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Mindfulness Buffers Exclusion-Related Social Distress

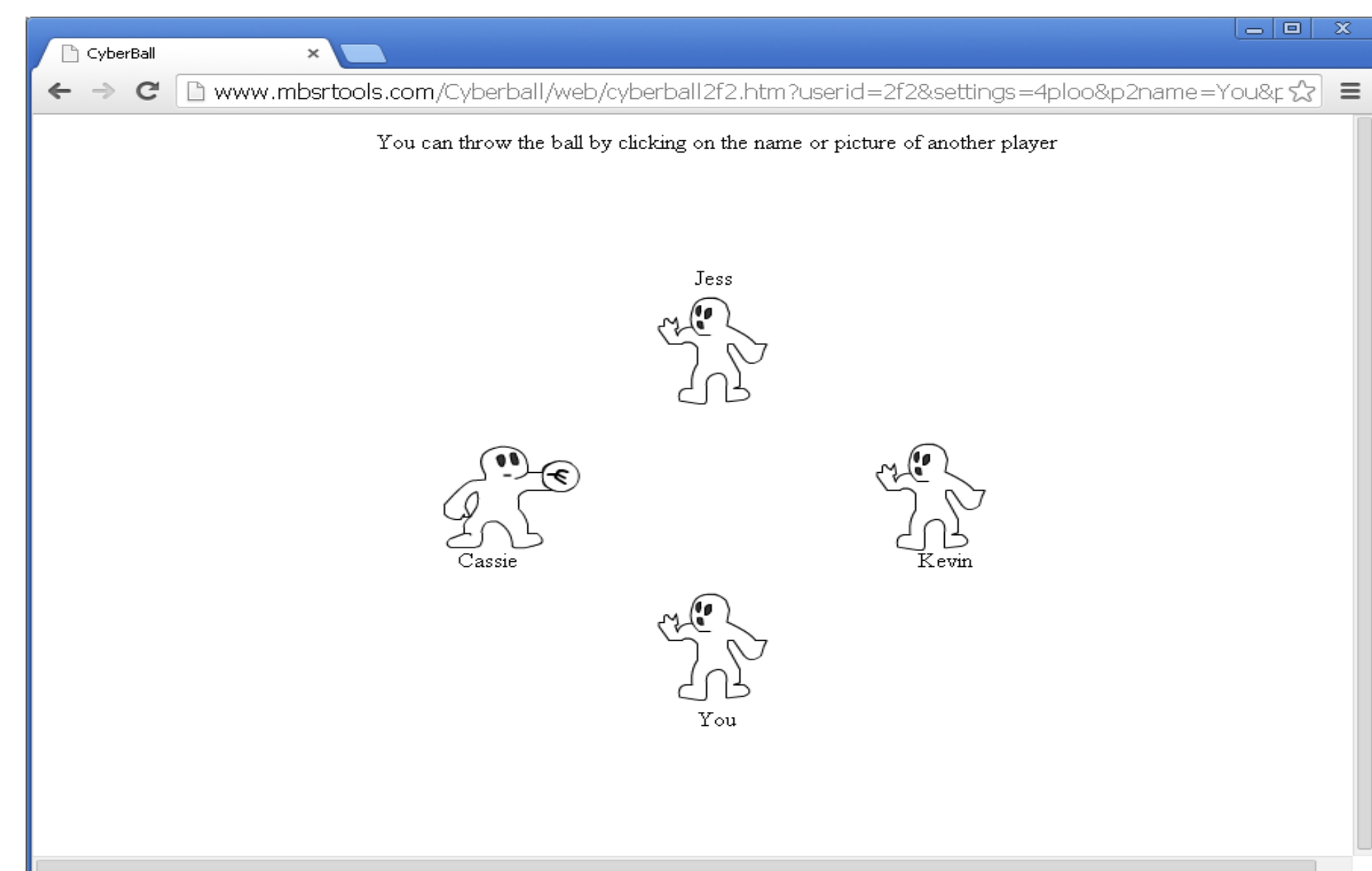
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Introduction

Social rejection is one of the more “painful” experiences humans can endure, affecting long term physical and emotional health¹. Experiencing social rejection can create psychological and social distress². A number of studies have sought to understand for whom and under what conditions social rejection would be more, or less impactful. Building on this research, the present study targeted mindfulness—a psychological state that entails receptive attention to one’s present experience³—as a potential buffer to rejection-induced social distress. We hypothesized that mindfulness would alleviate social distress because ample previous research suggests that mindfulness is a psychological resiliency factor that protects against personal and social distress.

Method

Study 1: Undergraduates (N = 87) received course credit in exchange for participation. Participants responded to survey questions and then played one round of Cyberball⁴. During the game, participants believe that they are playing a simple ball-tossing game over the internet with real people. However, the game is a computer program with no other participants, and it is designed to exclude the participant. After the game, participants reported levels of social distress⁵.



Study 2: Undergraduates (N = 119) received course credit in exchange for participation. As in Study 1, participants completed survey questions, but prior to playing Cyberball, participants were randomly assigned to listen to a mindfulness (MI) or control (CI) audio track. The purpose of the audio track is to induce a state of mindfulness; this allows for causal conclusions to be made from this study. After the induction, participants were excluded via Cyberball. Then, participants reported levels of social distress.

Social Distress Results Study 1

(a) Correlations Among Traits and Social Distress

Trait variable	Need Threat Scale Domain			
	Belongingness	Meaningful Existence	Control	Self Esteem
MAAS	0.28*	0.32**	0.27*	0.27*
AAw	0.27*	0.33**	0.18	0.26*
ACS	0.30**	0.31**	0.12	0.24*
RSE	0.18	0.04	0.20	0.24*

MAAS = Mindful Attention Awareness Scale, AAw = Acting with Awareness subscale of the Five-Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire, ACS = Attentional Control Scale, RSE = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Those higher in mindfulness showed reduced social distress (positive correlations indicate reduced social distress. Attentional control was also associated with reduced distress, whereas self-esteem was not.

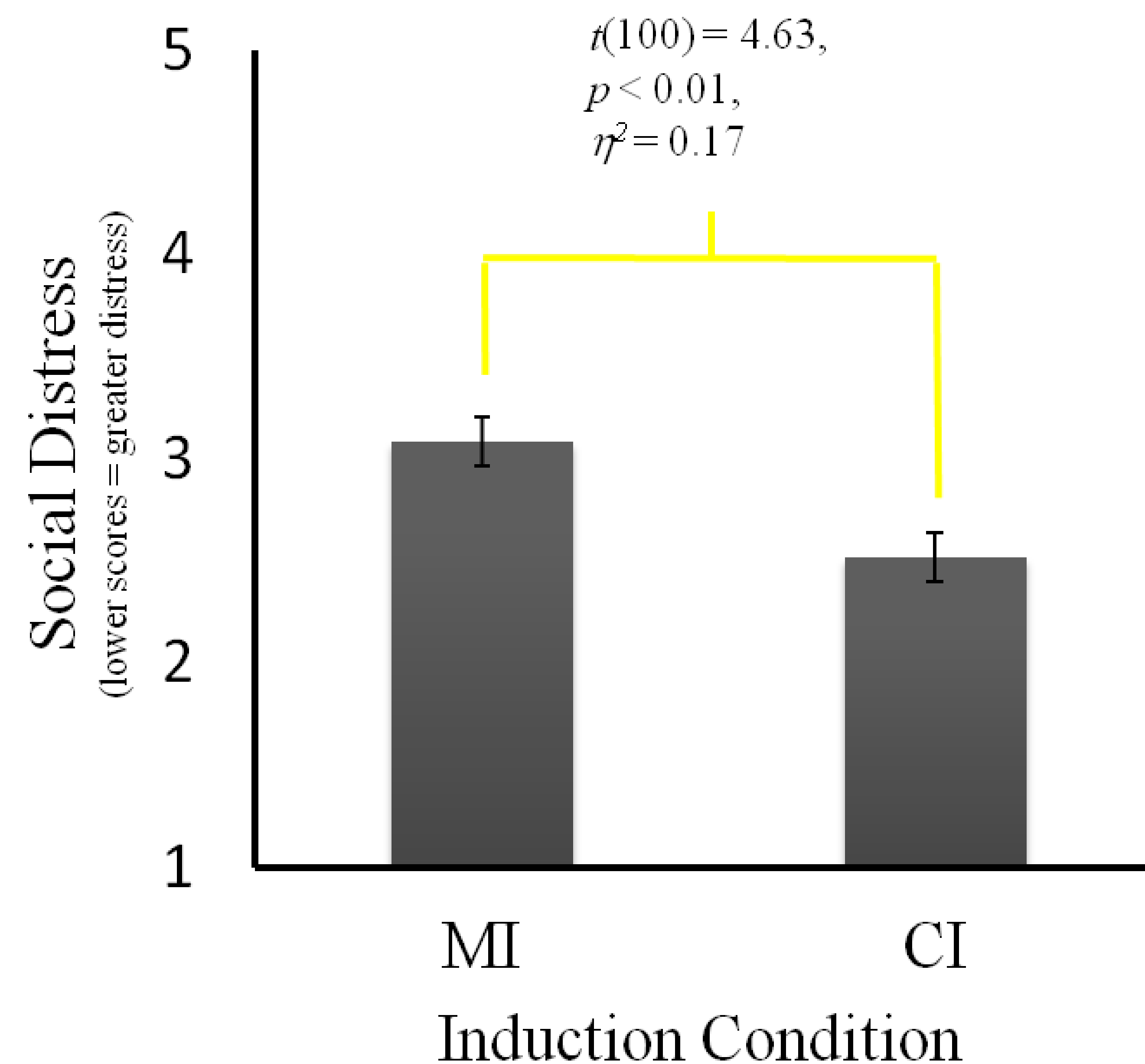
(b) Mindfulness’ Relation to Exclusion Distress After Controlling for Attentional Control

Trait variable	Need Threat Scale Domain			
	Belongingness	Meaningful Existence	Control	Self Esteem
MAAS	0.24*	0.27*	0.25*	0.24*
AAw	0.16	0.23	0.17	0.21

A two-block hierarchical regression was run to examine the effects of mindfulness on social distress over and above attentional control. Thus, we statistically controlled for attentional control by adding it into block one. Statistics are standardized coefficients of mindfulness’ effect on social distress from block two. Mindfulness as measured by the MAAS remained a stable predictor of the domains of social distress., indicating that mindfulness may buffer negative effects of exclusion.

Study 2

Effect of Mindfulness on Exclusion-related Social Distress



People in the MI condition experienced less total social distress, relative to CI. Similarly, there was a consistent pattern across all domains of social distress., Belongingness, $t(100) = 4.12$, $p < 0.001$, $h^2 = 0.14$; Meaningful Existence, $t(100) = 3.42$, $p = 0.002$, $h^2 = 0.10$; Control, $t(100) = 3.51$, $p = 0.001$, $h^2 = 0.11$; Self-Esteem, $t(100) = 3.56$, $p = 0.001$, $h^2 = 0.11$. This indicates that situationally inducing mindfulness can reduce exclusion-related distress.

Conclusion

- Mindfulness reduces exclusion-related social distress.
- Mindfulness may afford psychological resiliency when confronting social stressors.
- Importantly, mindfulness’ relation with reduced social distress was stable even after controlling for attentional control.
- Results are consistent with a growing body of research on mindfulness as a resiliency factor that protects against social threat.

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