

The dark side of mindfulness – why mindfulness interventions are not beneficial for everyone



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Introduction

Mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Mindfulness interventions are conducted with various groups with the objective to enhance mental and physical well-being. Meta-analyses have shown the effectiveness of those interventions.

But is mindfulness really beneficial for everyone? We argue that individuals who have trouble knowing their own preferences (i.e., low access to their self-system) might not be able to reach the non-judgmental state of mindfulness but rather drift into thought suppression during a mindfulness induction. This should turn the positive effects of mindfulness into the opposite and result in e.g. self-infiltration.

Self-infiltration is the introjection of goals that are alien to the self. Therefore self-infiltration leads to the pursuit of goals that might be not in concordance with implicit needs and motives.

Hypothesis: Self-access moderates the relationship between mindfulness induction and self-infiltration, such that the lower the self-access the higher the self-infiltration after a mindfulness induction.

Results

Indices:

False self-ascription rate of extrinsic *recommended* goals: quotient of extrinsic recommended goals that were falsely remembered as self-selected to total number of extrinsic *recommended* goals
=> **Self-infiltration**

False self-ascription rate of extrinsic *remaining* goals: quotient of extrinsic remaining goals that were falsely remembered as self-selected to total number of extrinsic *remaining* goals
=> **Baseline rate of memory errors**

Moderation analysis:

We used hierarchical regression to analyze our data (DV = self-infiltration). Condition was coded: control = 0, mindfulness = 1. Both condition and self-access were centered before they were entered into the equation.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Baseline rate of memory errors	.204	.134	.062
Condition		.155	.186
Self-Access		-.238	-.332*
Condition x Self-Access			-.401**
ΔR^2		.063	.150**
R^2	.042	.105	.255**

Table 1. Hierarchical regression
Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Figure 2 shows that persons with high self-access have about the same self-infiltration rates in both conditions, but persons with low self-access are far more vulnerable to expert recommendation of extrinsic goals in the mindfulness condition than in the control condition.

Similar effects could not be attained for false self-ascription rates of intrinsic goals or false other-ascriptions – self-selected goals that were falsely remembered as recommended – of either extrinsic or intrinsic goals.

Method

Participants were 57 undergraduate psychology students. They were grouped into one mindfulness (N = 28) and one control group (N = 29). Students in the mindfulness condition received a short mindfulness training (about 60 to 90 minutes) before participating in the experiment. The training included some information about mindfulness as well as a few examples of mindfulness exercises.

Before participating in the experiment, people filled out some individual trait measures, including the self-access questionnaire (Quirin, 2007).

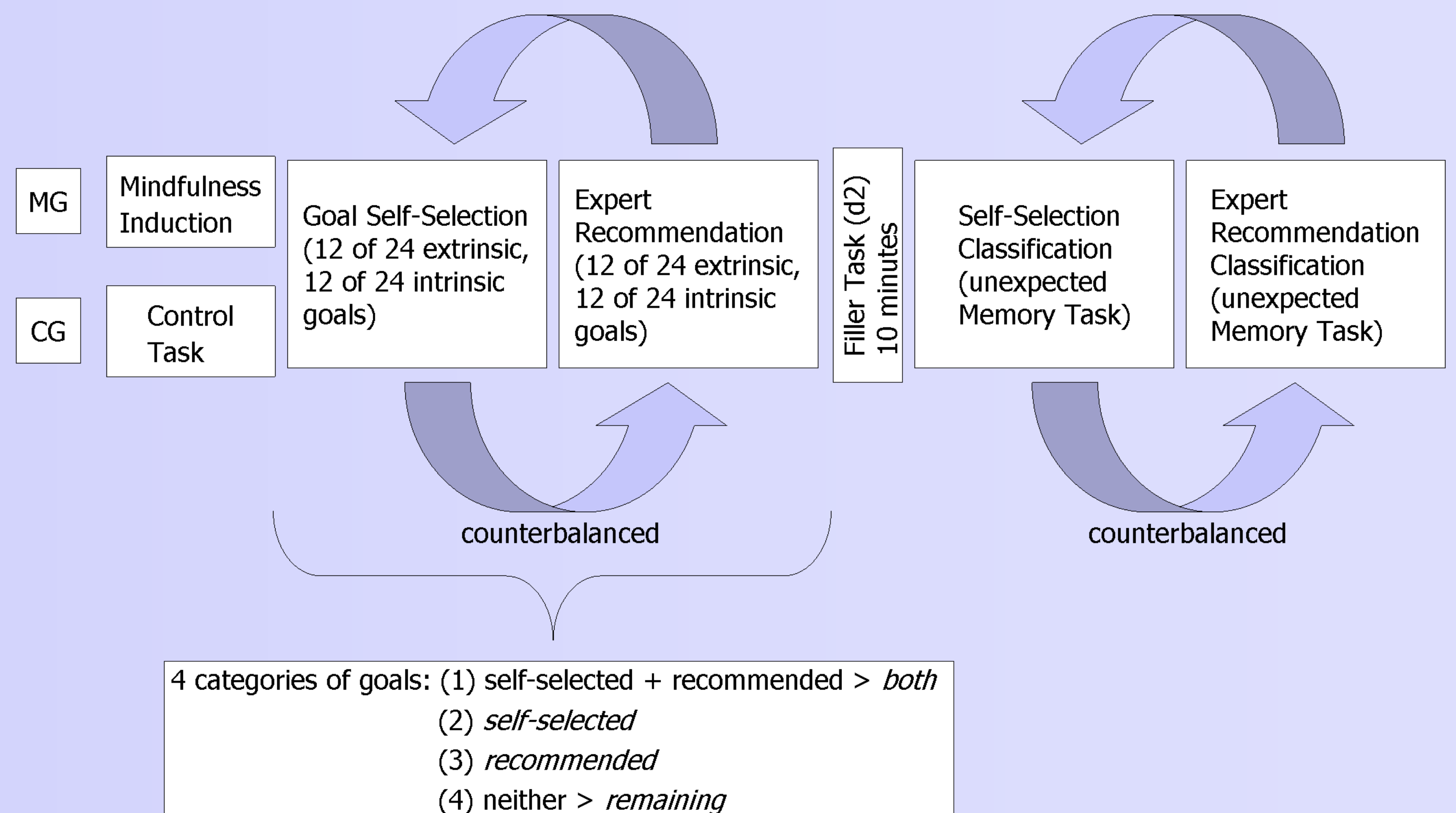


Figure 1. Time schedule of the experiment

The experiment was conducted via a computer program (PANTER, Kuhl, 1993). In the expert recommendation, goals were recommended by the researcher to be pursued by the participant because they ostensibly best fitted the personality of the participant (based allegedly on the individual trait measures). In fact, recommended goals were selected randomly by the computer program.

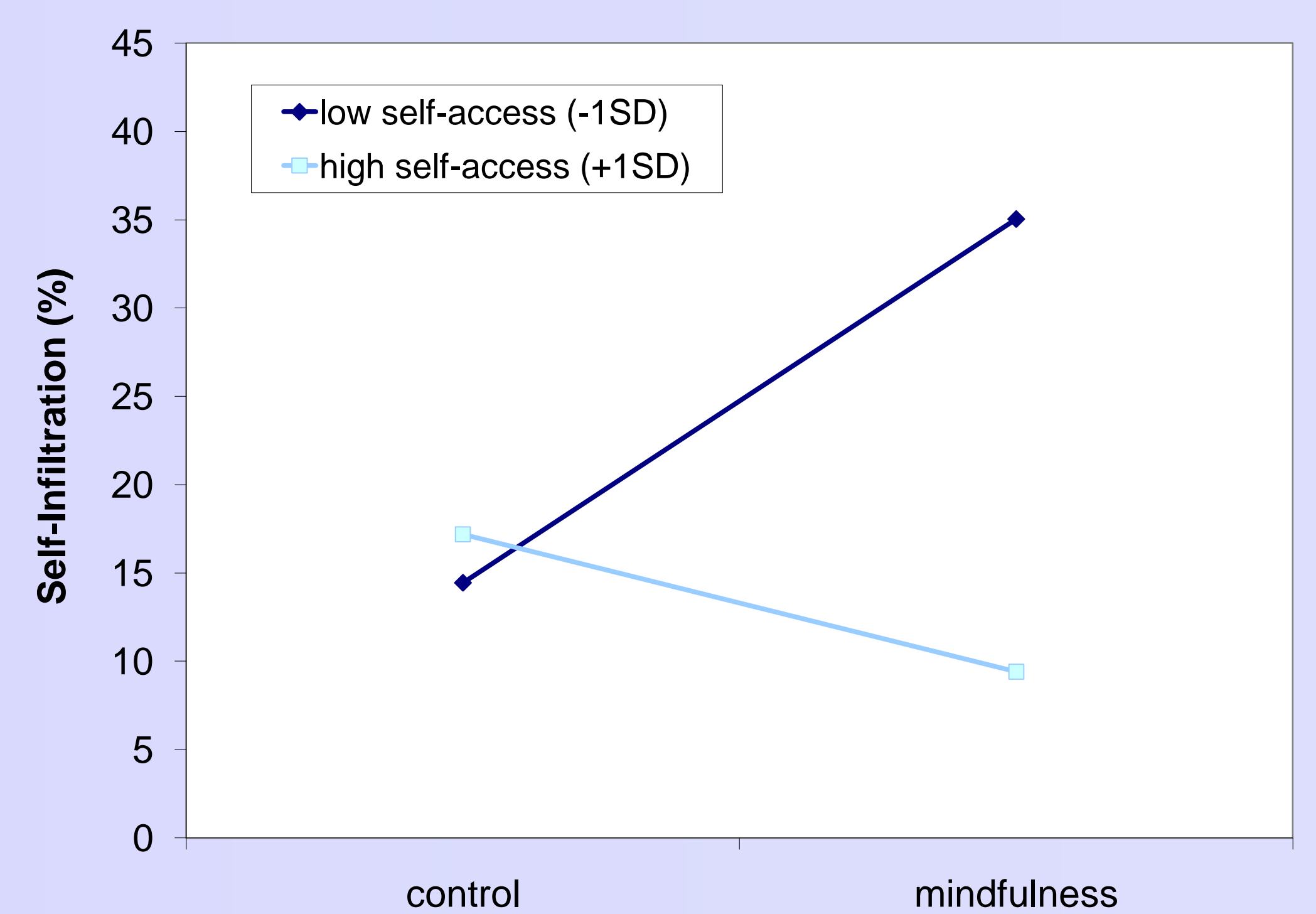


Figure 2. Interaction effect controlled for baseline rate of memory errors

Discussion

Our study is the first to show that mindfulness might be harmful for some people. In our experiment, individuals with low access to their self-system – i.e. to their preferences, needs and wishes – mistake expert recommendations for their own goals. This is especially adverse because this effect arose for *extrinsic* goals. The personal importance of these goals has been shown to be negatively associated with well-being (e.g. Kasser & Ryan, 1996). In addition, striving for unwanted goals, i.e. striving for goals that are not in congruence with ones implicit needs and motives, leads to psychosomatic symptoms (Baumann, Kaschel, & Kuhl, 2005).

Limitations: The study only focused on short-term effects of a mindfulness induction. Further research is needed to examine the long-term effects of mindfulness interventions on the susceptibility to goal recommendations (i.e. self-infiltration) for individuals with low self-access. In addition, the mechanisms why a mindfulness induction leads to a heightened susceptibility for those people need to be studied.

References:

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