

TEACHERS' WELL-BEING IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA: MEDITATION, COPING AND SELF-EFFICACY IN MANAGING POSITIVE EMOTIONS

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Abstract

The pandemic posed a challenge for the psychological well-being of teachers, leaving important consequences also in the post-pandemic period. Understanding which behavioural and emotional variables can strengthen teachers in the face of stress has become crucial. This study explores the association between meditation frequency and teachers' coping patterns in the post-pandemic context, considering the influence of self-efficacy in managing positive emotions on this relationship. A sample of N=110 Italian teachers took part in the research (mean age 50.05 years, SD=9.09; 87% female; 63% secondary school teachers, 37% secondary school teachers). The teachers responded to an online self-report questionnaire that included: an ad-hoc measure of meditation frequency, and two validated scales on coping and self-efficacy in emotion regulation. Results from two models of moderation indicate that meditation frequency is positively associated with problem orientation and positive attitude, with self-efficacy in coping with positive emotions reinforcing both relationships. The study emphasizes how the regular practice of meditation can promote teachers' psychosocial well-being by enhancing their coping skills through maximizing positive emotions in daily life. The results emphasize the importance of integrating daily meditation into support strategies for teachers in the post-pandemic period, providing valuable insights for targeted interventions.

Keywords: teachers; meditation; emotion regulation; self-efficacy; coping

Introduction

The profession of teaching is currently one of the most important and complex jobs (Benevene et al., 2020; UNESCO et al., 2024). During the pandemic, the psychophysical well-being of teachers worldwide has seen a significant decline (Kim et al., 2021) due to multiple factors such as uncertainty, negative perception of the profession, workload, concern for the well-being of

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others, and health-related challenges. Recent literature reviews and meta-analyses have highlighted an increase in symptoms related to depression, stress, and anxiety in this population (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2021), emphasizing the impact of the pandemic on teachers, even in terms of mental health. In particular, in the early stages of the pandemic, the biggest obstacle for teachers was adapting to distance learning, which negatively impacted emotions, motivation, and well-being (Panadero et al., 2022).

Despite a wide body of studies focusing on predictors of teacher well-being during the pandemic (Herman et al., 2021; Alves et al., 2021; Mari et al., 2021; Stang-Rabrig et al., 2022), few studies have focused on factors related to teacher well-being in the long term, even after the global health emergency (Billaudeau et al., 2022). Many teachers, for example, have experienced anxious symptoms upon returning to in-person teaching, highlighting the long-term effects of the pandemic on this profession (Wakui et al., 2021).

This underscores the need to precisely identify the resources to be strengthened in this population to increase their ability to cope with adversity and rethink the profile of teachers in the post-pandemic future (Hill et al., 2020), considering how closely linked teacher well-being is to the well-being of students and the school community. Indeed, the strategic and central role that the teaching profession currently assumes in all global and European institutional programs aimed at recovering learning and student well-being is particularly highlighted. The possibility of re-establishing the coordinates of mental health promotion, social support, and education for children, adolescents, and the entire school community (The World Bank et al., 2021; UNESCO et al., 2024) will depend on support for the implementation of resources and skills in teachers to cope with crises and uncertainty.

Meditation: a positive resource linked to coping and emotional regulation

The beneficial effects of meditation, across different types (dynamic, transcendental, silence-based, and mantra-based), on non-clinical populations have been widely demonstrated in terms of a reduction in symptoms of anxiety, depression, somatization, burnout, distress, post-traumatic stress, and negative emotions, and capable of increasing quality of life, autonomy, environmental mastery, personality integration, mental well-being, and perceived well-being (Yunesian et al., 2008; Iqbal et al., 2016; Lynch et al., 2018; Hendriks, 2018; Álvarez-Pérez et al., 2022, insert publication on meditation in prison).

Within this theoretical framework, investigating the relationship between meditation, coping styles, and emotion regulation can represent a fundamental factor in understanding the resources that teachers can rely on to cope with difficulties. Firstly, it's important to underline that effective coping strategies predispose individuals to a lower incidence of pathologies, greater longevity, and higher quality of life (Lazarus, 1999; Lester et al., 1994; Cheng et al., 2014). Meditation can contribute to improving personal coping abilities, reinforcing physical and mental health. Indeed, meditation can have psychological and behavioral benefits by increasing the mental openness of practitioners, thus

enriching the positive coping strategies available and decreasing avoidance coping (Pokorski & Suchorzynska, 2018). Mindfulness-based meditation, moreover, predisposes individuals to greater flexibility in coping strategies, making them more capable of monitoring and adapting the processes with which they face adversities (Jones et al., 2019).

Scientific literature has demonstrated the positive impact of meditation on coping even in specific populations. In the oncological population, for example, it has been shown that an eight-week mindfulness-based meditation program can influence the perception of stress, decreasing levels of salivary cortisol and emotion-focused coping in favor of problem-focused coping, from before to after the intervention (Kang & Oh, 2012). Similar results have emerged in individuals with substance use disorders, for whom meditation promotes positive attitudes and contact with their own emotions to increase their sense of responsibility in the face of stressors (Carlson & Larkin, 2009). Finally, concerning occupational burnout, meditation has been found useful in facilitating the transition from emotion-focused coping to proactive and problem-oriented coping (Charoensukmongkol et al., 2013). Although considered two separate constructs, coping and emotion regulation present relevant points of convergence regarding their importance in (i) psychological development processes, (ii) risk profiles for the development of psychopathologies, (iii) prevention and intervention strategies for psychopathology (Compas et al., 2014). Therefore, the relationship between meditation and coping should also be investigated in light of this variable.

Regulating one's emotions means being able to monitor the intensity, frequency, and duration of one's emotional responses, both negative and positive (Gross, 1998; Perasso & Velotti, 2020), thus increasing the likelihood of resilience in the face of adversity (Mestre et al., 2017; Arici-Özcan et al., 2019). The degree to which an individual feels capable of regulating their emotions, minimizing the frequency and impact of negative ones while maximizing the influence of positive ones, defines the level of self-efficacy in emotion management (Caprara et al., 2008).

Research has shown the existence of a reciprocal relationship between the ability to regulate emotions effectively and the use of coping strategies such as optimism (Jenaabadi et al., 2015; Gordon et al., 2016) and problem-focused coping (Pavani et al., 2016). Furthermore, like coping, emotion regulation can also be positively influenced by different types of meditative practices (Tang et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019; Valim et al., 2019; Basso et al., 2019; Fazia et al., 2020). This underscores how meditation can indirectly constitute a protective factor for individuals' psychological health (Bushell et al., 2009), acting on variables directly associated with it such as coping (Pokorski & Suchorzynska, 2018; Jones et al., 2019) and emotional regulation (Tang et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019; Valim et al., 2019; Basso et al., 2019; Fazia et al., 2020), especially in the post-pandemic era (Tan et al., 2021).

In particular, teachers face educational, cultural, emotional, and mental disparities while simultaneously engaging students in a path of learning and personal growth. These skills require a strong system of emotional regulation (Wang & Ye, 2021). Emotional management is among the competencies that determine a teacher's resilience and effectiveness in teaching and student engagement (Cam, 2021; Wijaya, 2021). In fact, in addition to knowledge and skills related to their teaching subject, teachers also need psycho-emotional knowledge to manage their own and others' emotions (Wang & Ye, 2021). For these reasons, it becomes crucial for teachers to know and utilize methods and techniques to address and overcome negative emotions and to enhance positive feelings even in difficult situations.

Teachers and meditation in the post-pandemic era

Numerous scientific findings underline how the pandemic has negatively impacted the mental health of teachers across different educational levels (Kim et al., 2021; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2021; Panadero et al., 2022). Consequently, it is necessary to inquire into what practices, in the post-pandemic period, can promote the psychosocial well-being of this population. It is essential, for the well-being of teachers themselves and the new generations of students, that they are able to perform their work in a complete and respectful manner towards their own health and that of others (Ray et al., 2007).

Meditation has been shown capable of reducing stress in terms of emotional, somatic, and behavioral manifestations in secondary school teachers after four weeks of training, during which they engaged in a 45-minute session once a week (Winzelberg & Luskin, 1999). Moreover, meditation serves as a protective factor against the possibility of the target population developing work-related stress and burnout in the school environment (Anderson et al., 1999). Therefore, meditation can constitute a flexible and effective practice to attenuate emotional exhaustion, a precursor of burnout, and to increase empathy to strengthen the relationship between teachers and students (Csaszar & Buchanan, 2015). In fact, neuro-cognitively, the student is predisposed to reproduce the behaviors of the teacher in a relationship of correspondence and mirroring (Perasso et al., 2023).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact of meditation on teachers' health has been the subject of attention from the scientific community (Garro et al., 2023). In an Italian study (Matiz et al., 2020), fifty-eight female teachers, during the first lockdown, underwent an 8-week mindfulness training: after the training, regardless of different levels of resilience, the teachers reported a statistically significant increase in awareness, well-being, interoceptive awareness, empathy, and a decrease in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion. A study conducted in the United States (Demmin et al., 2022), involving a sample of one hundred and four teachers during the pandemic period, investigated the effects of a training combining meditation and aerobic exercise, finding an improvement in depressive symptoms, rumination, a decrease in perceived stress, an increase in self-compassion, and the quality of

work-life. Increases in working memory, cognitive flexibility, and a lower frequency of sleep disturbances were also observed. To date, similar evidence has not yet been collected regarding teachers in the post-pandemic period.

Objective

The study aims to investigate, in the post-pandemic context, the relationship between meditation frequency and positive coping modalities (*e.g.*, positive attitude and problem orientation). Additionally, it is hypothesized that this relationship may be incrementally moderated by self-efficacy in regulating positive emotions.

Method

Participants

The study sample consists of N=110 teachers with a mean age of 50.05 years (SD=9.09), predominantly female (87%). 63% teach at secondary schools of the second degree, while 37% teach at secondary schools of the first degree. They come from schools located in different parts of Italy: 13.6% from the north, 33.6% from the center, 50% from the south, and 2.7% from the islands. Regarding educational qualifications, the majority (69%) have a master's degree. In terms of teaching experience, the majority (63.6%) have been teaching for more than ten years, while 25.5% have been teaching for more than three years, and only 10.9% have been teaching for a shorter period (between one and three years).

Measures

Participants completed an online questionnaire composed of validated and *ad-hoc* self-report instruments via the Survey Monkey platform. Regarding the validated scales, teachers completed the APEN/A - APEP/A scales (Personal Self-Efficacy Scales in Managing Negative and Positive Emotions) (Caprara, editor, 2001) to assess the level of personal self-efficacy in managing both negative and positive emotions. For this sample the scales presented, respectively, a Cronbach's α of .88 and .81, showing a good internal consistency. These dimensions were evaluated through 15 items with responses on a 5-point Likert scale (from "Not at all capable=1" to "Completely capable=5"). Additionally, they responded to two subscales of the COPE-NVI questionnaire (Coping Orientation to the Problems Experienced-New Italian Version) (Sica et al., 2008), for a total of twenty-four items, on a 4-step Likert scale (from "I usually don't do it=1" to "I almost always do it=4") related to positive coping attitude and problem orientation. Overall, the scale presented excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's α =.93). Finally, teachers answered an *ad-hoc* scale on meditation frequency: "Have you ever practiced meditation, and/or a few minutes of silence, and/or stress management techniques?" with responses

ordered on a Likert scale as 0=no, never, 1=yes, sometimes as needed, 2=yes, regularly.

Procedure

The research, developed by the Research Institute for Neuroscience Education and Didactics (RINED) of the Patrizio Paoletti Foundation in collaboration with the University of Padua (Italy). Participants, teachers identified through convenience sampling, were affiliated with schools that had participated in online events organized by the FPP, accredited by the Italian Ministry of Education, between February 2021 and January 2022. Teachers participated, after giving informed consent, in data collection in March 2022 and November 2023.

Data analysis

To understand the relationship between the variables of interest, descriptive analyses and two simple moderation models will be conducted using the IBM SPSS program (Version 29.0) and the PROCESS extension (Hayes, 2012). In the first model, the variables entered are: meditation frequency (as X, or predictor), positive attitude as a coping style (as Y, or target), and self-efficacy in managing positive emotions (as M, or moderator). In the second model, the variables entered are: meditation frequency (as X, or predictor), problem orientation as a coping style (as Y, or target), and self-efficacy in managing positive emotions (as M, or moderator).

Results

Descriptive analyses reveal that, regarding meditation, 33.6% never practice it, 51.8% practice it sometimes as needed, and 14.5% practice it regularly. In the first model (Figure 1), it emerges that meditation frequency predicts problem orientation ($B=16.19$, $t=2.57$, $p<.01$ ranging from LLCI 3.37 to ULLCI 28.65) with moderation by self-efficacy in regulating positive emotions ($B=1.09$, $t=5.61$, $p<.001$ ranging from .70 to 1.48). Interaction with $B=.08$, $t=2.97$, $p<.05$ ranging from 1.14 to .22. The model explains 24% of the variance ($R^2=.24$).

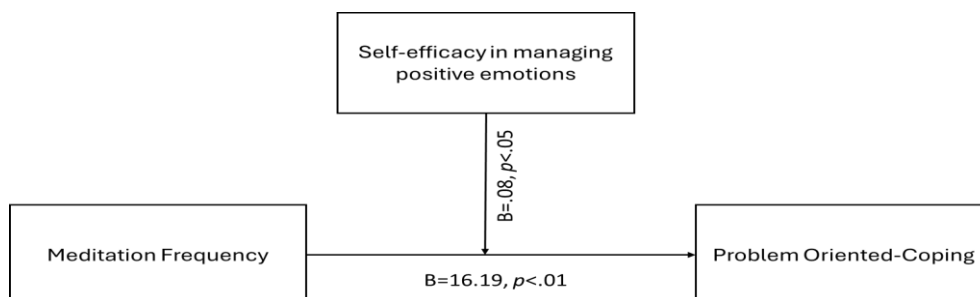


Figure 1. Model 1 from PROCESS (Hayes, 2012): the relationship between meditation frequency and problem orientation moderated by self-efficacy in managing positive emotions

In the second model (Figure 2), meditation frequency predicts positive attitude ($B=17.06$, $t=2.86$, $p<.01$ ranging from 5.43 to 29.77), with moderation by self-efficacy in regulating positive emotions ($B=1.06$, $t=5.56$, $p<.001$, ranging from .68 to 1.44). Interaction with $B=.71$, $t=3.14$, $p<.01$, ranging from 1.15 to .26. The model explains 23% of the variance ($R^2=.23$).

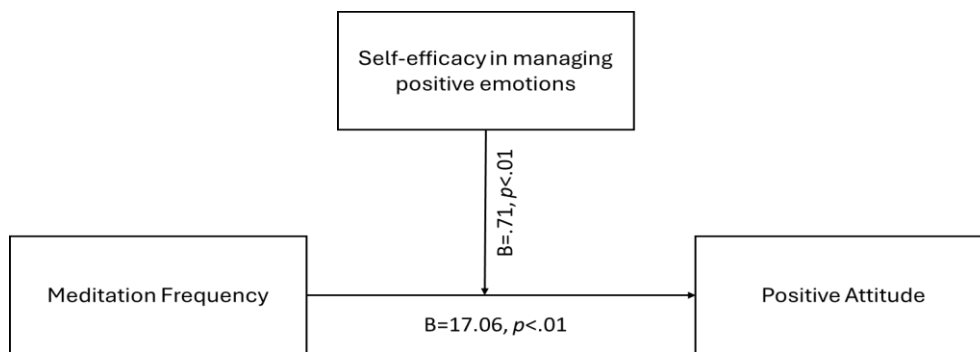


Figure 2. Model 1 from PROCESS (Hayes, 2012): the relationship between meditation frequency and positive attitude moderated by self-efficacy in managing positive emotions

Discussion

The results of the present study demonstrate a positive association between the frequency of meditation practiced by teachers and their coping resources. More specifically, diligently practicing meditation predicts the ability to cope with stress through problem orientation. Similarly, frequent meditation practice also precedes positive attitude. Both relationships, considered in the conducted statistical models, are positively moderated by the teacher's ability to manage their positive emotions, that is, to maximize their frequency and intensity.

The obtained results are in line with the theoretical and empirical framework of positive psychology (Seligman & Peterson, 2003), which in recent decades has paid increasing attention to meditation as a variable associated with individuals' well-being (Ivtzan et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2006; Shapiro, 2009). In this framework, positive psychological resources such as coping and emotion regulation have been studied (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2003; Wong et al., 2006; Tamir et al., 2011). Nevertheless, to date, this is the first study to have considered the relationship between meditation practice, coping strategies, and emotion management, highlighting the importance of focusing on the complexity of interactions between constructs that lead to psychosocial well-being.

The present study corroborates previous evidence that: (i) has demonstrated how meditation increases the flexibility of coping strategies in those who practice it (Pokorski & Suchorzynska, 2018; Jones et al., 2019; Paoletti et al., 2023), constituting an important resource to counteract the influence of stress even at the neuroendocrine level (Kang & Oh, 2012); (ii) have

emphasized how meditative practice can positively influence the ability to regulate emotions (Tang et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019; Valim et al., 2019; Basso et al., 2019; Fazia et al., 2020). Assuming the convergence of coping and emotional regulation in preventing psychopathology (Compass et al., 2014), the obtained results enrich the landscape of studies that have investigated the relationship between emotional regulation, optimism, and problem-oriented coping (Jenaabadi et al., 2015; Gordon et al., 2016; Pavani et al., 2016).

Previous studies on the beneficial effects of meditation on coping and emotional regulation have been conducted on populations affected by substance abuse (Carlson & Larkin, 2009), occupational burnout (Charoensukmongkol et al., 2013), oncological diseases (Kang & Oh, 2012), and detainees (Di Giuseppe et al., 2022). The present study, instead, focused on the population of teachers, described in recent literature as particularly at risk in terms of stress, anxiety, and depression due to the psychological consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021). Although during the pandemic, there was significant scientific interest in predictors of the well-being of this population (Herman et al., 2021; Alves et al., 2021; Mari et al., 2021; Stang-Rabrig et al., 2022), few studies have investigated these variables in the long term post-pandemic (Billaudeau et al., 2022). The challenges associated with the return to face-to-face teaching (Wakui et al., 2021) fueled the exploration of the positive resources of the teachers in the present study. Indeed, it is necessary to learn from the experience of the pandemic how to enhance the present and future profile of teachers (Hill et al., 2020), enabling them to educate the new generations in safeguarding their own and others' psychological health (Ray et al., 2007).

Previous studies have demonstrated how meditation practice can reduce perceived stress among teachers in relatively short periods (*e.g.*, 4 weeks) (Winzelberg & Luskin, 1999; Anderson et al., 1999). During the pandemic, similar studies (Garro et al., 2023; Matiz et al., 2020; Demmin et al., 2022) found that brief mindfulness training increased resilience, well-being, and empathy in this population, counteracting anxious and depressive symptoms. However, unlike these studies, the present research did not test the level of well-being of teachers pre- and post-meditation training but rather focused on the frequency with which teachers individually practice it. This data was interacted with the ability to regulate positive emotions and coping strategies of problem orientation and positive attitude. The focus of the study was not to test the already established positive impact of meditation on teachers' well-being but rather to concentrate on the relationship of this practice with their positive resources. In this way, the study emphasizes the importance of considering the interactions between variables and not just individual factors because according to various theoretical perspectives, well-being stems from a constellation of mutually interrelated constructs (Engel, 1977; Lazarus, 1999; Seligman & Peterson, 2003). The relationship between meditation practice and a constellation of positive resources is highly significant in terms of promoting well-being even in systemic terms, in

light of studies that highlight a relationship between teachers and students during adolescence, demonstrating that the positive characteristics of teachers (*e.g.*, coping styles, common humanity, self-efficacy in managing positive emotions) correlate with specific aspects of well-being and psychological functioning of adolescents (Di Giuseppe et al., 2023).

Conclusions and limitations

This study investigated the impact of meditation on teachers' problem-oriented coping and positive attitude, considering the potential moderation of self-efficacy in the management of positive emotions in the relationship between meditation and coping. The first model, focused on problem-oriented coping, highlighted that this coping style is preceded by the frequency of meditation and is moderated in an increasing sense by teachers' ability to manage (and therefore maximize) positive emotions. The second statistical model instead focused on positive attitude, also positively associated with the frequency of meditation and moderated by self-efficacy in the regulation of positive emotions. This indicates that regular meditation can contribute to promoting a positive attitude towards life among teachers, especially when supported by a high capacity to maximize positive emotions. The results of this study offer psychologists, teachers, and school principals valuable insights for the development of targeted interventions and strategies aimed at teachers' well-being, based on meditation practice and emotional regulation. Such positive resources can help teachers navigate the complexities and uncertainties of the post-pandemic period, synergistically contributing to the growth of the new generations. The study has some methodological limitations. First, the use of only self-report measures may have led to social desirability biases in participants' responses (Dicken, 1963; Kazdin, 2021). Future studies on the investigated phenomena could benefit from the integration of qualitative tools in the research design (*e.g.*, analysis of daily diaries written by participants), ensuring in-depth analysis of teachers' experiences through Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Furthermore, the present research does not include a longitudinal design since the aim was to capture the interaction of the variables meditation frequency, emotional regulation, and coping in the here and now. Additional future studies could delve deeper, including more measurements over time, into the temporal trends of this constellation of variables, taking into account salient moments of the teacher's work year (*e.g.*, beginning of classes, summer period). Finally, it is worth noting that the study measured meditation frequency as a comprehensive term for different types of practices (*e.g.*, mindfulness, silent meditation, yoga). Future studies could investigate the association of specific types of meditation with the positive resources of teachers explored here (emotion regulation, coping). Plus, given gender differences in adolescents' behaviors (Perasso & Barone, 2018), future research should deepen specific constellations of variables linked to males and females coping strategies. Despite the identified limitations, the study

innovatively emphasizes the importance of considering, within positive psychology, not only individual constructs but also their interactions. Additionally, the obtained results aim to draw the attention of the psychological and pedagogical scientific community to the importance for teachers to integrate meditative practices into their daily lives, improving their working conditions and their ability to manage stress, indirectly contributing to the well-being of students (Perasso et al., 2023).

Ethics statement

The research, developed by the Research Institute for Neuroscience Education and Didactics (RINED) of the Patrizio Paoletti Foundation in collaboration with the University of Padua (Italy), received approval from the Ethics Committee of the same University (protocol: 2020-III/13.41.10).

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

The authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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