

# Yoga and meditation-induced altered states of consciousness are common in the general population, study says

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Yoga, mindfulness, meditation, breathwork, and other practices are gaining in popularity due to their potential to improve health and well-

being. The effects of these practices are mostly positive and occasionally transformational, yet they are known to sometimes be associated with challenging altered states of consciousness.

New research by a team including investigators from Massachusetts General Hospital reveals that altered states of consciousness associated with [meditation practice](#) are far more common than expected.

Although many people reported [positive outcomes](#), that were sometimes even considered transformational, from these experiences, for a substantial minority the experiences were negative. The results are [published](#) in the journal *Mindfulness*.

"With more people engaging in mindfulness, meditation, and other contemplative and mind-body practices, we thought that altered states and their effects might be common among the general population. We conducted a series of international surveys to investigate and indeed found that such experiences were widespread," said senior author Matthew D. Sacchet, Ph.D., the director of the Meditation Research Program at Massachusetts General Hospital and an associate professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

"Altered states were most often followed by positive, and sometimes even transformational effects on well-being," Sacchet adds. "With that said, negative effects on well-being were also reported in some cases, with a small subset of individuals reporting substantial suffering."

For the study, a panel of experts in psychiatry, neuroscience, meditation, and survey design developed a questionnaire on the experience of altered states of consciousness.

Among 3,135 adults in the US and the UK who completed the online questionnaire, 45% reported experiencing non-pharmacologically

induced altered states of consciousness at least once in their lives.

This is far more than expected from the 5% (US) to 15% (UK) of these population estimated to have undertaken mindfulness practice.

The experiences included derealization (the feeling of being detached from your environment), unitive experiences (a sense of unity or "oneness"), ecstatic thrills, vivid perceptions, changes in perceived size, bodily heat or electricity, out-of-body experiences, and perception of non-physical lights.

Respondents reported a mix of positive and negative well-being following altered states, with 13% claiming moderate or greater suffering and 1.1% claiming life-threatening suffering. Of those who experienced suffering, 63% did not seek help.

"Rather than being extremely unusual and rare, our study found that altered states of consciousness are a common variant of normal human experience," said Sacchet. "However, we've found that those who experience negative outcomes related to these altered states often do not seek help, and that clinicians are poorly prepared to recognize or support these kinds of experiences. This has contributed to what might be considered a public health issue as a certain proportion of people have difficulty integrating their experiences of altered states into their existing conceptions of self and reality."

Sacchet noted that additional studies are needed to identify individual characteristics associated with experiencing altered states of consciousness, and with potential suffering associated with these states. He also stressed the importance of applying this research to [patient care](#).

"We should not dismiss meditation and other practices as inherently dangerous but rather we need to better understand and support

meditators to fully realize the potential of these practices," he said. "Similar to psychotherapy, pharmacology, and other therapeutic tools it's important that we learn to best implement and support people when engaging with these powerful practices."

He added that "ancient meditation manuals from the wisdom traditions may be useful for classifying and understanding altered states of consciousness. They may provide guidance into how to better manage altered states when they may be difficult. We clearly need more research to further study and understand this possibility."

"Clinical curriculum on altered states of [consciousness](#) should be developed to better support clinicians caring for patients experiencing suffering linked to these kinds of experiences," Sacchet added.

"Also, those who teach meditation practices should ensure that participants are aware of potential risk," he said. "Together, these kinds of safeguards will help to ensure that these very promising and powerful practices are taught and experienced safely."

**More information:** Malcolm J. Wright et al, Altered States of Consciousness are Prevalent and Insufficiently Supported Clinically: A Population Survey, *Mindfulness* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s12671-024-02356-z](#)

Provided by Massachusetts General Hospital

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