

Mindfulness training leads to kindness toward socially ostracized strangers, study finds

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People receiving brief instruction in mindfulness exhibited more kindness to strangers who had been ostracized or socially excluded by

their peers, according to a new study by researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University.

"This is one of the first series of studies that's directly addressed the question of whether [mindfulness training](#) can promote more prosocial behavior toward victims of social exclusion or rejection," said Kirk Warren Brown, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Psychology in the College of Humanities and Sciences. "What it suggests is that even very brief instruction in mindfulness can promote more kindness toward [people](#) who have been victimized in social ways."

The article in which the studies are described, "Mindfulness Increases Prosocial Responses Toward Ostracized Strangers Through Empathic Concern," will appear in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* and was led by Daniel R. Berry, Ph.D., a VCU doctoral graduate working with Brown and now at California State University, San Marcos.

Participants in the studies were randomized into several conditions, and in the key one, participants engaged in a brief mindfulness exercise that encouraged them to become more aware of and receptive to their moment-to-moment experiences, including thoughts, emotions and physical states. After the exercises, participants took part in a series of computer tasks designed to replicate situations in which participants have an opportunity to act prosocially toward a person who is being ostracized.

Participants first observed people playing a game called Cyberball, an open-source virtual ball-toss game designed for research on ostracism, social exclusion or rejection. One "player"—actually just a computer simulation—was never passed the ball after a few opening tosses, thereby excluding the player from the group.

Participants then wrote emails to the game's players. The emails written to the ostracized player from participants who did the mindfulness exercise showed more warmth and kindness than emails written by participants who had done a different exercise.

Participants then played Cyberball with the players they had been observing. Participants who had received mindfulness instruction made significantly more ball tosses to the previously excluded player.

The study's findings are important because ostracism, [social exclusion](#) and rejection are common occurrences—with in-person and online interactions—and can be very hurtful, Brown said.

"The feeling that one is excluded or rejected is very hard-hitting for people psychologically," he said. "Even when that means being rejected by a [stranger](#), we still feel the impact."

In the study, all of the people the [participants](#) observed were strangers to them, and the "person" being ostracized was a computer avatar who was not actually seen in-person. The researchers were aiming to replicate the conditions of witnessing a stranger being ostracized, as people tend to be kinder to individuals who are known to them, such as friends, family or those in their social group with similar characteristics.

"We wanted to test this with strangers because it's one thing to say that people are kind to those that they know but it's another matter to express kindness toward strangers—and we felt this was particularly important in the current social and political climate," Brown said.

"The world is increasingly interconnected and interdependent and people are in much greater contact with those they don't know than in previous times," he added, "so this [study series] is addressing the question: What helps us to express compassion toward people who we may not otherwise

feel concern for?"

Brown is an expert in mindfulness research, particularly on how mindfulness can help people regulate their emotions, especially difficult ones.

"This series of studies is an extension of that because when people witness someone being victimized, it's very common for them to be distressed by it, to get upset," he said. "And, interestingly, when that happens, people tend to turn away. They tend to want to take care of their own emotional states and are less likely to help other people in that situation."

In this case, however, that did not happen.

"The folks who had received the [mindfulness](#) instruction seemed to be better at regulating their emotions; they didn't get distressed," he said. "And perhaps that allowed them to more easily be present for the strangers that they were seeing being victimized."

More information: Daniel R. Berry et al. Mindfulness increases prosocial responses toward ostracized strangers through empathic concern., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/xge0000392](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000392)

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