

Research shows that mindfulness can improve daily psychological routines

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(Medical Xpress) -- A study from a transatlantic team of psychologists led by Dr Ulrich Weger from the University of Kent has shown that simple social judgment tasks that play a role in people's daily routines can be influenced through mindfulness exercises.

Mindfulness can be defined as a state of moment-to-moment awareness in which people experience their environment without immediate reactions or preconceived notions. The tasks that can be improved through this practice may include emotional judgments, interpersonal communications or the handling of social challenges.

Dr Weger explained that quite often straightforward psychological judgments such as estimating personal performance in a given situation are easily influenced by latent anxieties or prejudices. He said:

"Most of the time, people are not even aware of these subtle psychological variables and yet they have the power to become self-fulfilling prophecies. For example: in a situation where someone has to take an exam and knows that their results will be compared with others who they expect to do much better, many people experience a certain psychological threat that makes their performance suffer. This so-called "stereotype threat" has long been known to influence performance negatively, even when there is no ground for real differences. This includes females doing worse in a maths test after being warned that they will be compared with males (relative to when no such comparison is mentioned) and white males doing worse in the same test when warned

that they will be compared with Asian males."

It is not easy for a person to simply rid themselves of these latent anxieties - in fact, if suppressed they are known to rebound under certain conditions. However, through its study the team has shown that if people focus their attention and direct it in a principled manner towards a given object for a few minutes rather than let it wander or get sidetracked by the worrying thoughts, the negative consequences of such psychological threat are alleviated. In other words, those who experience psychological threat improve significantly after a mindfulness exercise, compared with those who also experience threat but do not engage in the exercise.

Dr Weger added: "This finding has significant implications for the way we experience and interact with our environment. It shows that while we may be vulnerable to anxieties, stereotypes or similar stressors, we are not enslaved by them. Our results suggest that it really depends on us as to how long - or short - of a lead we grant these stressors in pulling us off track."

Those involved in the project include Dr Weger, Dr Tim Hopthrow and Dr Nic Hooper from the School of Psychology at Kent, and Dr Brian Meier from the Department of Psychology at Gettysburg College, Pennsylvania.

Titled "Practising [mindfulness](#) as a strategy to prevent premature judgements", the project was funded by The Leverhulme Trust UK. The results will be published by the journal *Consciousness and Cognition*.

Provided by University of Kent

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