

Don't worry, be happy -- understanding mindfulness meditation

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In times of stress, we're often encouraged to pause for a moment and simply be in the 'now.' This kind of mindfulness, an essential part of Buddhist and Indian Yoga traditions, has entered the mainstream as people try to find ways to combat stress and improve their quality of life. And research suggests that mindfulness meditation can have benefits for health and performance, including improved immune function, reduced blood pressure, and enhanced cognitive function.

But how is it that a single practice can have such wide-ranging effects on well-being? A new article published in the latest issue of [Perspectives on Psychological Science](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, draws on the existing scientific literature to build a framework that can explain these positive effects.

The goal of this work, according to author Britta Hölzel, of Justus Liebig University and Harvard Medical School, is to "unveil the conceptual and mechanistic complexity of mindfulness, providing the 'big picture' by arranging many findings like the pieces of a mosaic." By using a framework approach to understand the mechanisms of mindfulness, Hölzel and her co-authors point out that what we think of as mindfulness is not actually a single skill. Rather, it is a multi-faceted mental practice that encompasses several mechanisms.

The authors specifically identify four key components of mindfulness that may account for its effects: attention regulation, body awareness, emotion regulation, and sense of self. Together, these components help

us attend to and deal with the mental and physiological effects of stress in ways that are non-judgmental.

Although these components are theoretically distinct, they are closely intertwined. Improvement in attention regulation, for example, may directly facilitate our awareness of our physiological state. Body awareness, in turn, helps us to recognize the emotions we are experiencing. Understanding the relationships between these components, and the brain mechanisms that underlie them, will allow clinicians to better tailor mindfulness interventions for their patients, says Hölzel.

On the most fundamental level, this framework underscores the point that mindfulness is not a vague cure-all. Effective mindfulness meditation requires training and practice and it has distinct measurable effects on our subjective experiences, our behavior, and our brain function. The authors hope that further research on this topic will "enable a much broader spectrum of individuals to utilize mindfulness [meditation](#) as a versatile tool to facilitate change – both in psychotherapy and in everyday life."

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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