

Letter to the Editor: Miscommunicating Mindfulness

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To the Editor:

In our article regarding news-media “hype” about results from research on meditation and mindfulness, some work by the author Rick Hanson was inadvertently mischaracterized. Specifically, we (Van Dam et al., 2018, p. 50) quoted from his book *Hardwiring Happiness*, asserting:

... in what is presumably an effort to explain how meditation has been shown to influence emotion regulation, correlated with alterations in amygdala activity (e.g., Goldin & Gross, 2010), [Hanson] has stated, “In terms of amygdala activity, people seem to belong to one of three groups . . . the ones with a joyful amygdala—are more focused on promoting the good than on preventing the bad” (Hanson, 2013, pp. 43–44). As a result of such oversimplifications, meditative benefits may be exaggerated and undue societal urgency to undertake mindfulness practices may be encouraged (e.g., Farias & Wikholm, 2015).

However, Hanson informed us subsequently that his book is about socio-emotional learning and that the above statement taken from it actually concerns individual differences in approach orientation and their potential neurological factors, rather than being about mindfulness and meditation per se. Furthermore, according to him, he was summarizing research by Cunningham, Raye, and Johnson (2005; Cunningham et al. 2012; Cunningham & Kirkland, 2013) that found a subgroup of people whose amygdalae were more sensitive to positive than to negative stimuli. The term “joyful amygdala” came originally from Cunningham and Kirkland (2013), not from Hanson (R. Hanson, personal communication, May 16, 2019).

In response to the personal communication from Hanson, we want to make the following points of clarification:

Our original intent was not to suggest that the selected excerpt from *Hardwiring Happiness* (Hanson, 2013) or that the book as a whole urges the public to undertake mindfulness or meditation practice. Instead, we were trying to provide an example of how oversimplifications of scientific results may obscure their

underlying complexities and may compel individuals to seek out mindfulness and/or meditation. Academics, including us, are also guilty of such oversimplifications on occasion—indeed, in the present case, Hanson’s oversimplification was inspired by a naming convention from Cunningham and colleagues (cf. Cunningham & Kirkland, 2013). Given the aforementioned matter, it would have been more appropriate for us to have quoted instead from a popular book on mindfulness (e.g., *Buddha’s Brain*; Hanson, 2009) or to have considered the large number of academic, popular, and press articles that manifest more direct evidence of oversimplifications. There are complex issues associated with critiques of any literature, and we did not intend for the credibility of a single author to be questioned.

We regret our preceding putative misconstrual and any confusion that may have stemmed from it. More discussion needs to occur among all concerned parties to ensure that such oversimplifications do not lead to unreasonable expectations. Academics and scientists have an important role to play in this regard. It behooves us to ensure that we neither intentionally nor unintentionally mislead journalists, writers, and the public. It also behooves popular-science writers and journalists to check that their information is factually accurate, not oversimplified, and not solely the opinion or subjective position of a single scientist or scientific group.

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