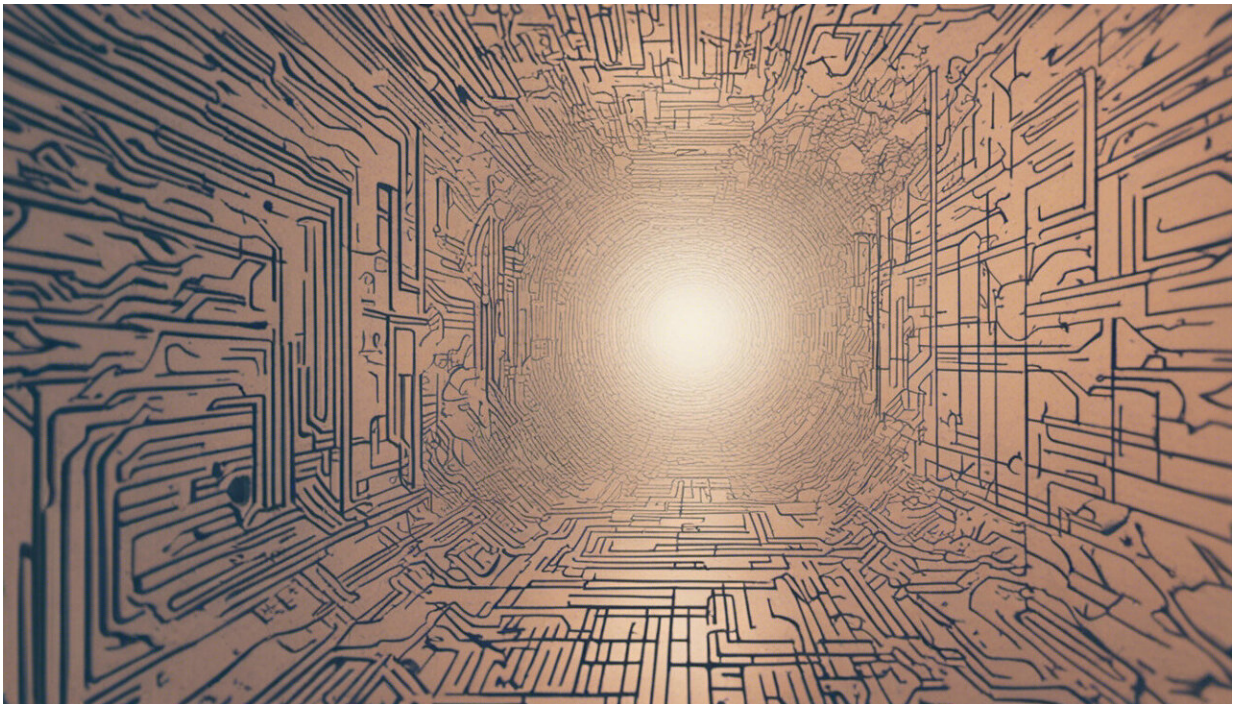


How online mindfulness training can help students thrive during the pandemic

August 27 2021, by Adam Austen Kay



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

COVID-19 is reasserting itself, with the Delta variant posing a serious threat to young people. The pandemic has made physical distancing an inescapable new reality of post-secondary education as universities continue to deliver courses online. Our [research](#) shows mindfulness training can also be effective when delivered online, bringing benefits

previously unknown to science.

One year into the pandemic, students are showing signs of wear. The [2020 Student Experience Survey](#) shows post-secondary students' engagement with learning has dropped. Responses indicated they were 4% more likely to drop out due to stress or health concerns.

Universities thus face a pressing need to help their students cope. Fortunately, a promising new resource is available: [online mindfulness training](#).

Mindfulness is the process of focusing attention and awareness on present moment experience with an open, curious and accepting attitude. It's usually taught in person. However, given the advantages of online delivery in a pandemic, the popularity of [online mindfulness training has boomed](#).

What did the study find?

In recent decades, a mountain of research has shown mindfulness is broadly effective for relieving symptoms of psychological suffering like anxiety, depression and stress. However, our [study](#), published in the journal *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, shows online mindfulness training can do more than alleviate such symptoms. It can help students flourish.

We examined the effects of online mindfulness training on the psychological well-being of 227 graduate students. Half of them took part in a free, evidence-based [online program](#). It involved 30 minutes a day of mindfulness meditation, five days a week, for eight weeks.

As a placebo control, the other half took part in an equal amount of training also known to promote health and well-being: physical exercise.

The psychological well-being of students in both groups improved. These gains were indicated by criteria like [self-acceptance](#), personal growth, meaning and purpose in life, and positive relationships with others.

However, online mindfulness training had a distinct benefit. It improved psychological well-being by helping students cultivate [authenticity](#).

What is authenticity?

Authenticity is one of the most powerful indicators of psychological health. Authentic individuals are self-aware, meaning they are in touch with their thoughts and emotions. They act in accordance with their values and beliefs.

Our findings echo Socratic exhortations to "know thyself" and Shakespearean admonishments "to thine own self be true." Educators have long [extolled the benefits of authenticity](#) for [character and leadership](#). However, they have lacked evidence-based practical methods to help guide their students on how to become more authentic—until now.

This study revealed that online mindfulness training helped students develop authenticity. It did so primarily by heightening their self-awareness and secondarily by helping them align their actions with their values.

Some students benefit more than others

While these findings are promising, the benefits were not the same for all students. Online mindfulness training improved the authenticity of nearly 60% of students but not others (although they still gained other

well-being benefits).

What was the difference? The answer lies in personality.

Every educator knows personality has important implications for [student](#) performance. Similarly, every psychologist knows the single most important dimension of personality for student performance is "conscientiousness." Highly conscientious students perform better because they show self-discipline, attention to detail, reliability, thoughtfulness and persistent hard work.

We reasoned that conscientiousness would be even more important in an online learning environment where students don't have access to the dedicated learning space and shelter from distractions that classrooms can provide.

Results supported our reasoning: only highly conscientious students benefited from online mindfulness training in terms of authenticity and the psychological well-being that flows from it. Even though students who were low in conscientiousness undertook a similar amount of training, they did not develop in authenticity. In other words, conscientiousness appears to have improved the quality of online mindfulness training.

It's not a cure-all for student well-being

This study is the first to show that, despite the advantages of online mindfulness training for helping students cultivate authenticity and thereby flourish in a remote learning environment, it's not a one-size-fits-all solution.

As the impacts of the pandemic stretch universities financially and educators struggle to respond with innovative content for engaging and

effective online delivery, this research offers timely evidence for incorporating online mindfulness training into higher education.

However, these findings also serve to caution educators not to view online [mindfulness training](#) as a panacea for student well-being. Instead, it should be seen as one part—albeit a promising one—of a broader strategy for helping students cope with the psychological consequences of physically distanced education in a time of COVID-19.

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