Stop Thinking about Past Relationships: Imagined Interactions, Mindfulness, and Anxiety in Romantic Relationships

Alyssa R. McCoy and Dilbur D. Arsiwalla
University of Northern Iowa

Abstract

People often experience conflicts within their romantic relationships, which can lead to increased blood pressure, slower rates of healing, and even increased rates of early mortality (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1998). However, conflicts rarely end when the exchange of words ends—romantic partners continue imagining or ruminating about the conflict or potential future conflicts. These rumination behaviors alter the interaction may lead to increased levels of anxiety indirectly affecting physical health in the long-term. Across mTurk, Facebook, and an online campus research platform, 527 participants were randomly assigned to report on a recent positive, negative, or no imagined interaction with their romantic partner and complete measures of state anxiety and mindfulness. Those who imagined a negative interaction with their romantic partner experienced significantly more state anxiety compared to those who imagined a positive interaction or no interaction.

Introduction

• Engaging in conflict with a romantic partner can have excessive negative long-term physical health effects, but what about those moments when partners ruminate on those conflicts after they happen?

• Imagined interactions are used to simulate real conversations and people often experience similar physiological effects to a real conversation (e.g., sweaty palms, nausea, shakiness; Honeycutt, 2003). If these simulated conversations are similar to real conversations, it would suggest that those who think about conflicts with their romantic partner may experience the same physiological effects of a real conflict such as increased anxiety.

• Previous research also suggests that those who are more mindfully aware and able to stay in the present would experience less anxiety compared to those who are less mindfully aware (Frewn et al., 2008).

• This study examined how anxiety changes across those who imagined a negative imagined interaction compared to a positive imagined interaction and no imagined interaction.

• This study also incorporates mindful awareness and mindful practices to learn how they might play a role in ruminative behaviors.

Method

• Participants
  - n = 527
  - Current US resident
  - 3 months of relationship experience
  - M_age = 39.8, SD = 13.693
  - 66% female participants
  - 80% White participants

• Three priming conditions
  - Control: Imagine the last task completed alone
  - Positive: Imagined a date with romantic partner
  - Negative: Imagine a conflict or disagree with romantic partner

• Measures
  - Current Anxiety Level Measure
    - 16 items; α = .959; “I am experiencing difficulty breathing”
  - Mindful Awareness Attention Scale
    - 15 items; α = .940; “I find it difficult to stay focused on what’s happening in the present”

Results

• Those who imagined a negative interaction experienced significantly more state anxiety compared to those who imagined a positive interaction or no interaction.
  - Overall: F(2, 524) = 12.844, p < .000, R² = .047
  - Negative vs. Positive: M_neg = 5.453, p < .000
  - Positive vs. Control: M_pos = 3.384, p < .005

• There were no differences compared to those who imagined a positive imagined interaction and no imagined interaction.
  - Positive vs. Control: M_pos = 2.069, p = .161

• Those who reported higher trait mindfulness also reported lower state anxiety.
  - All Conditions: F(2, 525) = .373, p < .001, R² = .139
  - These correlations were stronger among those within the negative priming group compared to the other two priming groups.
    - Control: r(181) = -.367, p < .001, R² = .135
    - Positive: r(170) = -.331, p < .001, R² = .110
    - Negative: r(170) = -.453, p < .001, R² = .210

Hypotheses:

H1: Those who are primed with a negative imagined interaction will report a higher level of state anxiety compared to those who are primed with a positive imagined interaction or no imagined interaction.

H2: Those who are more mindfully aware will report lower anxiety scores across all three priming levels compared to those who are not as mindfully aware.

Figures

Figure 1. Pre- and Post-Anxiety Scores across Priming Conditions

Figure 2. Association between Mindful Awareness and Anxiety

Conclusion

• In general, those who imagined a negative imagined interaction experienced more anxiety compared to those who did not have an imagined interaction and those who had a positive imagined interaction.
  - This result suggests that experiencing a negative imagined interaction with a romantic partner can have similar consequences to physical health as actually engaging in a conflict with a romantic partner.

• Those who were more mindfully aware also experienced less anxiety across all three conditions.
  - This result suggests that trait mindfulness may impact the amount of anxiety experienced in stressful situations, which could be explored with future research.

• Future research should explore the role mindfulness plays in ruminative behaviors by using a mindfulness intervention before introducing the different priming conditions to see how this impacts anxiety overall.

References


Contact Information:
armccoy@uni.edu
dilburarsiwalla@uni.edu
Presented at the 93rd Annual Midwestern Psychological Association Conference, April 2022