Mindfulness can get wandering thoughts back on track, according to new study

December 15 2021, by Angela Koenig

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Everyone has times where their mind won't stay on task. For example, you might be listening to someone talk in a meeting or class and your mind wanders to your dinner plans. Notably, research suggests that 30%

to 50% of our daily thoughts are spent on this kind of mind wandering, and that excessive mind wandering can lead to many negative outcomes like poorer performance on standardized tests and poorer recall of information.

"While zoning out for a few minutes during a meeting may not hurt, it can impact you negatively if it goes on for long periods of time," says Lynley Turkelson, a University of Cincinnati doctoral student and lead author of a new study on mindfulness and mind wandering published in the *Journal of Cognitive Enhancement*.

"When distracting thoughts or feelings come up, mindfulness helps us gently set them aside and refocus on what is right in front of us," says Turkelson.

Methods of practicing mindfulness vary but include practices such as breathwork and meditation.

For example, Turkelson says, one can practice mindfulness by paying attention to the experience of eating a favorite food: "You may start by noticing the smell of the food before you eat it, what it feels like as you bite into it, how it feels in your mouth, and the taste. Or perhaps you pay attention to the flow of breath in and out of your lungs or on the sensations you experience in various parts of the body."

For the study, Turkelson, a doctoral student and fellow in UC's Department of Psychology, and co-author Quintino Mano, Ph.D., a UC associate professor of psychology, conducted a systematic review of research that looks at the relationship between mindfulness and mind wandering.

What they found is that while mindfulness—the ability to intentionally focus attention on the present moment—can be effective for reducing

mind wandering, results do differ depending on the research methodology. For instance, people are sometimes unaware when they are distracted, so asking them to report their own mind wandering is not reliable. The study results show it's better to measure mind wandering in other ways, such as using computer-based testing.

"During COVID, people are facing even more distractions than normal, so it is important to find research-based ways to decrease mind wandering and improve attention," says Turkelson.

Turkelson says that their systematic review looks at the research on this topic and synthesizes the results so that researchers know how consistent these findings are, as well as what still needs to be studied to improve our understanding of how mindfulness helps with mind wandering.

Provided by University of Cincinnati