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DAILY MEDITATION VERSUS EMOTIONAL FREEDOM TECHNIQUES: A PILOT AUSTRALIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL TRIAL

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Abstract

This pilot study compared the effects of daily mindfulness meditation and Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) tapping on the emotional and behavioral regulation of 5-year-old children over a three-week period. Participants were divided into two groups, each receiving one of the interventions. Self-regulation, happiness, and life satisfaction were assessed weekly using validated measures. Results indicated that both interventions significantly improved self-regulation, however, no significant changes were observed in happiness and life satisfaction for either group. The findings suggest that while both mindfulness meditation and EFT tapping can enhance self-regulation in young children, longer intervention periods may be warranted for the other constructs. These results have implications for the implementation of mental health programs in early childhood education, highlighting the potential of both meditation and EFT practices to support emotional resilience from a young age.

Keywords: Meditation, emotional freedom techniques (EFT), children, emotional regulation.

INTRODUCTION

The early childhood years are critical for the development of emotional and behavioral regulation. During this period, children begin to form foundational skills that influence their future mental health and well-being. Given the increasing prevalence of stress and anxiety among young children, there is a growing interest in interventions that can support emotional resilience and mental health from an early age. Two such interventions that have gained attention are mindfulness meditation and Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) tapping.

Mindfulness meditation involves practices that cultivate present-moment awareness and emotional regulation through focused attention and breathing exercises. It has been shown to reduce stress, improve emotional regulation, and enhance overall well-being in various age groups, including young children (Zenner et al., 2014). Diamond et al. (2024) recently conducted a case study using mindfulness-guided visualization ("My Magical Garden") in a trauma-informed primary classroom and found improvements in emotional regulation and school reintegration over six months. A randomized controlled trial also reported that a classroom-based mindfulness program significantly improved executive function—including working memory, inhibition, and cognitive flexibility—in Year 2 students (Diéguez et al., 2024).

On the other hand, EFT tapping is a psychological acupressure technique that combines elements of cognitive therapy and exposure therapy with acupressure by tapping on specific meridian points on the body. EFT has been reported to reduce anxiety, improve emotional regulation, and enhance psychological well-being (Church et al., 2022). In primary school children "The Tapping Project" specifically investigated the use of EFT tapping with Year 5 and 6 students in four Northern Territory primary schools. The project found that a majority of students reported EFT tapping as effective, and it was linked to improvements in various areas like focus, concentration, and physical discomfort (Lambert, 2020).

This study is grounded in developmental and self-regulation theories that highlight early childhood as a sensitive period for acquiring emotional and behavioral regulation skills (Blair & Raver, 2015). According to self-regulation theory, the ability to manage attention, emotion, and behavior is foundational to mental health and adaptive functioning (Baumeister & Vohs, 2016). Interventions targeting these skills in early childhood may yield long-term benefits due to the heightened neuroplasticity of this developmental stage.

Mindfulness meditation supports self-regulation by enhancing attentional control and emotional awareness, with evidence showing it engages executive brain networks and reduces reactivity in the amygdala (Tang, et al., 2015; Zelazo & Lyons, 2012). EFT tapping, by contrast, combines cognitive reframing with somatic input, potentially calming the nervous system and reducing emotional intensity through bottom-up mechanisms (Feinstein, 2022).

Together, these frameworks suggest that both mindfulness and EFT tapping target complementary mechanisms of emotional regulation—cognitive control and physiological calming—making them particularly relevant and promising for young children. By comparing mindfulness meditation and EFT tapping, this study sought to identify whether the two interventions were comparable in supporting young children's emotional resilience.

Second, while both mindfulness meditation and EFT tapping have been shown to be beneficial in various populations, their comparative effectiveness in young children such as 5 year olds remains underexplored. However, a pilot Australian study has shown promising results for daily meditation (Stapleton et al., 2024). Understanding the relative benefits of these interventions can inform educators, parents, and policymakers about the most effective strategies for promoting mental health in early childhood settings.

Third, the practical implications of this study are significant. Schools and early childhood education centers are increasingly looking for evidence-based interventions to incorporate into their curricula. By providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of mindfulness meditation and EFT tapping, this study can guide the implementation of mental health programs in educational settings, ensuring that children receive the most beneficial support.

Finally, this study addresses a critical need for accessible and non-invasive interventions that can be easily integrated into daily routines. Both mindfulness meditation and EFT tapping are low-cost, easy-to-implement practices that do not require extensive training or resources. Demonstrating their effectiveness can encourage wider adoption and provide children with valuable tools for managing stress and emotions from an early age.

This study aimed to contribute to the growing body of research on early childhood interventions by comparing the effects of daily mindfulness meditation and EFT tapping on the emotional and behavioral regulation of 5-year-old children. It was a large multi-school meditation trial (outcomes reported in Stapleton et al., 2025), but this paper represents a subset of the larger study where one school participated in the EFT intervention instead of meditation. It was hypothesized:

H1: Both mindfulness meditation and EFT tapping would result in significant improvements in emotional and behavioral regulation from baseline to the end of the intervention.

H2: Both mindfulness meditation and EFT tapping would result in significant improvements in happiness from baseline to the end of the intervention.

H3: Both mindfulness meditation and EFT tapping would result in significant improvements in life satisfaction from baseline to the end of the intervention.

METHOD

Prior to the commencement of the study, ethical approval was obtained from the university (PS00210). According to the Department of Education (DoE) guidelines for single-school, non-sensitive applications, approval was granted at the discretion of the respective school principals. Consequently, no gatekeeper approval from the DoE was necessary. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Three schools participated in the original study (Stapleton et al., 2025); however, this study represents a subset of those participants at two of the schools, across a 3-week period.

Research Model

This study employed a comparative intervention design to evaluate the effects of the two wellbeing programs—Smiling Mind (SM) meditation and EFT tapping—on primary school students' mental health and emotional outcomes. This quasi-experimental design enabled comparison between the two active interventions in a naturalistic school setting, allowing for ecological validity while maintaining structured intervention delivery. Both interventions were delivered during regular classroom time by teachers using digital resources to ensure consistent implementation. Teachers received basic instruction to standardise delivery across classrooms, and adherence was monitored through teacher logs or follow-up communication. Schools were not randomly assigned; rather, one class within a participating school was allocated to the EFT tapping intervention due to logistical and scheduling feasibility. The remaining classes followed the standard Smiling Mind program, consistent with existing school practice.

Participants

Students were currently enrolled in Year 1 at two primary schools and were 5-6 years.

Interventions

The study utilized the Smiling Mind (SM) Primary School Program, delivered via a digital application (https://www.smilingmind.com.au/smiling-mind-app), which has been implemented in Australian schools since 2016. SM is a mindfulness-based social and emotional learning program designed to enhance the mental wellbeing and emotional resilience of primary school students (Van Der Zant et al., 2024). The participating school in this trial had access to the freely available SM program and were instructed on which meditation to play each day and week. The meditation content was age-appropriate and identical across year levels as specified by the app. Table 1 outlines the meditations included in the program.

One school watched daily videos of the EFT tapping process, delivered by the lead author, instead of the meditations. For the students, four acupoints were stimulated with a two-finger tapping process, using both hands (see Figure 1). At this time the children spoke a short phrase such as "calm breath" to stay focused. The topics were matched to the meditation topics (see Table 1).

Table 1. Meditation and EFT topic by week.

Meditation Topic	EFT Topic
Lesson 1 The Bubble Journey	Lesson 1 Learning to Tap; tap and breathe
Lesson 2 Belly Breathing	Lesson 2 Tapping for focus and attention
Lesson 3 Exploring Sounds	Lesson 3 Tapping for worry, frustration and anger

Figure 1 shows the tapping points that were used by the students in that group. They used both hands during the process, and tapped approximately seven times on each point, while watching the video.

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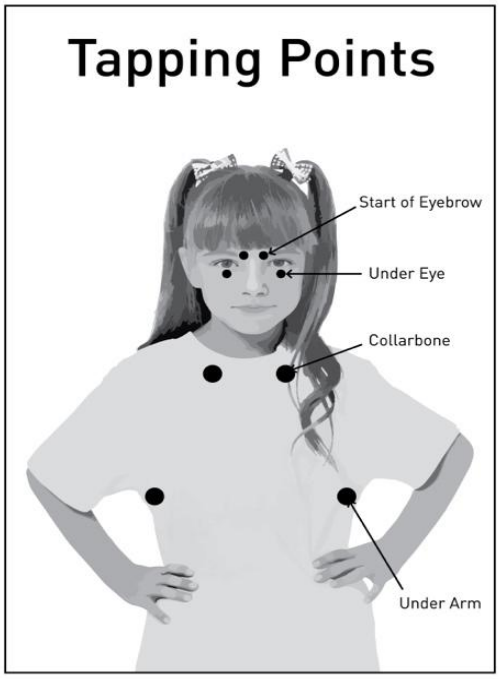

Figure 1. EFT Acupoints (copyright first author).

Measures

The Me and My Feelings Questionnaire (M&MF; Deighton et al., 2013) is a 16-item measure assessing children's self-regulation through emotional and behavioural difficulties subscales. Items are rated on a 3-point Smiley Face Likert scale from (0) never (happy face) to (2) always (sad face). Higher scores on the emotional difficulties subscale indicate lower emotion regulation, with potential scores ranging from 0-20, and for behavioural difficulties from 0-12. The original scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Deighton et al., 2013), convergent validity with the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, and discriminant validity (Deighton et al., 2013). The emotional difficulties subscale has an internal consistency of $\alpha = .79$, and the behavioural difficulties subscale $\alpha = .78$ (Patalay et al., 2014).

To measure subjective happiness, a single-item questionnaire ("How happy do you feel?") was used. Responses were rated on a 5-point Smiley Face Likert scale from (1) not happy at all (angry face) to (5) very happy (happy face). This measure correlates with the Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI; Argyle, Martin, & Lu, 1995; Hills & Argyle, 1998) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993), demonstrating good concurrent and convergent validity.

The Cantril's Self-Anchoring Ladder (Cantril, 1965) was used as this visual ladder ranges from 0 to 3, where participants indicate their current life satisfaction. The ladder has been validated in preschool and adolescent samples (Emerson et al., 2017; Levin & Currie, 2014) and correlates strongly with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Tov et al., 2022). It was adapted to a 3-point scale for this group with responses: I'm doing great; I'm doing well but I could do better; and I'm not doing my best.

Procedure

The study was conducted between July and September 2023, following ethical approval. The assessment package was created using Qualtrics, with a QR code provided for each age group at each school. Teachers received the study details and survey links. The survey was administered at 11 time points: before the trial started, every Friday of each week, and at the end of the trial. To ensure anonymity, no identifying data was collected. Students completed the surveys in the classroom each

Friday, using iPads to access the electronic link. Each survey took less than seven minutes to complete.

Teachers followed a schedule to play the SM meditations or EFT videos each morning of the school day, with each session lasting five to seven minutes. No additional activities within the app were required.

Data Analysis

Due to unequal group sizes resulting from varying participant numbers across the three schools and time points, analyses accounted for unbalanced data. Descriptive statistics (Table 2, Figure 2) were used to summarise participant numbers and outcome variables across the intervention groups (meditation vs. EFT tapping) over time. Internal consistency for the mental health measure was assessed using Omega total, appropriate for assuming unidimensionality without tau-equivalence. Consistency was generally strong (.80–.88), except for the baseline EFT tapping score (.66).

Linear regression was conducted to assess changes in self-regulation over time, with intervention type, week (0–3), and their interaction as predictors. Ordinal logistic regression was used to analyse changes in happiness and life satisfaction over time between groups. All analyses were conducted using standard statistical software, and significance was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

Because three schools participated in the larger trial, and only one class engaged in the EFT tapping intervention, the analysis was unbalanced due to different numbers of participants in each intervention group and at each time point. See Table 2 and Figure 2 for the participant numbers and the mean scores on each outcome variable over time for each intervention.

For the measure of mental health, Omega total (McDonald, 1999) was used to measure internal consistency since we assumed unidimensionality but not tau-equivalence. Internal consistency was excellent for both interventions across all weeks (ranging from .80 to .88) except the baseline measure for the tapping condition which was acceptable (.66). It was not possible to compute internal consistency for happiness and life satisfaction because they were measured using a single item.

Table 2. Number of year 1 students and descriptive statistics for the outcome variables by intervention and week.

Week	Intervention	N	ω_t	Self-Regulation Mean (SD)	Happiness Mean (SD)	Life Satisfaction Mean (SD)
0	Meditation	130	.80	9.62 (4.73)	4.13 (1.08)	2.70 (.48)
	Tapping	42	.66	11.02 (3.29)	3.88 (1.09)	2.45 (.50)
1	Meditation	266	.80	8.92 (4.61)	4.34 (.9)	2.65 (.51)
	Tapping	30	.80	9.67 (4.01)	3.83 (1.23)	2.37 (.56)
2	Meditation	154	.86	7.91 (4.98)	4.33 (.89)	2.73 (.47)
	Tapping	31	.87	8.42 (4.54)	4.16 (.93)	2.39 (.62)
3	Meditation	83	.86	7.77 (4.99)	4.31 (1.05)	2.69 (.49)
	Tapping	23	.88	7.04 (4.62)	3.91 (.90)	2.26 (.69)

Note. ωt = internal consistency measured using Omega total.

Figure 2 indicates the participant numbers and the mean scores on each outcome variable over time for each intervention.

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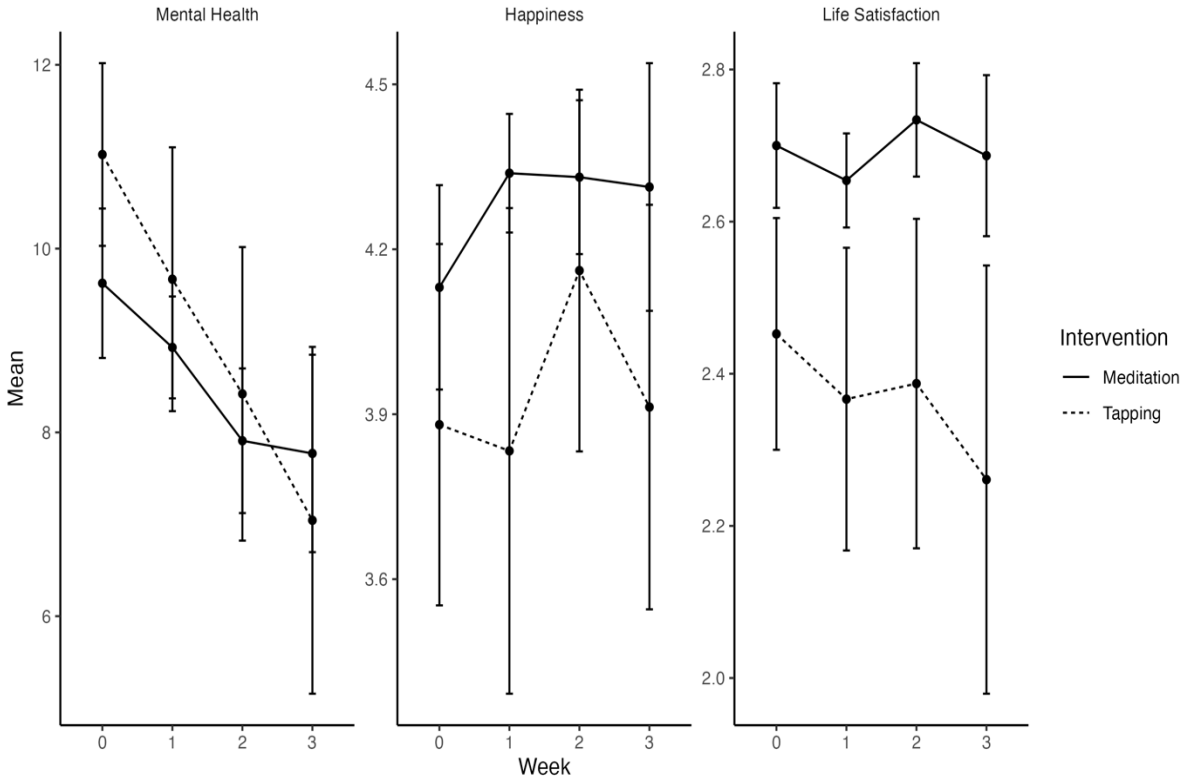

Figure 2. Comparison of mean scores for meditation and tapping for the outcome variables each week.

We compared the two interventions on our measure of self-regulation. We conducted a linear regression analysis with self-regulation as the dependent variable and included intervention (meditation vs. tapping), week (0-3), and their interaction as predictors (see Table 3 for results). There was no significant difference in self-regulation between the meditation and tapping groups at baseline ($b = 1.22$, $p = .14$), although this result approached significance. For the meditation group, self-regulation scores significantly decreased at week 2 ($\beta = -1.71$, $p < .01$) and week 3 ($\beta = -1.85$, $p < .01$) compared to the baseline, indicating an improvement in mental health. The interaction terms were not significant, suggesting that the decrease in self-regulation scores over time was similar for both interventions.

Next, we examined differences in happiness between the two interventions over time using an ordinal logistic regression (see Table 3). There was no significant difference in happiness between the meditation and tapping groups at baseline ($b = -0.51$, $p = .11$). None of the main effects for meditation or interaction effects were significant, indicating that there were no significant changes in happiness over time for either the meditation or tapping groups, and the interventions did not differ in their effects over time.

Lastly, we examined differences between the two interventions on life satisfaction using an ordinal logistic regression (see Table 3). At baseline, the meditation group reported significantly higher life satisfaction compared with the tapping group ($b = -1.03$, $p < .01$). None of the other parameters in the model were significant indicating that there were no significant changes in life satisfaction over time for either the meditation or tapping groups, and the interventions did not differ in their effects over time.

Table 3. Results of regression analyses comparing meditation and tapping for the outcome measures.

Predictor	Mental Health *b*	Happiness *b*	Life Satisfaction *b*
Intercept	9.62***	-	-
Intervention Baseline	1.40†	-.51	-1.00**
Week 1 Meditation	-.70	.35†	-.17
Week 2 Meditation	-1.71**	.31	.19
Week 3 Meditation	-1.85**	.46	-.05
Week 1 Interaction	-.66	-.34	-.08
Week 2 Interaction	-.89	.15	-.32
Week 3 Interaction	-2.12	-.52	-.49
R^2	.04***	.03**	.06***

***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, † $p < .10$.

Table 3 presents the results of regression analyses comparing the effects of the meditation and EFT tapping interventions on mental health, happiness, and life satisfaction across three weeks.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, and RECOMMENDATIONS

This study compared the effects of EFL tapping and meditation interventions on mental health, happiness, and life satisfaction among first-year students over a three-week period. The analysis was conducted with an unbalanced sample size across different time points.

Our analysis revealed a notable trend in self-regulation scores for both intervention groups. While there was no significant difference between the meditation and EFL tapping groups at baseline, the meditation group exhibited significant improvements in self-regulation at weeks two and three compared to baseline. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the positive effects of meditation on self-regulatory processes (Tang et al., 2015; Keng et al., 2011). Diamond et al. (2024) also demonstrated similar gains in emotional regulation using mindfulness-guided visualization in trauma-informed classrooms, and improvements in elementary students' interpersonal mindfulness and attentional focus have recently been noted (Lin et al., 2025). The mixed-methods trial in Australia with 138 primary school students found significant reductions in anxiety and improvements in wellbeing following EFT tapping sessions, similar to the outcomes in the present study (Lambert, 2020).

Interestingly, the lack of significant interaction effects suggests that both interventions may have similar trajectories in improving self-regulation over time. This finding is particularly noteworthy as it indicates that EFL tapping, a less studied intervention in this sample, may offer comparable benefits to meditation in enhancing self-regulatory capabilities. Future research should explore the underlying mechanisms through which both interventions affect self-regulation.

Contrary to our expectations, neither intervention demonstrated significant changes in happiness levels over the three-week period. This result is somewhat surprising; however, the mean score was 4 out of 5 at baseline suggesting a potentially happy sample. The relatively short intervention period may have been insufficient to elicit further measurable changes in happiness. Additionally, happiness as a construct may be more stable and resistant to short-term interventions compared to other mental health indicators (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Our findings regarding life satisfaction present an intriguing picture. At baseline, the meditation group reported significantly higher life satisfaction compared to the EFL tapping group. This initial difference could be attributed to pre-existing group characteristics or participants' expectations about the interventions. While neither group showed significant changes in life satisfaction over the study

period, it is important to note that the baseline mean was approximately 2 out of 3 on the Cantrill Ladder indicating "I'm doing well but I could do better", thus the sample may not have been unduly dissatisfied.

The stability of life satisfaction scores across both groups may suggest that this construct, like happiness, requires more time or more intensive interventions to show measurable change. Alternatively, it may indicate that both interventions are equally effective (or ineffective) in influencing life satisfaction over a short period.

Nonetheless, these results have important implications for both research and practice. The comparable effects of meditation and EFL tapping on self-regulation suggest that EFL tapping may be a viable alternative for individuals who find meditation challenging or unsuitable. However, the lack of significant changes in happiness and life satisfaction underscores the need for longer-term studies to fully understand the impact of these interventions on broader well-being outcomes.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study used a non-randomised design, and only one class received the EFT tapping intervention, limiting the ability to draw causal conclusions and increasing the potential for group differences at baseline. Second, the sample size was modest and unbalanced across groups and time points, which may have reduced statistical power and affected the reliability of some estimates. Third, the brief three-week duration of the intervention may not have been sufficient to capture changes in more stable constructs such as happiness and life satisfaction. Lastly, single-item measures were used for happiness and life satisfaction, which may have limited the sensitivity and depth of these assessments.

Recommendations

Future research should consider extending the intervention period, incorporating more frequent measurements, and exploring potential moderating factors such as participant characteristics or intervention adherence. Additionally, investigating the mechanisms through which these interventions affect different aspects of mental health could provide valuable insights for tailoring interventions to individual needs.

Practitioners implementing wellbeing programs in school settings may consider EFT tapping as a feasible and accessible alternative to meditation, especially for students who may struggle with traditional mindfulness practices. Given the observed improvements in self-regulation across both interventions, educators and school wellbeing staff could integrate either approach to support emotional regulation in the classroom. However, they should be mindful that short-term interventions may not be sufficient to impact broader constructs like happiness or life satisfaction, and ongoing support may be needed to sustain and deepen wellbeing gains.

In conclusion, while our study provides evidence for the potential benefits of both meditation and EFL tapping on self-regulation, it also highlights the complexity of influencing multifaceted constructs such as happiness and life satisfaction. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on mind-body interventions and offer a foundation for further exploration of their comparative efficacy in promoting mental health and well-being.

Ethics and Conflict of Interest

All ethical rules were observed at each stage of the research. The author declares that he acted in accordance with ethical rules in all processes of the research. The first author declares she may receive financial compensation for keynote presentations and book royalties for her research expertise in EFT. The other authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest with other persons, institutions or organizations.

Author Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the research.

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Professor Peta Stapleton is a registered clinical and health Psychologist who embraces evidence-based and innovative techniques. Peta is a world-leading researcher in Emotional Freedom Techniques ('Tapping') and has been awarded many achievements including the 2014 Harvey Baker Research Award for meticulous research (Association of Comprehensive Energy Psychology, USA), the 2015 Global Weight Management Congress Industry Professional Award of Excellence, the 2015 Gold Coast Women in Business Women in Change Award and the 2018 Innovation and Technology Award Winner. In 2016 Peta was awarded the Most Contribution to the Field (energy psychology) and was named the 2019 and 2024 Research Supervisor of the Year at Bond University. In 2019 Peta was also named Psychologist of the Year (by the Australian Allied Health Awards). Peta is a featured EFT Tapping presenter on Gaia, SBS Warner Brother Myth vs Medicine research expert, yearly presenter on the international Tapping World Summit, and is featured on Prime USA (Chasing The Present Film). In 2024 Peta was awarded the Distinguished Contribution to Psychological Science Award from the Australian Psychological Society.

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Matthew D. BLANCHARD
Matthew D. Blanchard is fascinated by the science of decision-making and how groups function. As a PhD candidate (about to be graduate) at the University of Sydney, his research explores the role of confidence and communication in group decisions. His other work explores our susceptibility to online propaganda, the impact of AI on student well-being, how collective intelligence can improve medical diagnoses, and the benefits of meditation.