between happiness and mindfulness ( $r = .24$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, mindfulness is related to forgiveness of self ( $r = .27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and forgiveness of situation ( $r = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but there is no significant relationship between mindfulness and forgiveness of others ( $r = .11$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

Hierarchical regression analysis was carried out to specify predictive relationships between happiness, mindfulness and forgiveness. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis were given in Table 3.

Table 3

*Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis Regarding Happiness*

	$\beta$	$t$	$R^2$	$F$	$F_{\text{change}}$
Step I			.134	12.33***	12.33
Forgiveness of Self	.12	1.63			
Forgiveness of Others	.17	2.62**			
Forgiveness of Situation	.17	2.14*			
Step II			.156	11.05***	6.39*
Forgiveness of Self	.09	1.27			
Forgiveness of Others	.17	2.63**			
Forgiveness of Situation	.15	1.85			
Mindfulness	.16	2.53*			

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

The hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive levels of forgiveness and mindfulness on happiness. In the first step, the dimensions of forgiveness were included in the regression equation. In the second step, mindfulness was added in the regression equation. The results showed that the first regression model was statistically significant and appropriate ( $F_{(3-242)} = 12.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the first step, forgiveness of others ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $t = 2.62$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and forgiveness of situation ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $t = 2.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ) predicted happiness significantly. Forgiveness of self did not predict happiness ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $t = 1.63$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Moreover, forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situation explained approximately 13% of the variance in happiness ( $R^2 = .134$ ). In the second step, mindfulness was added and the regression model was found to be significant ( $F_{(4-241)} = 11.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In this step, forgiveness of others ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $t = 2.63$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and mindfulness ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $t = 2.53$ ,

$p < .05$ ) predicted happiness significantly. Forgiveness of self ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $t = 1.27$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and forgiveness of situation ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $t = 1.85$ ,  $p > .05$ ) did not predict happiness. Furthermore, forgiveness of others and mindfulness explained about 16% of the total variance in happiness ( $R^2 = .155$ ). Mindfulness contributed a 2.2% increase to the regression model in the last step.

### Discussion

In the current study, we investigated the predictive role of mindfulness and forgiveness on happiness in a group of university students. The results revealed significant and positive associations between happiness and all the factors of forgiveness such as self, others and forgiveness of situation. Moreover, significant and positive associations were found between happiness and mindfulness. When the predictive role of forgiveness and mindfulness on happiness was examined, other and forgiveness of situation were found to be significant predictors of happiness. In the second step, mindfulness contributed to the model significantly but less than forgiveness. Forgiveness of others and mindfulness were found to be significant predictors of happiness in this step. In a study whose findings were similar to ours, Zümbül (2019) found that mindfulness and forgiveness were significant predictors of psychological well-being, which is associated with happiness.

Happiness has been found to be in association with mindfulness in recent studies (e.g., Campos et al., 2016; Gilbert et al., 2012; Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011). In a study by Nyklíček and Kuijpers (2008), mindfulness-based stress reduction interventions were found to be effective in quality of life among individuals. Similar to our findings, Deniz, Erus, and Büyükbeci (2017) revealed a significant association between mindfulness and psychological well-being. Moreover, Hamarta, Özyeşil, Deniz, and Dilmaç (2013) found the predictive role of mindfulness on subjective well-being, which is used as synonymously with happiness. These existing studies revealed similar results to our findings. Also, Germer (2009) stated that mindfulness may help to increase positive emotions such as self-compassion, forgiveness, and love. It is possible to state that mindfulness is effective in reducing negative attitudes, while increasing positive emotions. Increased positive emotions are related to one's level of happiness.

We, moreover, found significant associations between forgiveness and happiness. Current researches in the literature revealed certain associations between happiness and forgiveness (e.g., Chan, 2013; Datu, 2014; Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2005; Safaria, 2014). For example, Maltby et al. (2005) revealed the predictive role of forgiveness on happiness. Similarly, Rana, Hariharan, Nandinee and Vincent (2014) conducted a study among adolescents with the result that forgiveness contributed to happiness. In a study on Turkish sample of university students concerning romantic relationships, Balcı-Çelik and Öztürk-Serter (2017) found that forgiveness was a significant predictor of subjective well-being, which might be used as a synonym of happiness (e.g., Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot, 1991). In sum, since forgiveness is thought to decrease negative emotions while increasing positive emotions such as love, empathy and compassion (e.g., Bugay, 2010; Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1996; Freedman & Knupp, 2003), it is possible to conclude that this term is significantly associated with happiness as experiencing positive feelings more than the negative ones (Diener, 2000).

In conclusion, this study made a contribution to the literature revealing the predictive roles of mindfulness and forgiveness on the happiness levels of individuals. As far as we know, the current study is the first research that reveals the associations among happiness, mindfulness and forgiveness. These variables are important factors in relational contexts that affect one's well-being and psychological health. Thus, revealing the

associations among these variables might be important for future studies and counseling practices. First, this study is limited to university students. Therefore, it is only generalizable to similar groups. Future studies could be conducted with different groups using different methods. Secondly, the current study is limited to self-report measures, which may lead to a common method bias. Thirdly, the current study does not suggest any causality. It would not be suitable to imply that mindfulness and forgiveness cause happiness. Experimental studies could be used in the future to reveal causal relationships between these variables. Especially in the universities, mindfulness and forgiveness-based interventions and applications in counseling centers may be appropriate to increase positive emotions. Psychologists and psychological counselors may use mindfulness and/or forgiveness-based interventions in dealing with students' problems in close relationship.

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