

Psychology of possibilities can enhance health, happiness, research says

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First-time mothers who pay attention to their emotional and physical changes during their pregnancy may feel better and have healthier newborns than new mothers who don't, according to research to be presented at American Psychological Association's 120th Annual Convention.

"These findings continue more than 40 years of research that has made clear that whether you are mindless or mindful makes a big difference in every aspect of your health and well-being -- from competence to longevity," Ellen Langer, professor of psychology at Harvard University and a pioneer in researching mindfulness, said in an interview. Langer is a past recipient of APA's Award for Distinguished Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest.

For Langer's recent study, researchers trained women pregnant with their first child in mindfulness with instructions to notice subtle changes in their feelings and physical sensations each day, she said. When compared with two other groups of first-time [pregnant mothers](#) who did not have the mindfulness training, these women reported more well-being and [positive feelings](#) and less [emotional distress](#). "They had higher self-esteem and [life satisfaction](#) during this period of their pregnancy and up to at least a month after birth," Langer said. "And this also had a positive impact on their deliveries and overall health of the [newborns](#)."

Teaching mindfulness through attention to variability may be helpful for many disorders, including asthma, depression and learning disabilities, to

name a few, according to Langer.

"Noticing even subtle [fluctuations](#) in how you feel can counter mindlessness, or the illusion of stability. We tend to hold things still in our minds, despite the fact that all the while they are changing. If we open up our minds, a world of possibility presents itself," she said.

Author of the popular books "Mindfulness," "The Power of Mindful Learning," "On Becoming an Artist: Reinventing Yourself Through Mindful Creativity," and most recently, "Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility," Langer is known for her work on the illusion of control, aging, decision-making and mindfulness theory.

In her lecture, Langer will describe her research to test possibilities rather than find out what is typical. "Psychologists have traditionally studied the 'norm' rather than exceptions that could show that we are capable of far more than we currently realize," she said. Among other research, she will describe her work showing how a change in mindset has resulted in weight loss and improved vision and hearing, and how subtle differences in choice of words can improve health.

Langer first demonstrated the psychology of possibilities in her landmark 1981 "counterclockwise" experiment in which a group of elderly men spent time immersed in a retreat created to reflect daily life in the 1950s and where they were told to speak of the past in the present tense. Men in a comparison group reminisced for the week and were given no instructions regarding verb tense. The experimental group showed greater improvement in vision, strength, joint flexibility, finger length (their arthritis diminished and they could straighten their fingers more) and manual dexterity. On intelligence tests, 63 percent of the experimental group improved their scores, compared to 44 percent of the control group, Langer said.

BBC television recently replicated the study with British celebrities in a program that has been viewed in Great Britain, Australia, India and Hong Kong. It's currently being replicated with local celebrities in Germany and the Netherlands, Langer said.

"It is important for people to realize there can be enhanced possibilities for people of all ages and all walks of life," Langer emphasized. "My research has shown how using a different word, offering a small choice or making a subtle change in the physical environment can improve our health and well-being. Small changes can make large differences, so we should open ourselves to the impossible and embrace a psychology of possibility."

Provided by American Psychological Association

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