

Mindfulness meditation found to relieve the stress of waiting for bad news

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For the first time, mindfulness meditation has been linked with reduced stress while waiting for potentially bad news. Credit: University of California - Riverside

Popular music and clichés aren't the only evidence that the waiting is the hardest part. Research backs it up as well; waiting for potentially bad news can be at least as difficult as receiving the news.

People try lots of things to mitigate the suffering that comes with waiting

for exam scores, hospital test results, or the outcome of a job interview. They try to distract themselves. They try to stay positive. They brace for the worst.

Past research by UC Riverside "worry and waiting" expert Kate Sweeny has studied the effectiveness of those techniques. None of it works, her research has found. Those tactics not only fail to reduce distress – they can even backfire and make it worse.

But now, Sweeny's research finds something that can help: supplementing those ineffective strategies with "mindfulness" [meditation](#). That is, focusing on the present using meditation.

In the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, research funded by the National Science Foundation asserts that mindfulness is a sort of antidote to the "curse" of waiting. That curse is a focus on the past or future, represented by questions such as "Why did I say that?" and "What if things don't go my way?"

"We try to predict our fate and regain a sense of certainty and control over our life," said Sweeny, who is an associate professor of psychology at UCR. "We know from lots of research that rumination (repetitive thoughts about the past) and worry (repetitive thoughts about the future) are quite unpleasant and even harmful to our health and well-being, so it's important to seek solutions to this painful form of mental time-travel."

Better to focus on the present, Sweeny said, and accept your thoughts and feelings as they arise rather than engage in tactics to avoid them. It means you'll process your emotions differently and – Sweeny argues – more effectively.

The study was performed using 150 California law students who had

taken the bar exam and were awaiting the results, which take four months to post online. The students completed a series of questionnaires in that four-month waiting period.

There are few "waiting" scenarios more stressful than the potentially career-killing bar exam. The magnitude of the distress is represented in several sample statements Sweeny and her team collected. Among them:

I had a nightmare where I couldn't determine whether I had passed or failed the bar exam and I spent the entire dream trying to find out my results. I have these sort of bar exam nightmares once every couple weeks.

I got sick, like fever flu sick, and I think it's because my anxiety levels have slowly been building up to today!! I was constantly thinking and thinking about the results.

During the four-month waiting period, the students were asked to participate in a 15-minute audio-guided meditation session at least once a week.

Sweeny found the [mindfulness meditation](#) served to postpone the phenomenon of "bracing." Bracing is essentially preparing for the worst. Previous research by Sweeny and others shows bracing can be an effective technique for managing expectations, but its benefits erode when it occurs too early in the waiting process.

"Optimism feels good; it just does a poor job of preparing us for the blow of bad news," Sweeny said. "That's where bracing comes in. In a perfect world, we'd be optimistic as long as possible to get all the good feelings we can from assuming the best, and then we'd brace for the worst at the moment of truth to make sure we're prepared for [bad news](#)."

The benefits of mindfulness meditation have long been asserted, but Sweeny said this is the first research to demonstrate its effectiveness coping with waiting.

"We know that meditation is a great way to reduce everyday stress, but our study is the first to see if it also makes it easier to wait for personally significant news. This study is also one of the first to identify any strategy that helps people wait better, and it also shows that even brief and infrequent meditation can be helpful," Sweeny said.

Best of all, Sweeny said, the mindfulness tactic requires no training, no money, and minimal time and effort.

"Meditation isn't for everyone, but our study shows that you don't have to be a master meditator or go to a silent meditation retreat to benefit from mindfulness," she said. "Even 15 minutes once a week, which was the average amount of meditation practiced by our participants, was enough to ease the stress of waiting."

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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