

Study: Mindful adults age with better mental health

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Aging happens to all of us. If you are a mindful person, though, you may be better equipped to handle the effects of growing older.

According to a University of Maine study led by associate professor of psychology Rebecca MacAulay, published in the journal *Aging & Mental Health*, aging adults with high levels of "trait mindfulness," or a person's innate ability to pay attention to the [present moment](#) without judgment, showed measures of greater well-being and [mental health](#). Mindful adults also demonstrated more mental resilience to stressful situations.

In the study, 121 adults between the ages of 55 and 87 were evaluated for their levels of trait mindfulness using the scientifically validated Mindful Attention Awareness Scale. The subjects were then given an array of psychological tasks to gauge their levels of executive function, or the set of mental skills that allow individuals to plan, track and achieve their goals, including working memory, the ability to switch back and forth between tasks, and the ability to filter out irrelevant information. Researchers also measured the subjects' psychological resilience and emotional response to stressful, unexpected situations.

The results showed that subjects with higher levels of trait mindfulness were generally older and more educated, and exhibited [less stress](#), depression and anxiety. The researchers also found that trait mindfulness was tied to better [inhibitory control](#), the subjects' ability to focus their attention and filter out irrelevant information in tasks. Moreover, results showed that the harmful effect of perceived stress on inhibitory control was significantly reduced in those who were higher in mindfulness.

"It is increasingly recognized that stress, which is on average higher in those with lower socioeconomic status, can have devastating effects on physical and mental health. Importantly, trait mindfulness mediated the relationship between perceived stress and inhibitory control even after adjusting for lower education and global cognition. These findings support that trait mindfulness creates a mental buffer that reduces perceived stress and negative emotional reactivity across a range of older adults, which may have long-term benefits on multiple health outcomes,"

says MacAulay.

The study, like many psychological research projects, had some limitations. For example, the participants were nearly 95% white and non-Hispanic, and personal bias can factor into subjects' responses. Still, the findings suggest that having a mindful personality is not only associated with better well-being and mental health as we age, but also might give us the ability to be more resilient and flexible with our thinking. The study's subject recruitment method also focused on finding participants with [diverse backgrounds](#), particularly older adults who are not college educated, economically insecure or both.

"These findings raise the exciting possibility that increasing [trait](#) mindfulness as an intervention target may help attenuate the harmful impact of [stress](#)-related negative affect on brain health in [older adults](#)," MacAulay says. "My next step for this research is to adapt mindfulness practices for a socioeconomically diverse older adult population to see if increasing mindfulness through practice shows the same beneficial relationships with brain [health](#) and well-being."

More information: Rebecca K. MacAulay et al, Trait mindfulness associations with executive function and well-being in older adults, *Aging & Mental Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/13607863.2021.1998352](https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2021.1998352)

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