

# Study finds mindfulness apps can improve mental health

15 November 2018



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A University of Otago study has found that using mindfulness meditation applications (apps) on phones is associated with improvements in people's mental health.

In a randomised, controlled trial, mindfulness app users reported modest improvements in depressive symptoms, resilience, mindfulness, and college adjustment, relative to control participants; as well as broader improvements relative to their starting [mental health](#). Importantly, those who continued to use the apps frequently were more likely to maintain improvements in mental health until the end of the study.

The study, "Mobile Mindfulness Meditation: A Randomised Controlled Trial of the Effect of Two Popular Apps on Mental Health," has been published in the journal *Mindfulness*.

Lead author, Jayde Flett, Ph.D. candidate at Otago's Department of Psychology and Department of Psychological Medicine, says the development and availability of [mindfulness meditation](#) apps provides new opportunities to

practice mindfulness, which has been associated with a wide range of mental health benefits when practiced face-to-face.

"Mobile phones are often scorned as devices of distraction, but paradoxically, they may serve as a good platform to practice being in the moment and being mindful given their wide use," Ms Flett says.

The study involved 208 university students aged 18 to 49 who were randomly assigned to use one of three apps: Headspace, Smiling Mind, or Evernote (a non-mindfulness control group). Mimicking optimal use and more realistic use, participants were asked to use their assigned app for ten minutes each day for ten days, after which they received an extended 30 days' access to continue practicing at their discretion. Participants reported their [depressive symptoms](#), anxiety, stress, college adjustment, flourishing, resilience, and mindfulness at baseline, after the 10-day intervention, and after the 30-day continued access period.

App use was high at the outset of the study but dropped markedly when app use was at the discretion of the user, highlighting a need to investigate factors that relate to sustained app usage.

Although the modest improvements differed across the mindfulness apps, timeframe, frequency of use, and reference point, the results provide preliminary evidence that use of mobile mindfulness apps can improve some mental health outcomes in a non-clinical population. Further investigation of any longer-term effects is needed.

Ms Flett says that while not all mobile mindfulness apps are created equal—they should not replace traditional face-to-face [mindfulness](#) programmes. Mindfulness apps represent a promising opportunity for improving mental [health](#) given their 'light touch', ease of use, availability, and accessibility. But, importantly, these tools are only

effective if people use them.

**More information:** Jayde A. M. Flett et al. Mobile Mindfulness Meditation: a Randomised Controlled Trial of the Effect of Two Popular Apps on Mental Health, *Mindfulness* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s12671-018-1050-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-018-1050-9)

Provided by University of Otago

APA citation: Study finds mindfulness apps can improve mental health (2018, November 15) retrieved 25 May 2019 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-11-mindfulness-apps-mental-health.html>

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