

Mindfulness can make you selfish: study

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Mindfulness is big business. Downloads of mindfulness apps generate billions of dollars annually in the U.S., and their popularity continues to rise. In addition to what individual practitioners might have on their phones, schools and prisons along with 1 in 5 employers currently offer some form of mindfulness training.

Mindfulness and meditation are associated with reducing stress and anxiety, while increasing emotional well-being. Plenty of scholarship supports these benefits. But how does [mindfulness](#) affect the range of human behaviors—so-called [prosocial behaviors](#)—that can potentially help or benefit other people? What happens when the research looks outwardly at social effects of mindfulness rather than inwardly at its personal effects?

It's within the area of prosocial behaviors that a new paper by University at Buffalo researchers demonstrates the surprising downsides of mindfulness, while offering easy ways to minimize those consequences—both of which have practical implications for mindfulness training.

"Mindfulness can make you selfish," says Michael Poulin, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology in the UB College of Arts and Sciences and the paper's lead author. "It's a qualified fact, but it's also accurate. Mindfulness increased prosocial actions for people who tend to view themselves as more interdependent. However, for people who tend to view themselves as more independent, mindfulness actually decreased prosocial behavior."

The results sound contradictory given the pop culture toehold of mindfulness as an unequivocal positive mental state. But the message here isn't one that dismantles the effectiveness of mindfulness.

"That would be an oversimplification," says Poulin, an expert in stress, coping and prosocial engagement. "Research suggests that mindfulness works, but this study shows that it's a tool, not a prescription, which requires more than a plug-and-play approach if practitioners are to avoid its potential pitfalls."

The findings will appear in a forthcoming issue of the journal

Psychological Science.

Poulin says independent versus interdependent mindsets represent an overarching theme in social psychology. Some people think of themselves in singular or independent terms: "I do this." While others think of themselves in plural or interdependent terms: "We do this."

There are also [cultural differences](#) layered on top of these perspectives. People in Western nations most often think of themselves as independent, whereas people in East Asian countries more often think of themselves as interdependent. Mindfulness practices originated in East Asian countries, and Poulin speculates that mindfulness may be more clearly prosocial in those contexts. Practicing mindfulness in Western countries removes that context.

"Despite these individual and cultural differences, there is also variability within each person, and any individual at different points in time can think of themselves either way, in singular or plural terms," says Poulin.

The researchers, which included Shira Gabriel, Ph.D., a UB Associate Professor of Psychology, C. Dale Morrison and Esha Naidu, both UB graduate students, and Lauren M. Ministero, Ph.D., a UB graduate student at the time of the research who is now a senior behavioral scientist at the MITRE Corporation, used a two-experiment series for their study.

First, they measured 366 participants' characteristic levels of independence versus interdependence, before providing mindfulness instruction or a mind wandering exercise to the control group. Before leaving, participants were told about volunteer opportunities stuffing envelopes for a charitable organization.

In this experiment, mindfulness led to decreased prosocial behavior among those who tended to be independent.

In the next experiment, instead of having a trait simply measured, 325 participants were encouraged to lean one way or the other by engaging in a brief but effective exercise that tends to make people think of themselves in independent or interdependent terms.

The mindfulness training and control procedures were the same as the first experiment, but in this case, participants afterwards were asked if they would sign up to chat online with potential donors to help raise money for a charitable organization.

Mindfulness made those primed for independence 33% less likely to volunteer, but it led to a 40% increase in the likelihood of volunteering to the same organization among those primed for interdependence. The results suggest that pairing mindfulness with instructions explaining how to make people think of themselves in terms of their relationships and communities as they're engaging in mindfulness exercises may allow them to see both positive personal and social outcomes.

"We have to think about how to get the most out of mindfulness," Poulin says. "We have to know how to use the tool."

More information: Michael Poulin et al, Minding your own business? Mindfulness decreases prosocial behavior for those with independent self-construals, (2021). [DOI: 10.31234/osf.io/xhyua](https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/xhyua)

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