

Mindfulness meditation can reduce guilt, leading to unintended negative social consequences

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Mindfulness meditation can reduce guilt, leading to unintended negative social consequences, a UW study found. Credit: Andrew Haimerl/Unsplash

Mindfulness meditation is a stress-management practice with ancient

lineage that cultivates nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment, often by directing attention to the physical sensations of breathing. Initially inspired by centuries-old Buddhist practices consisting of philosophies and meditations together, today a secular version of mindfulness—consisting of meditations alone—is becoming increasingly popular.

There are phone apps that help generate self-awareness and many big corporations are folding mindfulness training programs into their curriculums. But there may be an unanticipated downside to secular mindfulness [meditation](#) practices, according to new research led by the University of Washington's Foster School of Business, and published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

"Meditating can reduce feelings of guilt, thus limiting reactions like generosity that are important to human relationships," said lead author Andrew Hafenbrack, an assistant professor in the Foster School who studies mindfulness.

Researchers wanted to know how mindfulness meditation reduces [negative emotions](#), like anger and guilt.

"Negative emotions may not be pleasant, but they can help us navigate social situations and maintain relationships," Hafenbrack said.

"If someone gets really angry and they yell at their boss, or something, and they get fired or make people feel unsafe, then you know that's a bad thing," Hafenbrack said. "Not all negative emotions are the same in terms of the kinds of behaviors that they queue up, though."

When people feel guilty, it tends to make them focus outward, on other people, which can promote reparative actions.

"Meditating for short periods of time is a tool that can make people feel better, like popping an aspirin when they have a headache," Hafenbrack said. "We have a responsibility as researchers to share not only the many positive effects of meditation, but also the inadvertent side effects, such as the potential for it to occasionally relax one's moral compass."

To better understand meditation practices, the researchers conducted eight experiments with more than 1,400 participants in the U.S. and Portugal. Participants varied for each experiment—some were U.S. adults recruited online, some were graduate students attending a university in Portugal, while another group was mostly undergraduates at the Wharton School of Business.

In their first study, the researchers demonstrated that mindfulness does reduce feelings of guilt. Participants were randomly assigned to either write about a past situation that made them feel guilty or write about their previous day. Then, they listened to either an eight-minute guided mindfulness meditation recording that instructed them to focus on the physical sensations of breathing or an eight-minute control condition recording in which they were instructed to let their minds wander. Participants who listened to the mindfulness recording reported feeling less guilt compared to those in the mind-wandering control group. This was true whether they had written about a guilty situation or their previous day.

The team then ran six other experiments to test whether mindfulness meditation would influence prosocial reparative behaviors, like making up with a friend after doing something that caused harm.

For example, in two experiments all participants were asked to recall and write about a time they wronged someone and felt guilty, before being randomly assigned to meditate or not. After that, they were asked to allocate a hypothetical \$100 between a birthday gift for the person they

had wronged, a charity for African flood victims, and themselves. Participants who had meditated allocated approximately 17% less to the person they had wronged compared to those who had not meditated.

The psychological process behind these allocation differences was reduced guilt. These and three other, similar experiments established that mindfulness meditation reduces the tendency to make amends for harming others.

"This research serves as a caution to people who might be tempted to use mindfulness meditation to reduce emotions that are unpleasant, but necessary to support moral thoughts and behavior," said co-author Isabelle Solal, an assistant professor at ESSEC Business School in Cergy-Pointoise, France.

While focused breathing meditation is the most popular form of meditation, used in mindfulness programs such as the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction approach and Google's Search Inside Yourself, the study also explored loving kindness meditation, which appears in those programs as well. Loving kindness meditation consists of imagery exercises in which one evokes other people and sends wishes that each is happy, well and free from suffering.

In the final experiment, participants once again wrote about a time they wronged someone and felt guilty, before listening to either a focused breathing [mindfulness meditation](#) recording or a loving kindness meditation recording. Participants in the loving kindness group reported higher intentions to contact, apologize to, and make up with people they had harmed compared to participants in the focused breathing meditation group. The difference was explained by participants' increased focus on others and feelings of love.

"Our research suggests that loving kindness meditation may allow people

to have the stress-reduction benefits of meditation without the cost of reducing repair, because it increases focus on others and feelings of love," said co-author Matthew LaPalme, who was a research scientist at Yale University and now works at Amazon.

More information: Andrew C. Hafenbrack et al, Mindfulness meditation reduces guilt and prosocial reparation., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/pspa0000298](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000298)

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