

Mindful movement may help lower stress, anxiety

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Taking a walk may be a good opportunity to mentally review your to-do list, but using the time to instead be more mindful of your breathing and surroundings may help boost your wellbeing, according to researchers.

The researchers found that while students reported being less stressed while they were on their feet and moving, they received an even greater benefit when they reported also being more mindful.

Chih-Hsiang "Jason" Yang, a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Southern California who led the study while earning his doctorate at Penn State, said the results suggest a simple way for people to boost their wellbeing throughout the day.

"It can be difficult to ask people to spend a lot of time doing moderate or vigorous activity by going to the gym or out for a run, especially if they feel stressed," Yang said. "But if they don't need to change their everyday behavior, and can instead try to change their state of mind by becoming more mindful, they can probably see this beneficial effect. You don't need to exert a lot of extra effort in order to improve your wellbeing by being more mindful while you're moving around."

David Conroy, professor of kinesiology at Penn State, also said the findings—recently published in the journal *Psychology of Sports and Exercise*—could help people who are not able to engage in strenuous exercise.

"If someone is looking for a way to manage these kinds of feelings, it may be worth trying some sort of mindful movement," Conroy said. "This option may be especially beneficial for people who don't enjoy exercise and would prefer a less intense form of [physical activity](#)."

According to the American College Health Association, more than half of college students experience anxiety, sadness or mental exhaustion at least once a year, suggesting a need for a simple way to reduce these negative states. Because students are often moving throughout their days, as they walk to class and go about other activities, the researchers wanted to see if there was a connection between mindfulness, movement and a

reduction in negative states.

The researchers recruited 158 Penn State students for the study. For two weeks, a special mobile phone app, called Paco, randomly prompted the participants eight times a day to answer questions about their current activity and states of mind. The prompts included questions about where the participant was, if they were moving, and if they were stressed or anxious, as well as questions designed to assess mindfulness.

After analyzing the data, the researchers found that in the moments when participants were more mindful or active than usual, they showed reduced negative affect. They also found a possible synergistic effect when people were both mindful and active.

"When people were both more mindful and more active than usual, they seem to have this extra decrease in negative affect," Yang said. "Being more active in a given moment is already going to reduce negative affect, but by also being more mindful than usual at the same time, you can see this amplified affect."

Conroy said it was interesting to see patterns emerge within the individual participants, instead of just comparing people who are generally more mindful to people who are generally less mindful.

"Most studies in this area have focused on the differences between people who are more versus people who are less mindful, but we saw that college students often slipped in and out of mindful states during the day," Conroy said. "Developing the ability to shift into these states of mindfulness as needed may be valuable for improving self-regulation and well-being."

To better explore the causal role of mindfulness on lower negative states of being, Yang completed a second study, in which older adults who

participated in an outdoor mindfulness activity then reported on their feelings of stress, anxiety and depression. Yang found that the mindful walking was associated with lower levels of these feelings.

The researchers said that in the future, studies that collect more objective data—like gathering information about physical activity by using accelerometers—and include more varied populations could be useful.

More information: Chih-Hsiang Yang et al, Momentary negative affect is lower during mindful movement than while sitting: An experience sampling study, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.05.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.05.003)

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