Mindfulness and its relationship with burnout syndrome in higher education teachers

Mindfulness y su relación con el síndrome de burnout en docentes de educación superior

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to analyze the relationship between mindfulness and burnout syndrome among higher education faculty during the year 2024. A quantitative, correlational, descriptive, and cross-sectional methodology was used. The sample consisted of 180 faculty members, and data were collected using Likert-scale questionnaires. The results revealed a significant relationship between mindfulness and burnout syndrome, with a correlation coefficient of 0.206, indicating a favorable but low-intensity association between the two variables. In conclusion, a positive, albeit weak, relationship was determined between mindfulness and burnout syndrome among the faculty members evaluated.

Keywords: awareness, judgment, mindfulness, reactivity, burnout syndrome.

Resumen

El presente estudio tuvo como objetivo principal analizar la relación entre el mindfulness y el síndrome de burnout en docentes de educación superior durante el año 2024. Para ello, se empleó una metodología cuantitativa, de tipo correlacional, descriptiva y transversal. La muestra estuvo conformada por 180 docentes, y los datos se recolectaron mediante cuestionarios con escala Likert. Los resultados revelaron una relación significativa entre el mindfulness y el síndrome de burnout, con un coeficiente de correlación de 0.206, lo que indica una asociación favorable, pero de baja intensidad entre ambas variables. En conclusión, se determinó que existe una relación positiva, aunque débil, entre el mindfulness y el síndrome de burnout en los docentes evaluados.

Palabras clave: conciencia, juicio, mindfulness, reactividad, síndrome de burnout.

Introduction

Various studies have demonstrated that burnout syndrome negatively impacts the mental health and performance of university educators. In Peru, for example, it has been reported that 64% of educators suffer from burnout, attributed to factors such as excessive workload and limited adaptation to virtual education (Ramos & Castro, 2021). This issue is not exclusive to Peru; Leiter and Maslach (2009) assert that 53% of educators globally experience some level of burnout. In Peru, the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI) reported in 2022 that 70% of teachers exhibit high levels of stress. However, research such as that conducted by Creswell (2009) suggests that mindfulness practice may be an effective tool for mitigating these effects, reducing stress by 32% and improving work performance by 26%.

Building on these international and national precedents, various studies have explored the relationship between mindfulness and burnout syndrome in different contexts. González et al. (2020) analyzed the treatment of emotional intelligence (EI) and burnout syndrome (BS) through mindfulness (MF), concluding that the latter diminishes the impact of burnout and enhances overall well-being by moderating stressful processes via EI. Similarly, Antón et al. (2022) demonstrated that mindfulness strengthens the capacity for adaptation in times of crisis, promoting emotional self-regulation and personal growth, and addressing health and care from a holistic perspective. Bonastre (2023) evaluated the impact of mindfulness on reducing stress and anxiety among students, concluding that its incorporation into the educational sphere fosters the development of emotional self-regulation and concentration skills. Along the same lines, Martín & Luján (2021) determined that structured mindfulness programs enhance emotional self-regulation and improve stress and conflict management. In the health sector, Castelo et al. (2023) found that emotional regulation effectively mediates the relationship between mindfulness and perceived stress in healthcare workers.

In Ecuador, Aguilar & Mayorga (2020) assessed stress and burnout syndrome levels among educators, concluding that, despite the absence of positive correlations, educators developed adaptive mechanisms to manage stress. Orozco et al. (2021) determined that symptoms of burnout syndrome are linked to deficiencies in interpersonal values, while Viveros & Fierro (2020) concluded that engagement depends on the time spent in the organization, as well as on workplace factors and recognition.

In the national context, Benavides & Benavides (2021) analyzed the application of mindfulness to improve teaching-learning strategies in higher education, determining it to be an effective resource for optimizing educators' well-being and productivity. Romero et al. (2024) established an inverse and moderate relationship between mindfulness and sleep quality among university students. Other studies have focused on related factors, such as self-esteem (Contreras et al., 2021), which influences the presence of burnout among physicians. Collan et al. (2023) linked happiness with personal fulfillment, particularly among women, in relation to burnout syndrome in hospital staff. Additionally, Corcuera et al. (2022) found a significant relationship between psychosocial factors and burnout syndrome among nursing personnel, while Gabriel (2021) found no significant association between job satisfaction and burnout syndrome in nursing professionals. Finally, Cortez et al. (2021) concluded that educators with high levels of exhaustion and emotional detachment exhibited job dissatisfaction, and Sardón et al. (2024) determined that students with greater resilience reduce the risk of burnout.

To better understand these dynamics, it is crucial to define the central variables of this study. Kabat-Zinn (1994) describes mindfulness as the awareness that emerges from intentionally paying attention to the present moment without judgment. Siegel (2007) conceptualizes it as the process of paying open and non-judgmental attention to the present moment. Langer & Moldoveanu (2000) understand it as a way to maintain conscious sensitivity to context and the variability of situations. Shapiro & Carlson (2016) define it as a multidimensional process encompassing intention, attention, and attitude, known as the three-component model. Finally, Grossman (2010) describes it as a capacity for mindful awareness and non-critical observation of internal and external states.

Regarding theoretical models of mindfulness, Jankowski & Holas (2020) explain that this practice improves emotional regulation by enhancing attention and self-control, which is beneficial in treating emotional disorders and improving overall well-being. This model is based on dimensions such as attentional regulation, non-reactive monitoring, and cognitive adaptation. Hanley et al. (2021) propose a model that transforms negative emotions into valuable experiences through conscious acceptance and positive reframing, thereby enhancing resilience and reducing post-traumatic stress and depression. Schuman et al. (2020) present an integrative model that combines mindfulness practices with behavioral change strategies to facilitate the adoption of healthy habits and improve psychological well-being, with dimensions such as emotional self-regulation, stress management, and the creation of positive habits. The dimensions of mindfulness include observation, which is understood as a scientific technique that gathers information through immediate perception of facts without altering them, for the purpose of studying and understanding them (S. Hernandez, 2014). Description refers to the act of labeling or verbally naming internal or external experiences without altering their essence (Baer et al., 2004). Acting with awareness involves fully engaging in the present and performing activities with deliberate attention, rather than operating in an automatic state (Brown & Ryan, 2003). The absence of judgment is defined as the ability to observe and experience internal and external events without classifying them as good or bad, desirable or undesirable (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Finally, the absence of reactivity is the ability not to respond automatically to internal or external stimuli, allowing emotions and thoughts to flow without triggering impulsive reactions (Baer et al., 2004).

Regarding the Second Variable, Burnout Syndrome, Maslach & Jackson (1981) describe it as a state of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment caused by work-related stress. Schaufeli & Enzmann (1998) indicate that it is a psychological response to excessive demands and constant pressure characteristic of the educational environment. Friedman (2000) defines it as the perception of personal inefficacy combined with the inability to manage stress associated with the school environment. Hakanen et al. (2006) consider it the result of an imbalance between job demands and resources, while Yu et al. (2015) describe it as a state of physical and mental exhaustion resulting from work pressure.

There are various theoretical models to understand burnout syndrome. Bakker & de Vries (2021) propose the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, which encompasses a burnout process and a demotivation process. This model allows organizations to strategically intervene by adjusting demands and increasing resources to promote workplace well-being and prevent burnout syndrome. The Maslach and Jackson model (Pereira et al., 2021) emphasizes the importance of managing interpersonal stress and strengthening personal resilience, with dimensions such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment. Almén (2021) proposes the Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Burnout, which explains that negative beliefs and avoidant behaviors reinforce workplace stress and exhaustion, exacerbating feelings of inefficacy.

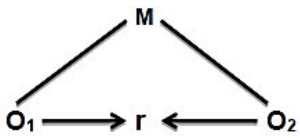
The dimensions of burnout syndrome include exhaustion, which refers to extreme fatigue affecting physical, emotional, and mental well-being, attributed to constant exposure to work stress (Matos et al., 2024); cynicism, which is a defensive response to chronic stress and dissatisfaction (Jevdic, 2024); and professional efficacy, described as the perception of personal competence and work success (Konstantinou et al., 2024).

In summary, the review of the scientific literature establishes a solid foundation for understanding the variables of mindfulness and burnout syndrome, as well as their various dimensions and theoretical models. In this context, the present study aims to analyze the relationship between mindfulness practice and the reduction of burnout syndrome among university educators in Lima. The results will facilitate the design of mindfulness-based programs that contribute to improving educators' mental health, promoting healthier academic environments, and implementing institutional policies focused on well-being, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3: Health and Well-Being. In this regard, the direct beneficiaries of this approach would be university educators, who would experience improved emotional well-being and greater job satisfaction. Indirect beneficiaries would include students and academic communities, as they would benefit from more motivated and committed educators. Furthermore, universities that implement mindfulness-based programs could reduce absenteeism, enhance educational quality, and prioritize institutional mental health.

Methodology

This study is based on a non-experimental, descriptive, and correlational design. Data collection was conducted at a single point in time, allowing for the description of the involved variables (Hernández et al., 2010). The study is characterized as descriptive, as it aimed to identify and highlight the specific characteristics of each present variable. It is also considered correlational, focusing on calculating the correlation coefficient to assess the relationship between these variables (Hernández, 2014).

The work was based on the following illustration:



Where:
M: higher education students in Lima
O1: Variable 1: Mindfulness
O2: Variable 2: Burnout syndrome
r: Relationship between the variables.

The target sample for this study consisted of 180 educators from the Faculty of Economic Sciences of a private educational institution (PEI). As noted by Hernández Sampieri (2014), the sample is understood as a representative subset of the population with similar characteristics.

Regarding data collection strategies, surveys were employed, as they are effective tools for exploring subjective aspects and obtaining meaningful data from a large group of individuals (Duque, 2005). The questionnaire was used as the main technique, with the survey serving as the general purpose (Casas et al., 2003).

The mindfulness questionnaire evaluated five dimensions: observation, description, acting with awareness, absence of judgment, and absence of reactivity. A Likert scale was used with the following options: Never (1), Rarely (2), Sometimes (3), Often (4), Very Often or Always (5), consisting of 38 items (Cebolla, 2014). The burnout syndrome questionnaire measured three dimensions: exhaustion (6 items), cynicism (6 items), and emotional fatigue (3 items), using the same Likert scale (Britto, 2018).

To ensure the validity of the instruments, three experts evaluated the clarity, coherence, and significance of the items, achieving 100% validity. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (SPSS v27), applying a pilot test to 20 educators. The results indicated high reliability: 0.979 for the mindfulness questionnaire and 0.971 for the burnout questionnaire, thus validating the instruments according to the criteria of George & Mallery (2003).

The analysis and processing of quantitative data were conducted using descriptive statistics, frequency tables, and non-parametric methods (Spearman's Rho and hypothesis testing) to accurately analyze the collected data.

Regarding ethical considerations, informed voluntary consent from participants was ensured, along with the confidentiality of data and its exclusive use for academic purposes.

Results and discussion

Inferential results

Table 1
Normality tests

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov | Shapiro-Wilk					
	Statistic	**df**	**Sig.**	**Statistic**	**df**	**Sig.**
Mindfulness	0.486	180	0.000	0.495	180	0.000
Observation	0.488	180	0.000	0.500	180	0.000
Description	0.485	180	0.000	0.491	180	0.000
Acting with Awareness	0.481	180	0.000	0.482	180	0.000
Absence of Judgment	0.479	180	0.000	0.492	180	0.000
Absence of Reactivity	0.486	180	0.000	0.501	180	0.000
Burnout Syndrome	0.452	180	0.000	0.478	180	0.000
Exhaustion	0.395	180	0.000	0.512	180	0.000
Cynicism	0.498	180	0.000	0.447	180	0.000
Professional Efficacy	0.492	180	0.000	0.447	180	0.000

Table 1 indicates that the significance value for all variables is 0.00, which is less than 0.05. This suggests that the data do not follow a normal distribution, justifying the use of non-parametric statistics.

Hypothesis results

Table 2
Correlation between Mindfulness and Burnout syndrome

			Mindfulness	Burnout syndrome
Spearman's Rho	Mindfulness	Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.206**
		Sig. (two-tailed)	-	0.006
		N	180	180
	Burnout syndrome	Correlation coefficient	0.206**	1.000
		Sig. (two-tailed)	0.006	-
		N	180	180

Table 2 shows a significance value of 0.000, less than 0.01, allowing us to accept the alternative hypothesis (Ha). This indicates a significant relationship of 0.206 between the variables. However, this relationship is favorable, suggesting that higher levels of mindfulness are associated with increases in burnout syndrome levels.

Table 3
Correlation between Observation and Burnout syndrome

			Observation	Burnout syndrome
Spearman's Rho	Observation	Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.211**
		Sig. (two-tailed)	-	0.004
		N	180	180
	Burnout syndrome	Correlation coefficient	0.211**	1.000
		Sig. (two-tailed)	0.004	-
		N	180	180

Table 3 indicates a significance value of 0.000, which is less than 0.01. This leads to the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis (Ha), indicating a favorable relationship of 0.211. This suggests that higher levels of observation are associated with an increase in burnout syndrome levels.

Table 4
Correlation between Description and Burnout syndrome

			Description	Burnout syndrome
Spearman's Rho	Description	Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.208**
		Sig. (two-tailed)	-	0.005
		N	180	180
	Burnout syndrome	Correlation coefficient	0.208**	1.000
		Sig. (two-tailed)	0.005	-
		N	180	180

Table 4 shows a significance value of 0.000, which is less than 0.01. Therefore, we accept the alternative hypothesis (Ha), indicating a favorable relationship of 0.208. This relationship suggests that higher levels of description are associated with an increase in burnout syndrome levels.

Table 5
Correlation between Acting with Awareness and Burnout syndrome

			Acting with Awareness	Burnout syndrome
Spearman's Rho	Acting with Awareness	Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.207**
		Sig. (two-tailed)	-	0.005
		N	180	180
	Burnout syndrome	Correlation coefficient	0.207**	1.000
		Sig. (two-tailed)	0.005	-
		N	180	180

Table 5 indicates a significance value of 0.000, which is less than 0.01. Consequently, we accept the alternative hypothesis (Ha), indicating a significant relationship of 0.207. This relationship suggests that a greater absence of awareness is associated with slightly higher levels of burnout.

Table 6
Correlation between Absence of Judgment and Burnout syndrome

			Absence of Judgment	Burnout syndrome
Spearman's Rho	Absence of Judgment	Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.207**
		Sig. (two-tailed)	-	0.005
		N	180	180
	Burnout syndrome	Correlation coefficient	0.207**	1.000
		Sig. (two-tailed)	0.005	-
		N	180	180

Table 6 shows a significance value of 0.000, which is less than 0.01. Therefore, we accept the alternative hypothesis (Ha), indicating a significant relationship of 0.207. This relationship suggests that a greater absence of judgment is associated with slightly higher levels of burnout.

Table 7
Correlation between Absence of Reactivity and Burnout syndrome

			Absence of Reactivity	Burnout syndrome
Spearman's Rho	Absence of Reactivity	Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.209**
		Sig. (two-tailed)	-	0.005
		N	180	180
	Burnout syndrome	Correlation coefficient	0.209**	1.000
		Sig. (two-tailed)	0.005	-
		N	180	180

Table 7 shows a significance value of 0.000, which is less than 0.01. Consequently, we accept the alternative hypothesis (Ha), indicating a favorable relationship of 0.209. This suggests that a greater absence of reactivity is associated with slightly higher levels of burnout.

Discussion

Regarding the general hypothesis (GH), a positive, albeit weak, relationship (r=0.206) was confirmed between mindfulness and the reduction of burnout. This relationship is supported by studies such as Benavides & Benavides (2021), which indicate that mindfulness improves teacher well-being and productivity. Moreover, Romero et al. (2024) and other studies confirm the positive impact of mindfulness on stress reduction and performance enhancement, though with variations in the intensity of these effects.

Concerning specific hypothesis 1 (H1), the study reveals a positive relationship, albeit of low intensity (r=0.211), suggesting that an increase in observational capacity could lead to a slight increase in burnout. While Contreras et al. (2021) found that low self-esteem raises the risk of burnout, whereas high self-esteem acts as a

protective factor, Collan et al. (2023) highlighted that job happiness decreases burnout in women. This research broadens the perspective by considering observation as a factor in the dynamics of burnout.

With respect to specific hypothesis 2 (H2), the study shows a positive correlation, although of limited magnitude (r=0.208), implying that enhancing descriptive capacity could lead to a slight increase in burnout. While Corcuera et al. (2022) found a significant relationship between psychosocial factors and burnout, and Gabriel (2021) identified high emotional exhaustion without a significant relationship to other variables, this study emphasizes the importance of analyzing descriptive capacity in self-perception of stress and its relationship with burnout, a factor closely linked to workplace conditions.

Regarding specific hypothesis 3 (H3), a low positive correlation (0.207) was detected between acting with awareness and burnout. This suggests that an increase in acting with awareness could be associated with a slight increase in burnout. While Cortez et al. (2021) indicate that exhaustion and emotional distancing generate job dissatisfaction among teachers, and Sardón et al. (2024) stress that resilience protects against burnout by improving adaptability, this study posits that the relationship between acting with awareness and burnout is more complex than previously thought, with both emotional and behavioral factors influencing this dynamic.

As for specific hypothesis 4 (H4), a moderate favorable correlation (0.207) was observed between the absence of judgment and burnout syndrome. This suggests that less self-criticism does not always translate to a decrease in exhaustion. In this regard, Collan et al. (2023) state that happiness and personal fulfillment mitigate emotional fatigue. Collectively, these findings invite consideration that, while the absence of judgment may impact burnout, happiness and personal fulfillment could be more relevant factors in preventing emotional exhaustion.

Finally, concerning specific hypothesis 5 (H5), a low positive correlation (0.209) was identified between the absence of reactivity and burnout. This suggests that a lower absence of reactivity does not guarantee burnout reduction on its own. While Gabriel (2021) and Cortez et al. (2021) demonstrate that job dissatisfaction and emotional exhaustion are determining factors of burnout, and Sardón et al. (2024) highlight that resilience combats stress and decreases burnout, this study suggests that, in certain cases, active adaptation and support networks may be more important than mere emotional regulation in workplace environments for addressing burnout.

Conclusions

According to the stated general objective, a positive correlation of 0.206 was identified between mindfulness and burnout syndrome. This suggests that, within the studied sample, individuals with higher levels of mindfulness also tend to exhibit increased levels of burnout.

Regarding the specific objectives, the results revealed the following:

- A positive correlation of 0.211 was found between the observation dimension of mindfulness and burnout syndrome, indicating that greater observational capacity is associated with higher levels of burnout.
- Additionally, a positive correlation of 0.208 was identified between the description dimension of mindfulness and burnout syndrome, suggesting that greater ability to describe experiences is related to an increase in burnout levels.
- A positive correlation of 0.207 was also found between the acting with awareness dimension of mindfulness and burnout syndrome. This finding indicates that a greater tendency to act with awareness is associated with slightly higher burnout levels.
- For the absence of judgment dimension of mindfulness, a positive correlation of 0.207 with burnout syndrome was found, suggesting that a greater absence of judgment relates to slightly higher burnout levels.
- Finally, a positive correlation of 0.209 was identified between the absence of reactivity dimension of mindfulness and burnout syndrome, indicating that a greater absence of reactivity is associated with slightly higher burnout levels.

In conclusion, it is recommended to implement mindfulness programs, emphasizing the development of emotional regulation and resilience to optimize stress management. It is essential to apply these practices in a balanced manner, as excessive use could be associated with an increase in burnout. Furthermore, it is advisable to combine these interventions with active coping strategies and the promotion of social support to prevent emotional overload among employees.

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