**Chapter 16**
# Transformations of Social Bonds and Mental Health: How Can Mindfulness Counter Individualization and the Influence of Communication Technologies?

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**Abstract** This study focuses on the effect of social transformations—including those connected to information and communication technologies—on interpersonal bonds and community building. I describe and problematize said transformations, discuss the threats and opportunities that they can entail in terms of mental health, and suggest how contemplative practices such as mindfulness can buffer threats by fostering healthy bonds at both the individual and community levels, which should help improve psychological well-being. The conclusion of this analysis is that, over the last decades, humanity (at least in Western societies) has been witness to a weakening of traditional bonds, compounded by a growing individualization process and the dissolution of traditional and stable communities. This process results in individuals who are more reliant on themselves (and less dependent on prescribed social norms) when it comes to constructing their lives. Practicing mindfulness, especially those varieties that include acceptance and compassion, makes it possible to buffer the negative effect that the transformations discussed can have on mental health. Contemplative practices such as mindfulness can teach the stressed inhabitants of technologically-mediated relationships to pay attention to their experience in the present moment, learn to know and accept their own thoughts and emotions, be kind to themselves, and maintain an attitude of empathetic and accepting openness toward others.

**Keywords** Personal bonds · Community bonds · Hyperconnectivity · Transformation of communities · Contemplative practices

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## 16.1 Social Bonds and Mental Health

### 16.1.1 Importance of Personal Bonds

The importance of personal bonds for mental health, particularly those formed in early childhood, is arguably one of the most robust findings of psychology research (Olhaberry et al., 2014). Even before birth, the affective processes involved in the attachment relationship between the caregiver and the infant are essential for the development of the self and of the affective and social resources that make relationships with others possible. Developing as an individual—which entails differentiating oneself from the rest—and establishing nourishing relationships with others are among the fundamental tasks that every human being must complete. For both tasks, the bonds developed early in life are crucial (Cierpka, 2016). This relational matrix is necessary for our mind to develop; also, these affective networks support us emotionally and socially all through our lives.

Growing up in a protective environment with significant people is therefore essential for achieving mental health. Failings in these environments entail a burden, since they determine a psychological vulnerability when addressing future developmental challenges. Attachment insecurities, in general, increase the risk of suffering psychological disorders (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Vulnerability is greater when attachment insecurities are linked to low perceived social support in the person's broader context (Dagnino, Pérez, C., Gómez, A., Gloger, S. & Krause, 2017). Particularly, early attachment trauma has been found to be connected with future mental health problems (McLeod, 1991; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993), especially when these adverse conditions are cumulative (McLeod & Shanahan, 1996).

Nevertheless, corrective experiences exist that can be helpful in later developmental stages such as adolescence, a period during which the relation with oneself and others acquires special importance. And given that post-childhood stressors are relevant as well (Heim & Nemeroff, 2001), it is also possible to conduct preventive actions in later stages of life. Unfortunately, evidence also shows that unhealthy attachment styles can be intergenerationally transmitted, which increases the likelihood of mental health problems in new generations (Gómez & Jaén, 2011). This underscores the importance of curative actions aimed at personal bonds and those intended to prevent their deterioration in various stages of life.

In brief, interpersonal affective relationships are fundamental for human development from early childhood to old age, and therefore constitute the main protective factor of our mental and physical health.

### 16.1.2 Importance of Community Bonds

As previously noted, relations with others are highly relevant not only in early childhood or adolescence, but throughout a person's life. Consequently, psychosocial

research has provided evidence of the importance of community bonds for mental health (Castonguay, 2011; Krause & Montenegro, 2016). A long tradition of research has shown the association between stressful life events, low social support, and mental health (Brown, Sklair, Harris & Birley, 1986). The social support provided by relations with others is the main protective factor when dealing with stressful life events causally associated with mental health problems (Brown et al., 1973). This effect of social support on mental health has been observed across cultures (Kessler & Bromet, 2013).

The importance of bonds throughout one's life results from the fact that humans are essentially social beings, and this social nature is expressed precisely through the permanent construction of communities (Krause & Montenegro, 2016).

Taking into account classical elements of the concept of community and acknowledging their current transformations (Veinot & Williams, 2012), community can be defined as "a human group that develops upon shared meanings and a common identity, whose members define themselves as such and are linked to each other by a sense of belonging and a relationship sustained through communication, shared goals, and joint actions which occur in a variable material and temporal space" (Krause & Montenegro, 2016, p. 291). Through the relationship between their members, communities construct a sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), expressed through shared interpretations, values, symbols, and rituals. These common aspects support their capacity for acting as a group, contributing to the social and subjective integration of their members (Bessant, 2011) and becoming "a relational and affective universe" (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009, p. 223).

The link between community and mental health is well supported by research. Several characteristics of communities can explain their positive impact on their members' health. For example, communities increase the well-being of their members through the establishment of interpersonal bonds, mostly when expressed through mutual support (Sarason, 1974) that is perceived as such (Cohen, 2004). Health is also promoted through common identification (Campbell & McLean, 2003; McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and through the feeling that one is a valuable or meaningful person for others in the community (Sarason, 1974). Other important health promoting aspects include emotional connection and security (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005).

An additional health related aspect of communities is their effectiveness in attaining shared goals, which leads to the experience of social competence and empowerment, the latter being directly related to health and psychological well-being (Rappaport, 1984; Turró & Krause, 2008; UNDP, 2004).

Given the solid evidence for the relationship between social and community bonds and general and mental health, it is particularly relevant to analyze the transformations that these elements have undergone over the last decades.

## 16.2 The Transformation of Social Bonds

### 16.2.1 The Shift Toward Individualization

Over the last decades, modern Western societies have experienced major transformations in the way in which bonds with others are constructed and preserved. These transformations include the weakening of the traditional forms of collective action along with changes in social consciousness and in the ways of belonging to a community.

As social and community points of reference become relativized, individuals depend increasingly more on themselves (Hodgetts, Bolam, & Stephens, 2005) for constructing their identities and life plans (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2010; Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2002; Krause et al., 2015). This has been conceptualized as a growing individualization process (Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2002; Güell, Peters, & Morales, 2012). Thus, these sociocultural changes have a profound impact on people's subjectivities and forms of sociability (Bauman, 2007; Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2002; Castells, 2001, Castel, 2011; Sennett, 2006).

For Bessant (2011), modernity has weakened traditional social bonds, resulting in a social world that is fragmented, isolated, and atomized. In this context, sociocultural changes have influenced individuals' relationship with themselves and others, which means that this modernization process can threaten mental health due to the resulting increase in impersonality, moral neutrality, and individualism (Nisbet, [1953]1967). In this context, we can conceptualize the weakening of social bonds and communities as a mediating variable between sociocultural changes and illness (Campbell & Murray, 2004; Cornish, 2004).

Empirical evidence exists which links these changes in social and community embeddedness with one of the world's most prevalent mental health problems: depression. This sociocultural hypothesis of depression holds that the disorder is more prevalent in countries with more individualistic sociocultural characteristics, with the relationship also depending on biological factors via "culture-gene co-evolution" (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010), which involves interactions between culture, stress, emotion regulation, and genetic polymorphisms (Kim et al., 2011; Way & Lieberman, 2010). Based on these findings, Luyten and Blatt (2013, p. 179) proposed, for societies that are more sensitive to the social environment, that "as many of these societies shift toward a greater emphasis on achievement and self-definition (individualism), with less emphasis on social bonds and social support, it can be expected that the prevalence of psychopathology will increase as the moderating influence of social support and collectivistic attitudes […] in these socially sensitive populations decreases".

Over the last two decades, the social changes described above have been complemented by a new dimension of everyday life that strongly impacts interpersonal relations: the hyperpresence of information and communication technologies.

## 16.2.2   *Relations Mediated by Information and Communication Technologies*

The current era, characterized by the hyperconnectivity and hyperinformation granted by information and communication technologies (ICTs), has intensified the change process described, which entails both threats and opportunities in terms of mental health.

### 16.2.2.1   The Transformation of Personal Bonds

The mediation of ICTs has transformed both the number and form of people's bonds with others. The most prominent characteristic of this transformation is immediacy, which affects information and relations. The former effect has certainly transformed our relationship with knowledge by simplifying access to it, which has the potential to lessen educational and cultural differences. Authors speak of a democratization in access to information (Tolosa, 2013). Nevertheless, at a psychological level, the omnipresence of information also entails the threat of attentional saturation (due to the excessive amount of information available) and confusion (due to the excessive number of ways of accessing it). For people, it is a challenge to weigh and identify differences between the types of information that each source provides (Tolosa, 2013).

As for the immediacy of relations, it would appear to eliminate the threat of loneliness, enabling us to establish close relationships even across large geographical distances; however, this can generate confusion regarding the levels of intimacy involved, which is compounded by the supplementation of nonverbal cues with simple and homogenized graphical elements used to express emotions (emojis).

In psychosocial terms, multiple memberships and participation in Internet-mediated social networks involve a new step in the individualization process, particularly regarding the self-construction of identity or of multiple identities deployed in each virtual context. These new possibilities of existence in each person's relational world can be considered to be enriching, but they can also be regarded as a threat to mental health, especially when associated with "perfectionism", materialized through signs of approval (such as the "likes" that can be obtained in virtual social networks). For Curran and Hill (2017, p. 1), "neoliberalism has succeeded in shifting cultural values so to now emphasize competitiveness, individualism, and irrational ideals of the perfectible self (…) [that] are systemic within contemporary language patterns, the media, and social and civic institutions, and are evident in the rise of competitive and individualistic traits, materialistic behavior, and presentational anxieties among recent generations of young people". Thus, increased opportunities for self-construction (either real or imagined) can go hand in hand with a (culturally mediated) increase in perfectionism. This has been labeled Multidimensional Perfectionism (Curran & Hill, 2017) and is characterized by an exacerbation of the desire to be perfect, with unrealistic expectations of oneself and punitive self-assessment or

context-blaming. In the latter case, the context is regarded as excessively demanding and judgmental, which causes the person to feel that he/she requires perfection to ensure other people's approval. In addition, the individual can project perfectionism on his/her social environment. "When perfectionistic expectations are directed toward others, individuals impose unrealistic standards on those around them and evaluate others critically (other-oriented perfectionism)" (Curran & Hill, 2017, p. 1).

### 16.2.2.2   The Transformation of Communities

Current changes brought about by new communication technologies have not caused communities to disappear. However, they have transformed them, which can hinder their contribution to mental health. At present, individuals belong to multiple communities characterized by their transience and the fact that they are often disconnected from a shared physical or geographical space (Krause & Montenegro, 2016; UNDP, 2004).

   Current communities have been described as having undergone four major transformations affecting as many dimensions: space, structure, time, and permanence.

   With respect to space, communities are currently less embedded in geographical locations and have fewer face-to-face interactions. ICTs, especially the Internet, have detached communication from territorial and physical co-presence, which has opened up new community building opportunities (Krause and Montenegro, 2016). Early in this century, Castells (2001, p. 126) had already noted that "'place-based sociability' and 'territorially defined community' … certainly play a minor role in structuring social relationships for the majority of the population in developed societies". It is interesting to reflect on the possibilities derived from digitally mediated interaction, the most evident of which may be the creation of virtual communities, defined by Chambers as "online networks that display the psychological and cultural qualities of strong community with little or no physical proximity". Thus, ICTs generate a different kind of space for the emergence of communities.

   In terms of their structure, new forms of community are characterized by lower social network density and greater flexibility of roles and hierarchies (Tolosa, 2013). Furthermore, their external boundaries are fuzzier.

   As for their temporality, these new forms of community frequently have a shorter lifespan. Communities can rapidly be created around shared interests and affinities, with no need for a long common history. On the other hand, this also means that these Internet-mediated communities depend on the ongoing efforts of their members to sustain them (Krause and Montenegro, 2016). The result is that multiple communities are being generated and discontinued all the time.

   As for transformations affecting affiliation, Internet-mediated social relationships have made it easier to belong to various groups and networks simultaneously (UNDP, 2004). This can result in fragmented and specialized social relations, which has been labeled "networked individualism". ICTs have multiplied relations and coordinations among persons, but hinder a unified sense of belonging and a stable identity among the members of a community (Krause & Montenegro, 2016). "High levels of personal

mobility fracture the maintenance of relationships with fixed communities and favor the formation of 'new' groups of people with similarly fluid characteristics" (Findlay, Hoy, & Stockdale, 2004, p. 61).

In sum, Internet-mediated communities bring forth a new format of communication, a different definition of space, a new temporality, and scattered and multifaceted identifications. A relevant question for the present chapter is how do these changes affect their functions related to mental health?

The above transformations in communities have a potential impact on well-being because they alter several of the psychosocial and psychological determinants of health (Kulkarni, 2012), such as social support, attachment, and identity, and may even interact with genetic conditions (Luyten & Blatt, 2013).

For example, current transformations have altered the density of social relations within communities, reducing the availability of social support, a community function that is essential for mental health. Also, belonging to multiple communities simultaneously may hinder their identity-defining function.

The new, more "circumstantial" communities can be very empowered and politically effective (Tolosa, 2013) but their shorter lifespan may impede the healthy effect of empowerment on individual participants. In the long run, their ephemeral nature could even increase hopelessness, causing a negative impact on mental health.

Nevertheless, these changes in communities can also be regarded as an opportunity, because they involve a flexibility and dynamism that might benefit health. In contrast, while traditional communities, particularly those with clear geographical roots, were almost imposed on individual persons, the more dynamic communities of today, especially those mediated by communication technology, may open up spaces for individual freedom, thus promoting well-being. The possibility of having multiple memberships grants more opportunities to community members, enabling them to establish new connections, take up new roles, and develop their skills.

However, some empirical studies and conceptual analyses have linked the transformation of communities to mental health problems (e.g. depression) that are becoming increasingly common around the world (Gotlib & Hammen, 2002). It has been hypothesized that the weakening of communities and social bonds operates as a mediating variable between sociocultural changes and mental health problems (Campbell & Murray, 2004; Cornish, 2004). In 1989, Seligman had already pointed out that increasing levels of depression may have to do with "environmental determinants", noting the contrast between its prevalence among the general US population and some "non-modern" cultures. He considered that the growth in individualism to the detriment of the common good was the factor causing increased depression rates in some societies. This argument is still current: for Castonguay (2011, p. 132), "the lack of commitment to common projects, one could suggest, has robbed individuals of buffers against depression when they are confronted with personal difficulties or failures. Our over-involvement in activities aimed at increasing our individualistic accomplishments, wealth, and comfort might well make it more difficult to reach out for and obtain help and support from others when we experience serious difficulties in our lives".

## 16.3    Mindfulness Within the Context of Transforming Bonds

This section discusses how mindfulness provides an alternative for countering some negative effects that current social transformations can have on mental health.

Compared to past decades, information and communication technologies have enabled people to gain more immediate access to information, thus increasing interpersonal contact opportunities. The increased amount of available information and the growing number of potential bonds represent major opportunities for individuals, but can also threaten their mental health. The informational aspect of our technological era challenges our attentional capacities, which are left exposed to hyperstimulation and thus to the threats of losing focus and developing stress. Regarding ties with others, ours is a world characterized by a degree of hyperconnectivity that can leave individuals feeling dissatisfied due to their superficial, incomplete, or even fictional relationships, established by scattered selves with a non-integrated psychological functioning. Adolescents, hungry for information and contacts with their peers due to specific characteristics of their stage of development, are especially vulnerable to this threat.

In this context of immediacy that technologically mediated human relationships entail, practicing mindfulness can help people establish a deeper connection with themselves and others, thus gaining protection from the threat of superficiality. Mindfulness can also protect people from "networked individualism" and the exacerbation of perfectionism, discussed in prior sections. In consequence, it is not surprising to find that mindfulness and other meditative techniques have increasingly been integrated into psychotherapeutic (Kirmayer, 2015) and preventive interventions (Langer, Ulloa-Jiménez, Cangas, Rojas, & Krause, 2015).

### 16.3.1    Mindfulness for Contact with Oneself

Mindfulness, as "a mode of awareness that is present-centered and nonevaluative" (Kirmayer, 2015, p. 447), is a practice that lessens the stressful impact of the "hyperreality" of information and communication technologies and their attendant self-demands (Kirmayer, 2015). It heightens our perception of our own bodily and mental states, and therefore of our own needs and desires, within the context of a self-compassionate and accepting attitude. By helping us stay focused on ourselves, practicing mindfulness fosters psychological integration and the experience of a cohesive identity. With respect to its use for preventing psychological problems, it has been found to be an effective antidote to stress (Kirmayer, 2015), which is one of the main precursors of mental health issues. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses have provided extensive evidence of the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions for a variety of mental health problems (Chiesa & Serretti, 2011; Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011).

### *16.3.2 Mindfulness for Bonding with Others*

In a world where maintaining deep bonds with others is at risk, it is relevant to consider the potential of mindfulness practices as tools to foster empathy and, consequently, prosocial behaviors. The latter encourage civic commitment and social cohesion, because they involve focusing on a more general common good: that of the community. Empirical research has shown evidence for the positive effect of interventions aimed at strengthening bonds in social or community contexts, since contact reduces prejudice toward others, decreases anxiety, and increases empathy (Pettigrew, 2018). Increased contact with people from a variety of cultures, such as migrants, extends one's knowledge about others and helps one trust them (González et al., 2017). Studies belonging to this line of research show that prosociality is associated with high levels of empathy (Abrams, Van de Vyver, Pelletier, & Cameron, 2015).

From this perspective, mindfulness-based interventions can lead to greater openness toward others and a less anxious and prejudiced attitude, which should foster the establishment of personal bonds. It has even been demonstrated that greater openness toward one's own psychological states, trained through mindfulness practices, increases people's ability to represent and infer others' mental states. In other words, understanding ourselves helps us understand others (Böckler, Herrmann, Trautwein, Holmes, & Singer, 2017).

These findings open up interesting possibilities for preventive interventions aimed at young people, which should be able to foster both their contact with themselves and their empathy toward others. In this regard, a study conducted by Langer et al. (2015)—which sought to analyze the subjective experience of a group of adolescents after a mindfulness-based intervention developed for school contexts—represents a valuable precedent. Results published by Langer et al. (2015) reveal that adolescents report cognitive effects such as increased attention and concentration and improvements in their ability to solve problematic situations, along with emotional effects such as better mood, tranquility, and reduced stress symptoms, which have a positive effect on interactions with others by lessening aggressive behaviors. The young people interviewed also reported more self-acceptance, increased kindness and gratitude, and decreased self-criticism.

However, given the variety of mindfulness training methods available, in order to achieve an impact on empathy and thus strengthen bonds with others, it is important to consider research that shows that compassion-based practices are especially effective in producing ethical-motivational changes like a nonjudgmental attitude, compassion, and self-compassion (Hildebrandt, McCall, & Singer, 2017).

## 16.4   Conclusions

In this chapter, I described social transformations, particularly those affecting inter-personal and community bonds, analyzed their impact on mental health, and reflected on how mindfulness-based intervention strategies can contribute in this context.

The conclusion of this analysis is that, over the last decades, humanity (at least in Western societies) has been witness to a weakening of traditional bonds, com-pounded by a growing individualization process (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and the dissolution of traditional and stable communities (Bessant, 2011). This pro-cess results in individuals who are more reliant on themselves (and less dependent on prescribed social norms) when it comes to constructing their lives.

In a context marked by individualization and the weakening of community bonds, contemplative practices can shield us from potential reductions in well-being, which may be one of the reasons behind their growing popularity in Western cultures (Kir-mayer, 2015). However, we need to include in this analysis a reflection on the impact of the largest transformation of the last decades: the widespread growth of informa-tion and communication technologies.

The social transformation of social bonds that took place in past decades has now been overcome by an explosion of technologically-mediated relationships, which have created a sort of "hyper-reality" of social bonds, now omnipresent and instan-taneous. This new reality can be subjectively experienced as an exacerbation of the present: "it's all there, at our fingertips". A person living in today's world is poten-tially able to access all of the world's information and can follow every Internet link; also, by experimenting with a variety of characters, he/she has all the possible ways of "being" at his/her disposal. Amid this sea of possibilities, identifying our own defining characteristics and those of others can be a major challenge. Mindfulness and other contemplative practices precisely enable us to experience what is "true" in our contact with ourselves and others, thus preventing our own identity and our bonds with others from vanishing in a superficial "as if" world, where it is possi-ble to construct multiple "false selves" subjected to extreme perfectionist demands. Practicing mindfulness, especially those varieties that include acceptance and com-passion (Hildebrandt et al., 2017), makes it possible to buffer the negative effect that the transformations discussed can have on mental health. Contemplative practices such as mindfulness can teach the stressed inhabitants of technologically-mediated relationships to pay attention to their experience in the present moment, learn to know and accept their own thoughts and emotions, be kind to themselves, and maintain an attitude of empathetic and accepting openness toward others. By improving the relation with ourselves and others, contemplative practices can protect mental health while also giving us a chance to revert the impact of past adverse situations on our social bonds (Davidson and Begley, 2012).

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