

Online mindfulness may improve mental health during COVID-19 pandemic

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The fear, anxiety and stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on mental health. But a new study suggests these symptoms may be alleviated through safe and convenient online mindfulness

practices.

The study, which was recently published in the journal *Global Advances in Health and Medicine*, shows that an online mindfulness intervention may reduce momentary stress, anxiety and COVID-19 concern.

At the onset of the [pandemic](#), Rebecca Erwin Wells, M.D., M.P.H., associate professor of neurology at Wake Forest School of Medicine, part of Wake Forest Baptist Health, and principal investigator for this study, recognized the tremendous impact of this pandemic on [emotional health](#) and wanted to evaluate how a safe, online mindfulness meditation strategy might help.

In creating this study, Wells was inspired by Mindfulness for Milan, a program created by co-author Licia Grazzi, M.D., an Italian physician who led free daily mindfulness sessions to help the public manage stress and anxiety during lockdown.

Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment, non-judgmental awareness of thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and surrounding environment.

"We are all born with the capacity for mindfulness," said Wells. "It can help reduce stress and anxiety, and mindfulness meditation practice can help enhance this ability."

There were 233 participants from across the world in this non-randomized clinical trial, which included a pre-session survey, a single 15-minute online mindfulness meditation session and a post-session survey. The study ran from March to August 2020. Pre- and post-session surveys evaluated momentary stress, anxiety and COVID-19 concern. Most of the participants (63%) had never practiced mindfulness before, and 89% of participants said the session was helpful, and that the online

platform was effective for practicing mindfulness. 76% of participants reported decreased anxiety, 80% reported decreased stress, and 55% had decreased COVID-19 concern. Of note, 21% of participants were retired, suggesting that age did not prevent accessibility.

Participants were also surveyed on how they were helping others during the pandemic. Responses varied with common themes including following public [health](#) guidelines, conducting acts of service and connection such as reaching out to elderly neighbors, and self-care activities such as staying positive and calm.

Investigators also assessed online mindfulness resources across time during the pandemic and found a 52% increase in search results of "Mindfulness + COVID" from May to August 2020. "People are searching for ways to help target the [stress](#) and [anxiety](#) of the pandemic," Wells said. "Mindfulness teachers and programs have expanded offerings, eliminated fees, and converted offerings to online to meet this huge need."

According to Wells, the study shows that a virtual platform can be effective for practicing mindfulness.

"We found that online mindfulness interventions may improve psychological health at a time of uncertainty. We were also encouraged by the survey responses, which showed a sense of connectedness and a desire to help others," Wells said. "Helping others during the pandemic demonstrates the beautiful capacity of the human spirit to find positivity despite the extraordinary negative circumstances."

Wells said that additional research is needed to evaluate the pandemic's effects on post-traumatic growth, the positive psychological change experienced following a challenging life circumstance.

More information: Suzan R Farris et al, Online Mindfulness May Target Psychological Distress and Mental Health during COVID-19, *Global Advances in Health and Medicine* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/21649561211002461](https://doi.org/10.1177/21649561211002461)

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