

Eudaimonic Pathways of Activating Compassion Reduce Vulnerabilities to Paranoia.



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Introduction

Paranoia is a characteristic common to many psychological problems such as depression, schizophrenia and anxiety and refers to irrational and unrealistic beliefs of grandeur, threat, persecution and suspicion. Such beliefs can cause significant distress to the thinker and may pervade interpersonal relationships and daily functioning. A vulnerability to paranoid thoughts has roots in the non-clinical general population. Increased vulnerability to paranoid beliefs can produce paranoid ideation. Social media platforms expand available stimuli to perceive threats for example from ideals of body weight, education and money.

The opposite to these situations is a supportive and safe environment where individuals are shown love and unconditional positive regard associated with self-compassion. Encounters with the natural world increase self-compassion, an innate resource aimed at promoting self-soothing during experiences of suffering. Compassion and paranoia have been considered bi-polar opposites. Yet, findings have been inconclusive of whether compassion benefits paranoia. Two arguments have been presented that paranoia blocks compassion and that components of self-compassion effect paranoid vulnerability alternatively. Mindfulness and common humanity components are considered eudaimonic forms of compassion by cultivating resources through cognitive channels whereas emotional compassion refers to self-kindness. This study aimed to identify which form of compassion reduces paranoia successfully. Prior previous research suggested self-kindness would be most successful in reducing paranoia.

Methods

In this study 104 participants were randomly allocated into one of five groups and had their paranoia and self-compassion measured both before and after compassionate exercises through validated visual analogue scales from definitions provided by Freeman et al. (2005) and Neff (2003) respectively.

The five groups were a control group plus four groups of different compassionate exercises:

- Kindness – exercises from Neff (2018); writing a letter describing positive attributes and thinking of a warm and compassionate response to a friend
- Mindfulness – “affectionate breathing” and “giving and receiving compassion” exercises (Germer & Neff, 2017)
- Humanity – exercises involving looking for similarities between pictures to stimulate feelings of connectedness (Petrocchi, Ottavani & Couyoumdjian, 2017; Gilbert, 2009)
- Forgiveness – an exercise involving a scenario of transgressing and changing the impact of actions (Exline et al., 2011)

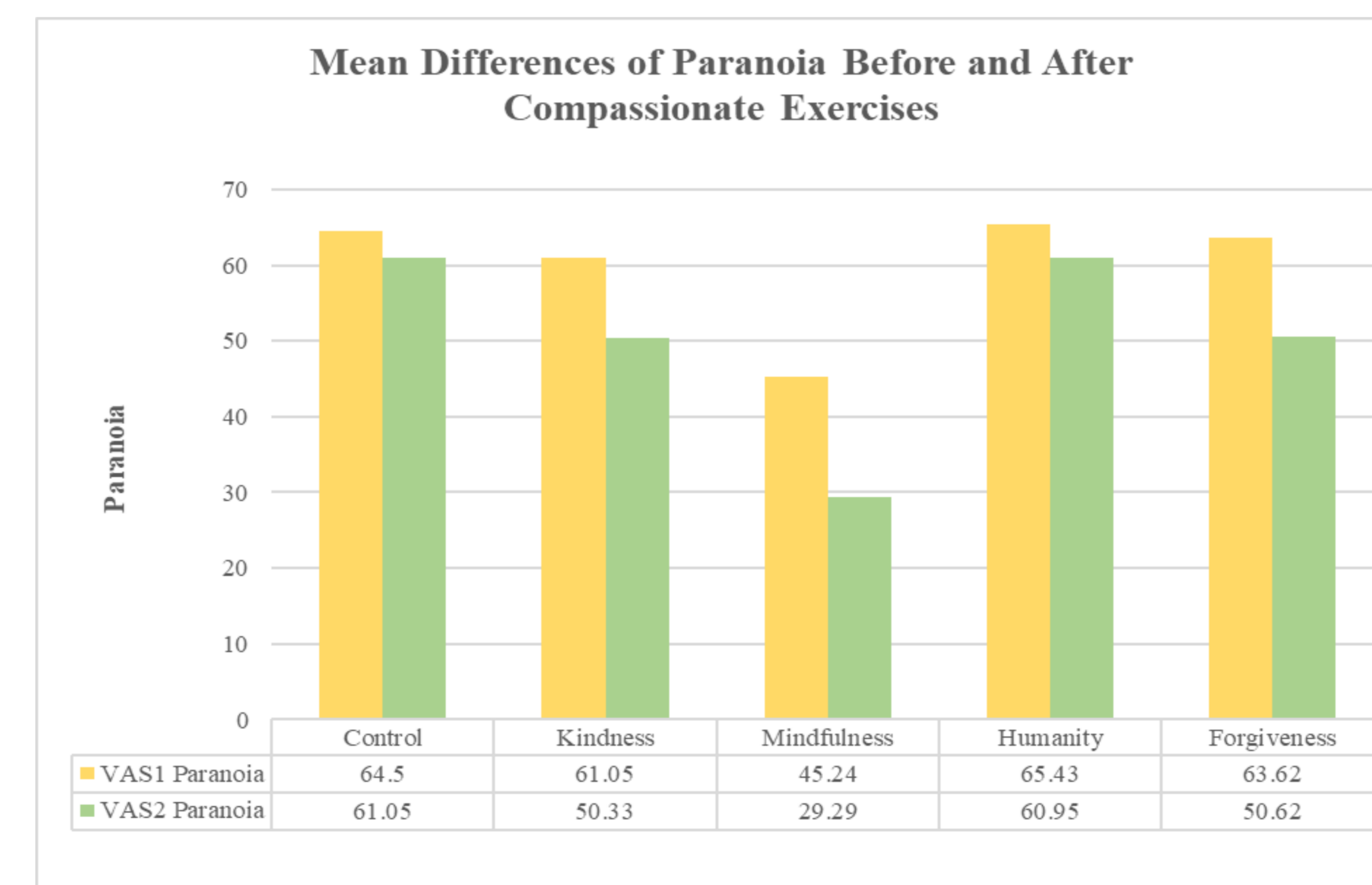
Social media use was also measured at the beginning of the experiment as a possible covariant and predictor of post-exercise paranoia.

Abstract

This study aimed to identify if compassion benefits paranoia and, if so what type of compassion. Following a series of different compassionate exercises in 104 participants it was found that mindfulness approaches were the most significant in reducing paranoia suggesting a new approach for psychological problems characterised by paranoia.

Results

A five-way multivariate analysis of variance was performed to investigate differences in compassionate exercises on two dependent variables of self-compassion and levels of vulnerability to paranoia. Analysis revealed there was a statistically significant small difference between the type of compassionate exercises on the combined dependent variables, $F(4, 96) = 3.62, p < .001$; Wilks' Lambda = .58; $\eta^2 = .13$. Post Hoc comparisons revealed where the significant differences between dependent variables were present. The mean scores indicated mindfulness had the most improved score of paranoia post-exercise. This result was stable after controlling for pre-exercise paranoia and the amount of social media used by participants.



A bar chart showing the mean differences of paranoia before and after compassionate exercises.

Discussion

The results of the current experiment supported there are significant differences between compassionate exercises in reducing paranoia. However, the study did not support the prediction that kindness exercises would be the most successful in reducing paranoia. The findings instead indicate that mindfulness exercises are the most successful in reducing paranoid vulnerability. One implication of the current results is that eudaimonic compassion may reduce paranoia in the short-term. Mindfulness may be more successful in reducing paranoid vulnerability acutely rather than more hedonic compassionate exercises such as kindness. Therefore, the study has successfully identified differences between the forms of compassion and suggested the importance of mindful compassion which has not previously been highlighted. An important implication for therapy practice is that mindfulness techniques may offer immediate relief from paranoid vulnerability.

References

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