

# Why you may not be getting the benefits you expected from mindfulness

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You've probably seen the word mindfulness everywhere these days, from the news, to [magazines](#), to [social media](#).

Mindfulness is sometimes packaged as a [mental health cure-all](#), and studies do suggest that [mindfulness-based therapies support mental health](#). Your friends or family may even have told you that mindfulness has changed their lives.

But if you have tried mindfulness and feel like it isn't working for you, our developmental [psychology research](#) might explain why.

In [our recent study](#), we have found that being highly mindful may not be beneficial for all. Instead, some aspects of mindfulness may be more important than others at certain ages, affecting mental health and well-being differently.

## Different aspects of mindfulness?

Mindfulness can be described as an [awareness of the present moment with a nonjudgmental, accepting attitude](#). When you think of mindfulness, you may consider it as a general ability. But some researchers think that mindfulness consists of [five aspects](#):

- Acting with [awareness](#): behaving with attention to the present.
- Observing: paying attention to experiences such as thoughts, emotions and sensations.
- Describing: being able to label your experiences with words.
- Nonjudgement: not criticizing your inner thoughts and emotions.
- Nonreactivity: allowing your thoughts and emotions to come and go freely without automatically reacting to them.

[Psychology research](#) has shown that some of these mindfulness aspects might support mental health and well-being more than others. But which combinations of mindfulness aspects are beneficial, and does your age play a role?

## **Mindfulness aspects across the lifespan**

In [our research](#), we studied mindfulness aspects and mental health among 1,600 people, aged 14 to 90 years. We found that [older adults](#) were more likely to act with awareness (rather than on autopilot) and be nonjudgmental towards themselves. We also found that having these aspects of mindfulness coincided with better mental health.

On the other hand, youth tended to be good at observing what was happening around them, but not so good at other mindfulness aspects. This pattern of mindfulness was related to poorer mental health.

Developmental psychology research may provide an explanation for the finding that older and younger people experience mindfulness differently. Older individuals are better at [mindfully savoring the present moment](#), possibly because they recognize that there is limited time left to fully enjoy their lives.

Meanwhile, younger people prioritize social acceptance and approval. They may feel that [others are always thinking about them](#), judging their appearance and actions. As a result, [young people](#) pay close attention to social messages and follow social norms. This focus on outward observing may leave little room for the kind of mindfulness that could support mental health.

## **Should you change how you build mindfulness skills?**

Given our research findings, we suggest that every person could benefit from a more personalized mindfulness practice. If you feel like you run on autopilot and want to build self-compassion, [acceptance and commitment therapy](#) can support your acting with awareness and nonjudgement.

When considering age, younger individuals might benefit by working on their nonjudgement to support their well-being. If youth tend to compare themselves to others (perhaps a result of high observing), they could benefit by grounding themselves in the present and accepting themselves without judgment.

Although our research suggests that older people tend to be nonjudgmental and act with awareness, this may not be true for everyone. Older individuals can still engage in mindfulness practices that can strengthen these aspects. For example, continuing to build awareness through [mindful walking](#) could further improve your well-being.

If you are curious about your level of mindfulness—and particularly which aspects might benefit you—[this quiz](#) administers the [Five-Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire](#) to provide a personalized profile of mindfulness aspects. In psychology research, the Five-Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire has been demonstrated to be [a valid and reliable measure](#) of the five mindful aspects. It's important to note that quizzes should not be used to replace psychological expert advice. However, this one can give you a good idea of how you experience mindfulness.

Despite its ubiquity, generalized mindfulness may not be an all-purpose mental health tool. Rather, our research shows how different components of mindfulness might be uniquely important. Your age could also affect how much you benefit from mindfulness practices. Knowing your [mindfulness](#) profile could be an important next step for more effectively improving your well-being and mental health.

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