

Exploring why mindfulness meditation has positive mental health outcomes

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A workshop on mindfulness taught by Jose Ramón Yela. Credit: Yela et al.

Over the past few decades, mindfulness meditation has become increasingly popular, particularly as a tool to reduce stress or anxiety and gain a greater sense of wellbeing. While many empirical studies have

confirmed that regular meditation, especially mindfulness meditation, can have beneficial effects on people's mental health, so far very little is known about the mechanisms underpinning these effects.

Researchers at [Pontifical University of Salamanca in Spain](#) have recently carried out a study aimed at uncovering some of the reasons why mindfulness [meditation](#) can improve people's psychological health and wellbeing. Their paper, published in the [Journal of Clinical Psychology](#), identifies three main factors that could be associated with the observed mental health benefits of mindfulness practices.

"Our study arises from the need to identify why meditation can produce positive psychological effects," José Ramon Yela, the lead researcher for the study, told MedicalXpress. "After reviewing some of the contributions of previous research on this subject, we proposed that three variables could play an important role: the capacity for [self-compassion](#); experiencing that life has meaning—that is, that there are valuable and important things in life and valuable objectives to pursue; and finally, reducing the extent to which a person avoids thoughts, emotions or experiences that may be unpleasant but are part of his/her life."

The work of Yela and his colleagues builds on previous studies investigating the mechanisms behind mindfulness meditation, including their own past investigations and a study conducted a few years ago by a research team [at the University of New Mexico](#). It also draws inspiration from the work of psychologists [Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer](#), which focuses on a program called Mindful Self-Compassion.

In addition to identifying three factors that could underlie the positive effects of mindfulness meditation, Yela and his colleagues hypothesize the presence of a specific sequential mechanism that unfolds over time. More specifically, they propose that practicing mindfulness meditation

on a regular basis can increase levels of self-compassion, which in turn makes life feel more meaningful, finally motivating the person meditating to become more involved in life, thus reducing their avoidance of both pleasant and challenging experiences.

"Being self-compassionate is especially important when a person goes through a difficult period in life," Yela explained. "In this sense, it is important to clarify the meaning of self-compassion, which includes three components."

In their paper, Yela and his colleagues define self-compassion as one's ability to be kind towards oneself rather than harsh or self-critical, while also recognizing that suffering, pain and difficulties are common to our shared human nature rather than feeling alienated or weird. The third important component entails the ability to be mindfully aware of potentially aversive inner experiences, such as disturbing thoughts, negative emotions or upsetting sensations, instead of over-identifying with these experiences.

In their work, Yela and his colleagues combined a few different research methods. First, they asked participants to answer surveys designed to measure the three variables that their study focused on. Subsequently, they tried to uncover the relationships between these variables and integrated them into an empirically testable model.

"This type of research is very interesting because we can collect data from very large samples and analyze the role that multiple variables may play concerning mental health and psychological wellbeing," Yela said. "However, it has some limitations, such as the fact that it is complicated to make causal attributions concerning the relationships among variables. For this reason, we are also carrying out longitudinal research."



The research team in the baroque cloister, at Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca. Credit: Yela et al.

To test their hypotheses, the researchers asked 414 meditators and 414 nonmeditators to answer questionnaires designed to measure their levels of mental health, self-compassion and experiential avoidance, as well as how much they felt life had meaning. They then analyzed the data they collected, comparing the responses of meditators with those of nonmeditators.

"We focused on people who have received mindfulness or mindfulness and self-compassion trainings and analyze how different psychological parameters (e.g., mental health, anxiety, depression, etc.) and potentially explanatory mechanisms (e.g., increased capacity for self-compassion,

experience of meaning, reduction of experiential avoidance) change across time as a result of such training," Yela explained.

The analyses carried out by the researchers yielded a number of interesting results. Firstly, Yela and his colleagues found that self-compassion, presence of meaning in life and a reduced experiential avoidance may all be associated with the [beneficial effects](#) of mindfulness meditation.

More specifically, their observations suggest that consistently practicing mindfulness meditation encourages self-compassion, helping people to find greater meaning in their life, but also reducing the tendency to avoid or escape from unpleasant thoughts or emotions that cause pain, suffering or discomfort. Combined, these three factors could lead to improvements in wellbeing and mental health.

"In sum, we highlight the relevance of being kind to oneself, treating oneself compassionately, recognizing what is valuable in life and moving forward even though life is not always as one would like it to be," Yela said. "Another important result of the study concerns the commitment with the practice of meditation."

In addition to shedding light on some of the reasons why [mindfulness meditation](#) can be so beneficial, the findings gathered by this team of researchers highlight the benefits of meditating regularly. Yela and his colleagues found that for meditation to be associated with positive effects it must be practiced regularly over time, which is aligned with previous empirical results. When meditation is only practiced on an occasional basis, on the other hand, its effects can be negligible, or the practice can even become a form of experience avoidance in itself.

The researchers are now conducting further research aimed at unveiling other mechanisms that could mediate the relationship between

mindfulness and psychological wellbeing. Moreover, they are evaluating the effectiveness of some therapeutic approaches and protocols designed to foster mindfulness and self-compassion, including Mindfulness Self-Compassion (MSC) and Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs.

"We are also planning research on the effects of self-compassion practices on a number of psychological, health and biological parameters, the latter being connected with cellular ageing (i.e., telomere length)," Yela said. "In this project, we will follow up for three years people who are starting to practice self-compassion and compare them with long-term meditators."

More information: José Ramón Yela et al. Self-compassion, meaning in life, and experiential avoidance explain the relationship between meditation and positive mental health outcomes, *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/jclp.22932](https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22932)

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