Trait mindfulness, emotion dysregulation, and depression in individuals with multiple sclerosis

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Emotion dysregulation plays a role in the development and maintenance of psychopathology. Given the higher rates of mood disturbances in people with multiple sclerosis (PwMS), there is a need to explore the relationships between metrics of emotion dysregulation and potential protective traits. Mindfulness, a multi-faceted trait characteristic reflecting present moment awareness, is one such trait showing promise for positive associations with affective health. The current project assessed the relationship between trait mindfulness, the use of emotion regulation strategies during an emotionally evocative task, and depression in PwMS.
Methods: Sixty-one PwMS completed a worry/rumination induction task that examined emotion regulation strategy use in response to emotionally evocative stimuli.
Results: Higher trait mindfulness was associated with both lower symptoms of depression and greater employment of acceptance-based strategies following worry and rumination inductions. Acceptance use mediated the relationship between trait mindfulness and symptoms of depression.
Conclusions: Our results suggest that the association between trait mindfulness and emotion dysregulation extends to the use of emotion regulation strategies during an emotionally evocative task. Additionally, emotion regulation strategy use, and acceptance in particular, may play a role in the relationship between trait mindfulness and depression. These findings suggest that increasing levels of mindfulness through clinical interventions may present a path toward improving emotion regulation, and by extension, reducing the symptoms of depression in PwMS.

1. Introduction

Compared to the general population, the prevalence of depression is higher for people with multiple sclerosis (PwMS; Patten et al., 2017). Comorbid depression in PwMS predicts a greater reduction in quality of life (Frühwald et al., 2001) compared to other symptoms such as disability and fatigue (Karatepe et al., 2011). Additionally, PwMS with comorbid depression are less likely to adhere to their disease modifying therapies (Tarrants et al., 2011), have a significantly increased risk of their disability worsening (Binzer et al., 2019), have an increased risk of suicide (Shen et al., 2019), and also report lower amounts of exercise and poorer diet (Ploughman et al., 2020). Given the numerous negative outcomes associated with comorbid depression for PwMS, there is an emerging need to explore potential correlates of depression in PwMS to better understand what leads to an increased prevalence rate of depression in PwMS.

Emotion dysregulation, or patterns of emotional response management that interfere with goal-directed activity, is thought to be a transdiagnostic factor underlying variance in mood disorders as well as anxiety and personality disorders (Fisher et al., 2017; Desrosiers et al., 2013). PwMS experience greater difficulties with emotion regulation compared to controls (Phillips et al., 2014; Prakash et al., 2019). A recent study from our laboratory provided evidence for higher symptoms of depression and reduced quality of life in PwMS compared with age, sex, and education-matched community controls (Prakash et al., 2019). The group differences between PwMS and community controls

were mediated by differences in emotion dysregulation and the use of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, providing evidence for emotion dysregulation as a factor contributing to the variance in symptoms of depression (Prakash et al., 2019). Consistent with the broader literature (Sloan et al., 2017), the aforementioned results provide preliminary evidence that psychiatric disturbances in PwMS may reflect an underlying vulnerability—elevated emotion dysregulation. Given the high rates of depression and the increased difficulties with emotion dysregulation in PwMS, there is a growing need to identify traits that may be associated with better psychological health in this population.

In recent years, trait mindfulness has gained traction as being correlated with improved psychological health in numerous populations (Tomlinson et al., 2018). Trait mindfulness, referring to one's ability to maintain a present-focused attention and engage in self-regulation (Weinstein et al., 2009), is associated negatively with both self-reported depression (Pakenham and Samios, 2013; Sauder et al., 2021) and emotion dysregulation (Schirda et al., 2015) in PwMS. Additionally, higher levels of trait mindfulness have been associated with a myriad of positive outcomes in PwMS. These outcomes include decreased psychological stress, better coping skills, increased resilience, and better quality of life (Senders et al., 2014).

Although there is a clear link between trait mindfulness and emotion dysregulation (Schirda et al., 2015; Coffey and Hartman, 2008; Hill and Updegraff, 2012), the literature assessing trait mindfulness and emotion regulation strategy use is more complex. For example, higher trait mindfulness has been associated with a greater use of cognitive reappraisal, a putatively adaptive strategy (Jermann et al., 2009). Conversely, a recent study from our laboratory did not find a relationship between mindfulness and cognitive reappraisal (Prakash et al., 2017). In contrast to these more adaptive strategies, the relationship between mindfulness and maladaptive strategy use appears to be more robust. Higher levels of mindfulness have been linked to a reduced use of rumination (Borders et al., 2010) and suppression (Tamagawa et al., 2013). Furthermore, thought avoidance has been identified as a partial mediator of the association between mindfulness and emotion dysregulation (Prakash et al., 2017). Thus, additional research is needed to elucidate the differential associations between mindfulness and emotion regulation strategy use and to examine how these concepts relate to depressive symptoms. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to replicate the previously observed negative relationship between trait mindfulness and emotion dysregulation (Schirda et al., 2015) and to extend these findings to emotion regulation strategy use in the context of a laboratory-based induction of worry and rumination. We predicted that higher levels of trait mindfulness would be related to lower emotion dysregulation and reduced symptoms of depression. Conversely, we predicted that higher trait mindfulness would be related to decreased use of avoidance and suppression. Although the relationship between mindfulness and use of adaptive emotion regulation strategies is more equivocal, it was predicted that mindfulness would be associated with increased use of acceptance—given its theoretical tie to mindfulness and not cognitive reappraisal. Additionally, although trait mindfulness appears to be associated with better psychological functioning in PwMS, little is known about the potential mediators of this relationship. Thus, the second aim of the current study was to examine the mediating role of emotion regulation strategy use on the relationship between trait mindfulness and depressive symptoms.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The current study involves secondary analyses of baseline data from PwMS enrolled in a randomized controlled trial designed to compare the effects of mindfulness training with adaptive cognitive training and a wait-list control group on emotion dysregulation in PwMS (clinicaltrials.

gov # NCT02717429). To be included in this study, participants had to be relapse- and corticosteroid-free for the prior 30 days (see the primary RCT (Schirda et al., 2020) for more details about trial design and information on inclusionary/exclusionary criteria). This study included 61 PwMS between the ages of 30 and 59 (M_{age} = 45.74 years; SD = 8.10).

2.2. Procedure

Eligible participants were invited to participate in a seven-day diary period designed to collect data on their worries and ruminations. Data from these diaries were used for the worry/rumination induction task that was completed in the laboratory. After completing the diaries, participants were invited to complete an in-person neuropsychological assessment. All participants provided informed consent before participating as required by The Ohio State University Review Board. All participants were compensated an hourly rate of $8.00 and received $10.00 for completing all the diary entries.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Trait mindfulness

Trait mindfulness was measured using the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ; Baer et al., 2006). Although the FFMQ has not been specifically validated in multiple sclerosis there is a significant body of literature employing this measure with adequate reliability in PwMS (Schirda et al., 2015; Pagnini et al., 2019; Gilbertson and Klatt, 2017; Senders et al., 2018). The FFMQ is a 39-item questionnaire assessing five unique facets of mindfulness: observing, describing, acting with awareness, nonjudgement, and nonreactivity. Using a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*), respondents rated how often they engaged in behaviors representative of each of the facets. Higher total scores on the FFMQ reflect higher levels of trait mindfulness. Cronbach's alpha for the total score, including all facets, was 0.903.

2.3.2. Emotion dysregulation

Emotion dysregulation was measured using the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz and Roemer, 2004). The DERS is a 36-item questionnaire designed to measure six facets of emotion dysregulation: nonacceptance of emotional responses (Nonacceptance), difficulties engaging in goal directed behavior (Goals), impulse control difficulties (Impulse), lack of emotional awareness (Awareness), limited access to ER strategies (Strategies) and lack of emotional clarity (Clarity). Using a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*), respondents rated how often they experienced difficulties in each facet. Higher scores reflect greater emotion dysregulation. Cronbach's alpha for the total score, including all facets, was 0.940.

2.3.3. Depression

Depressive symptoms were measured using the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck et al., 1996). The BDI-II is a commonly used, self-report measure of depressive symptoms consisting of 21 items measured using a 4-point rating scale. Higher scores on the BDI-II reflect higher levels of depressive symptoms. Cronbach's alpha was 0.930.

2.3.4. Daily diary assessment

Participants completed seven daily diaries online using Qualtrics (software Version 2014). Participants were presented with a detailed description, an example of worry and rumination, and were subsequently quizzed on both constructs. Worry was framed as a form of repetitive thinking that focuses on the future, whereas rumination involved perseverating on events from the past. After demonstrating knowledge of the constructs, participants provided descriptions of a salient worry and rumination that occurred in the past 24 h and responded to a set of questions measuring how they felt before, during, and after their worry and rumination. Participants also provided a rating

of the intensity of each worry/rumination. The two most intense worries and the two most intense ruminations were selected for the worry/rumination induction. When intensity ratings were equivalent, the participant's most recent worry/rumination was selected.

2.3.5. Worry/Rumination induction task

A worry/rumination induction task was employed to assess the use of emotion regulation strategies. We selected the two most intense participant-rated worries and ruminations. Participants were asked to engage with these worries and ruminations for a total of four blocks. During each induction, the participant's worry (e.g., "I worried about what my husband would think when I told him about my fall") or rumination (e.g., "I've been ruminating about the different paths my life could have taken and the choices I've made over the years") was presented. Then, participants were given instructions to follow a series of twelve auditory prompts to increase their engagement with the worry (e. g., "Think about how bad the consequence could be."; "Think about how keyed up or on edge you feel.") or rumination (e.g., "Think about how you wish this situation had gone better."; "Think about all of your shortcomings, failures, and mistakes.") to induce negative affect. An auditory prompt was presented every 20 s. Next, participants engaged in a two-minute typing period where they described all the thoughts and emotions they experienced during the induction. Participants were then presented with their worry or rumination and given two minutes to generate ways they could regulate their emotions. Before and after each block, participants responded to a set of questions measuring their employment of two maladaptive (avoidance and suppression) and two adaptive (acceptance and cognitive reappraisal) emotion regulation strategies on a scale of 1 to 100. Each of the four blocks lasted eight minutes for a total task length of 32 min.

2.4. Statistical analyses

Data was analyzed using SPSS Version 26. Each composite variable was outlier corrected and tested for normality. Outliers were defined as any z-score ±2.5 SD from the mean and were replaced with the value corresponding to 2.5 SD from the mean (Osborne and Overbay, 2004). Normality was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test. (Shapiro and Wilk, 1965). Pearson product moment correlations (r) and Spearman rank-order correlations (ρ) were performed for normally distributed and non-normal distributed data, respectively.

Strategies employed during the worry/rumination induction were examined independently due to the non-significant association between cognitive reappraisal and acceptance ($r_s = -0.11$, $p = .39$), two putatively adaptive strategies. Although avoidance and suppression were significantly correlated ($r_s = 0.62$, $p < .001$), these strategies were also examined independently for consistency. We employed a linear mixed model framework estimated by the Restricted Maximum Likelihood (REML) method. For strategy use, we examined a full-factorial model including the fixed effects of Induction (worry, rumination), Strategy Type (acceptance, cognitive reappraisal, suppression, and avoidance), Mindfulness (FFMQ), and the interactions of these variables. We also included the random effects of each participant's intercept, induction, and strategy type. The dependent variable was strategy use ratings from the worry/rumination induction. Based on our findings from the linear mixed models, we examined the mediating role of acceptance in the relationship between trait mindfulness and depression. To do so, we constructed a mediation model using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). Utilizing the PROCESS macro, we employed a nonparametric bootstrapping technique with 5000 resamples to estimate the direct, indirect, and total effects of trait mindfulness on depression. In our model, the indirect effect (ab) was the effect of trait mindfulness on depression accounted for by acceptance use. The model statistically examines the product between (a) the effect of trait mindfulness on acceptance use, and (b) the effect of acceptance use on depression. The direct effect (c') was the effect of trait mindfulness on depression after

statistically controlling for acceptance use. Finally, the total effect (c) was the sum of the indirect and direct effects.

3. Results

The majority of participants were white (72%), middle-aged ($M = 45.7$, $SD = 8.10$), and female (77%) with a relapsing-remitting disease course (96.7%). The participants had an average disease duration of 11.2 years ($SD = 7.37$, range $= 0.50 - 30$) and reported a mean disease severity, assessed by the Expanded Disability Status Scale (EDSS; Kurtzke, 1983), of 4.34 ($SD = 1.31$, range $= 0 - 7$). Additional demographics and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Participants with a higher EDSS score were more likely to report greater symptoms of depression ($r_s = 0.40$, $p \leq 0.01$). However, no other clinical characteristics showed a significant relationship with our variables of interest. Specifically, there was no significant relationship between depressive symptoms and disease duration ($r_s = -0.07$, $p = .59$), emotion dysregulation and EDSS ($r_s = 0.16$, $p = .23$), or emotion dysregulation and disease duration ($r_s = -0.07$, $p = .58$). Similarly, there was no relationship between trait mindfulness and disease duration ($r_s = 0.034$, $p = .78$) or EDSS score ($r_s = -0.24$, $p = .06$).

Consistent with our previous findings, we found that individuals with higher trait mindfulness reported less difficulties with emotion regulation ($r_s = -0.67$, $p < .001$) and lower depression ($r_s = -0.54$, $p < .001$). Additional bivariate correlations are presented in Table 2. Examining the worry and rumination task, we found a significant interaction between trait mindfulness X strategy type ($F(3, 177) = 3.18$, $p = .025$). There were no significant main effects of induction type ($F(1, 59) = 0.026$, $p = .87$), strategy type ($F(3, 177) = 1.01$, $p = .39$), or trait mindfulness ($F(1, 59) = 0.03$, $p = .86$). Post-hoc analysis of the

Table 1
Demographic characteristics ($N = 61$).

Demographic	Number (%) or mean (SD)	Range
Age (years)	45.74 (8.10)	31 – 59
Sex		
Male	14 (23.00%)	
Female	47 (77.00%)	
Education (years)	15.99 (2.27)	12 – 23
BDI-II	12.16 (9.89)	0 – 38.01
Race		
White	44 (72.1%)	
Black	14 (23%)	
Biracial	2 (3.3%)	
Other	1 (1.6%)	
MS Course		
RRMS	59 (96.7%)	
PPMS	1 (1.6%)	
Unknown	1 (1.6%)	
Disease duration (years)	11.21 (7.37)	< 1 – 30
EDSS	4.34 (1.31)	0 – 7
FFMQ		
Average	25.56 (3.85)	16 – 34.4
Observing	26.21 (6.16)	
Describing	26.34 (6.98)	
Acting with Awareness	26.44 (5.98)	
Nonjudging	28.18 (6.47)	
Nonreacting	20.61 (4.71)	
DERS		
Total	76.52 (21.00)	42 – 129.79
Nonacceptance	12.33 (5.58)	
Goals	13.70 (4.16)	
Impulse	10.41 (4.04)	
Awareness	14.33 (5.05)	
Strategies	16.11 (5.80)	
Clarity	9.74 (3.64)	

Note. BDI-II = Beck Depression Inventory-II. RRMS = Relapsing-Remitting MS; PPMS = Primary-Progressive MS; EDSS = Expanded Disability Status Scale; FFMQ = Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire; DERS = Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale.

Table 2
Bivariate Correlations Among Variables.

Measures	1	2	3	4	5
(A) DERS					
1. Nonacceptance	–				
2. Goals	.38**	–			
3. Impulse	.53**	.61**	–		
4. Awareness	.48**	.16	.34**	–	
5. Strategies	.58**	.59**	.62**	.47**	–
6. Clarity	.34**	.20	.39**	.66**	.41**
(B) FFMQ					
1. Observing	–				
2. Describing	.21	–			
3. Acting with Awareness	.05	.48**	–		
4. Nonjudging	.14	.24	.13	–	
5. Nonreacting	.38**	.34**	.22	.36**	–
(C) Composite Variables					
1. DERS	–				
2. FFMQ	−0.67**	–			
3. BDI-II	.63**	−0.54**	–		

Note. DERS = Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale; FFMQ = Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire; BDI-II = Beck Depression Inventory-II.
$p \leq 0.05$.
** $p \leq 0.01$.

significant trait mindfulness X strategy type interaction indicated that higher levels of dispositional mindfulness were associated with greater acceptance use compared to avoidance (estimate = −3.24, $p = .01$) and suppression use (estimate = −3.31, $p < .01$), but not when compared to cognitive reappraisal (estimate = −1.62, $p = .20$) use. The relationship between mindfulness and suppression use did not significantly differ from the relationship between mindfulness and cognitive reappraisal (estimate = 1.69, $p = .18$) or avoidance use (estimate = 0.07, $p = .95$). Similarly, the relationship between mindfulness and cognitive reappraisal did not significantly differ from the relationship between mindfulness and avoidance use (estimate = 1.62, $p = .20$). See Fig. 1 for a visual depiction of these relationships.

Based on our findings from the linear mixed model, we utilized a simple mediation model with bootstrapping to estimate the direct and indirect effects of trait mindfulness. The effect of trait mindfulness on acceptance use was significant (B = 2.20, SE = 0.80, $p < .01$), such that
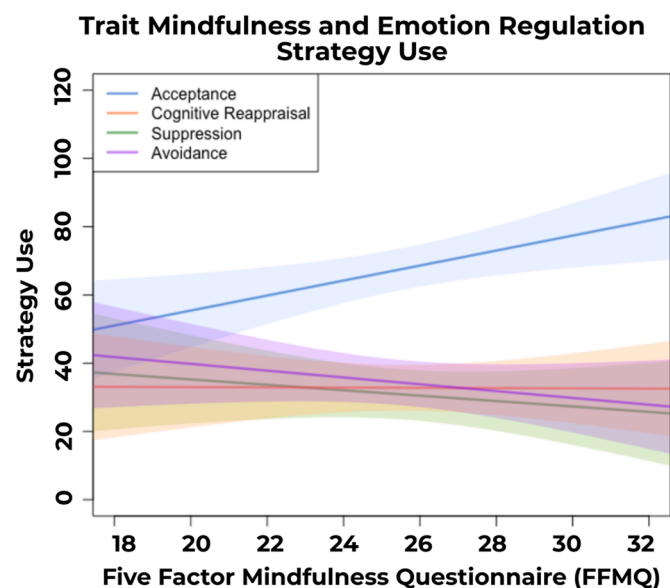

Fig. 1. Depiction of the relationships between trait mindfulness and acceptance, cognitive reappraisal, suppression, and avoidance. Mindfulness was significantly related to use of acceptance-based strategies compared with use of suppression or avoidance strategies.

higher levels of trait mindfulness were associated with greater use of acceptance. We also found a significant relationship between acceptance use and depression (B = −0.14, SE = 0.04, $p < .01$), such that increased acceptance use was related with decreased symptoms of depression. The point estimate of the total effect of the relation between trait mindfulness and depression was −1.38 with 95% CI [−1.95, −0.82]. The indirect effect, assessing the variance explained by acceptance use in the relationship between trait mindfulness and depression was significant (indirect point estimate = −0.30 (0.15), CI [−0.63, −0.06]). This finding suggests that acceptance use mediates the relationship between trait mindfulness and depression in PwMS. The direct effect of trait mindfulness on depression remained significant (point estimate of −1.08; 95% CI [−1.64, −0.52]), indicating that this relationship was only partially mediated by acceptance use. See Fig. 2 for complete statistics of this model.

4. Discussion

The current study investigated the relationship between trait mindfulness, metrics of emotion dysregulation, and depression in PwMS. Given the higher prevalence of emotion dysregulation in PwMS (Phillips et al., 2014; Prakash et al., 2019), evidence supporting emotion dysregulation as a shared vulnerability factor underlying differences in psychological symptoms (Prakash et al., 2019), and the observed association between higher emotion dysregulation and reduced quality of life in this population (Schirda et al., 2015), there is a clear need to identify traits related to lower levels of emotion dysregulation that may serve as targets for future interventions. Our results suggest that higher trait mindfulness was associated with decreased emotion dysregulation, as assessed by DERS, corroborating our previously published results (Schirda et al., 2015), and increased acceptance use during a negative mood induction. Additionally, we found that acceptance use, a putatively adaptive emotion regulation strategy, mediated the relationship between trait mindfulness and depression.

In response to a worry/rumination induction, PwMS who reported higher levels of trait mindfulness demonstrated greater use of acceptance, an adaptive emotion regulation strategy, to regulate negative affect as compared with thought suppression and avoidance. The literature looking at how PwMS utilize acceptance as an emotion regulation strategy is limited. However, a recent study found that the acceptance of illness corresponds to an improved health-related quality of life (Wilski et al., 2019). Although this conceptually differs from acceptance as an emotion regulation skill, this finding further suggests that PwMS who practice acceptance exhibit greater well-being. The relationship between trait mindfulness and acceptance did not significantly differ from the relationship between trait mindfulness and cognitive reappraisal. However, this is likely because trait mindfulness showed no association with cognitive reappraisal ($r_s = −0.05$, $p = .72$) whereas suppression ($r_s = −0.17$, $p = .18$) and avoidance ($r_s = −0.24$, $p = .06$) showed
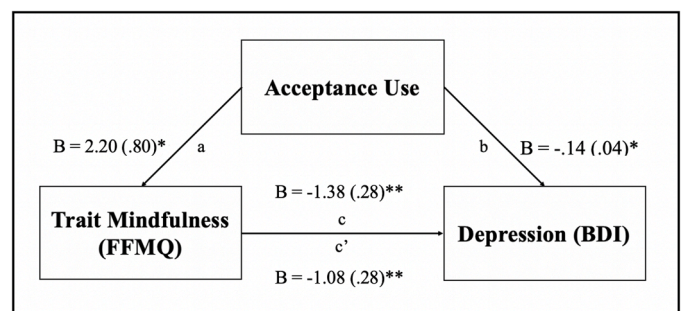

Fig. 2. Simple mediation model including the total effect (c) and direct effect (c') of trait mindfulness on depression, and the indirect (ab) mediated effect of acceptance use. Beta-coefficients are unstandardized with the SE listed in parentheses. *$p \leq 0.01$ **$p \leq 0.001$.

nonsignificant negative relationships with trait mindfulness. This finding supports the proposed theoretical role of acceptance in mindfulness and suggests that cognitive reappraisal, while an adaptive emotion regulation strategy, may be unrelated to trait mindfulness. Given our findings, PwMS high in trait mindfulness may be more prone to employing acceptance-based strategies to regulate negative mood states. Longitudinal research outside of PwMS lends support to this claim. For example, a recent study found that six weeks of training in focused meditation significantly improved self-reported emotion dysregulation—specifically, the nonacceptance of emotional responses domain of the DERS (Menezes and Bizarro, 2015).

In our sample of PwMS, trait mindfulness was negatively correlated with depressive symptoms—aligning with findings from a recent meta-analysis in the general population (Carpenter et al., 2019) and findings in samples of PwMS (Sauder et al., 2021; Mioduszewski et al., 2018). To understand the relationship between mindfulness and depressive symptoms, we explored acceptance use as a potential mediator of the effect. Although we cannot speak to causality, our results suggest that individuals who report higher levels of trait mindfulness and a greater use of acceptance strategies are more likely to report lower symptoms of depression. These findings align with the broader literature which supports emotion regulation use as potentially mediating the relationship between trait mindfulness and depressive symptoms. Specifically, a longitudinal follow-up study found that rumination, a maladaptive emotion regulation strategy, mediated the impact of non-judgement, a facet of mindfulness, on depressive symptoms (Petrocchi and Ottaviani, 2016). Similarly, additional research supports the mediating role of rumination in the relationship between mindfulness and depression and provides evidence for cognitive reappraisal as a potential mediator (Desrosiers et al., 2013). It is possible that greater use of acceptance leads to lower symptoms of depression through increasing positive affect. Supporting this interpretation, a recent study found an indirect effect of higher mindfulness on reduced emotion dysregulation through higher levels of positive affect (McLaughlin et al., 2019). Given the limited literature looking at the mediating role of specific emotion regulation strategies on the relationship between trait mindfulness and depression, more research is needed to understand the role emotion regulation strategy use plays in the relationship between trait mindfulness and depression. The aforementioned studies were conducted outside of PwMS, therefore additional research is needed to understand these relations in PwMS given the increased prevalence of depression in these individuals.

The present findings provide further support for the inverse relationship between trait mindfulness and emotion dysregulation in PwMS. Additionally, provide preliminary evidence supporting the use of fewer maladaptive strategies and an increased use of acceptance-based strategies in response to a negative mood induction in those with higher trait mindfulness. Finally, mindfulness, through increased acceptance use, may be one mechanism to ameliorate difficulties with affective functioning, specifically depression, by cultivating a focus on present-moment awareness in a nonjudgmental manner—thus allowing individuals to cope with difficult emotions related to the uncertainty of MS. The cross-sectional design limits our ability to draw causal claims regarding the relationship between trait mindfulness, emotion dysregulation and depression. However, although there have been several studies examining mindfulness-based training for PwMS (Grossman et al., 2010; Bogosian et al., 2015; Simpson et al., 2017), there is only one study looking at the impact of mindfulness-based training on emotion dysregulation in PwMS (Schirda et al., 2020). Thus, longitudinal data are needed to address issues of causality in the relation between mindfulness, acceptance use, and depression. Future well-powered RCTs, employing mindfulness-based training with a focus on cultivating acceptance should be explored as potential interventions to help ameliorate emotion dysregulation and symptoms of depression in PwMS.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Elizabeth Jean Duraney: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft. **Brittney Schirda:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Jacqueline A. Nicholas:** Resources, Writing – review & editing. **Ruchika Shaurya Prakash:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Authors have no competing interests to declare.

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