

# Despite understanding the concept of mindfulness, people are applying it incorrectly, research finds

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Mindful awareness is about both accepting and engaging with life's challenges, and that's what popularized concepts of mindfulness tend to miss, new research has found.

Studying popular concepts of [mindfulness](#), the researchers found most laypeople are confusing the practice with passive acceptance of problem—a misconception scientists say ignores the important work of engaging with them.

Originating in Buddhist [religious practice](#), much of the mindfulness movement's popularity grew from [clinical research](#) affirming its potential for reducing stress and related health disorders.

"Scientific understanding of mindfulness goes beyond mere stress-relief and requires a willingness to engage with stressors," said Igor Grossmann, corresponding author of the project and a professor of social psychology at Waterloo. "It is, in fact, the engagement with stressors that ultimately results in stress relief. More specifically, mindfulness includes two main dimensions: awareness and acceptance."

Grossmann and colleagues compared critics' claims to popular interpretations of mindfulness to evaluate how people understand and apply the concept in their daily lives. They found that in practice, most people conflate acceptance with passivity or avoidance.

The research team conducted an extensive empirical project that examined the meaning of mindfulness in three parts: analyses of the semantic meaning of the term mindfulness in the English language, meta-analysis of the results from a widely used mindfulness measure, and empirical tests of association with markers of wisdom and effective emotion regulation.

"While we found that people seem to conceptually understand that mindfulness involves engagement, the general public is not walking the talk. Our results suggest that laypeople may understand what awareness is, but the next step of acceptance may not be well understood—limiting potential for engaging with problems," said Ellen Choi, lead author on

the paper and an assistant professor of organizational behavior at Ryerson University.

Using social media as a topical example, Grossmann says that with algorithms curating increasingly hateful content, the ability to be mindful of others' perspectives has never been more critical. "Mindfulness might not provide an easy answer to the divisiveness that surrounds us, but an accurate understanding that includes the practice of acceptance may herald the re-emergence of sincere discussion and authentic connection."

The paper, "What do people mean when they talk about mindfulness?," authored by Grossmann, Choi, Norman Farb of the University of Toronto, University of Guelph's Ekaterina Pogrebtsova and Jamie Gruman, was recently published in the journal *Clinical Psychology Review*.

**More information:** Ellen Choi et al, What do people mean when they talk about mindfulness?, *Clinical Psychology Review* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cpr.2021.102085](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2021.102085)

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