

Mindfulness meditation: Our mind could really benefit from it?

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Mindfulness meditation, a mental training practice originating from Buddhism, has witnessed exponential development in both social culture and academic research over the past two decades. In broad terms, mindfulness meditation refers to the practice of cultivating attention to the present moment openheartedly and nonjudgmentally, for example, focusing on the breath (Kabat-Zinn, 2012). By 2015, mindfulness meditation training has already been a billion-dollar industry in the United States (Whippman, 2016). Some studies, especially the early studies, suggest that mindfulness meditation could be beneficial to the mind owing to its possible role in emotion regulation and attention control. Yet a plethora of tentative empirical results about its benefits have been overinterpreted by popular media as established facts, thereby contributing to an increasing marketing hype of mindfulness meditation, while its potential side-effects were often underreported or even neglected. However, some recent scholars take issue with its positive impact, and even contend that the mind may be adversely affected by mindfulness meditation. Despite numerous arguments in favor of the benefits of mindfulness meditation on the mind, this essay argues that mindfulness meditation should be taken with caution as its potential side effects on the mind may outweigh its intended effects.

One of the most significant arguments advocating the benefits of mindfulness meditation on the mind is that mindfulness practices would facilitate emotional regulation in the long term. It is a widely held view that mindfulness meditation upgrades the level of emotional acceptance by means of emotional non-judgment awareness (e.g., Taylor et al., 2011; Tang et al., 2015). Inordinate judgment, for instance, focusing excessively on negative aspects of the situations or dwelling upon the past, is very likely to negatively impact mental health. Through non-judgment

awareness, meditators would generate a critical distance from their emotion, thus enabling them to be less obsessed with their intrusive thoughts (Tangney et al., 2017). Accordingly, mindfulness meditation may contribute to the reduction in internalizing disorders, for example, excessive self-judgment, which are risk factors for anxiety and depression, thereby conducing to emotional regulation improvement. Furthermore, Emavardhana and Tori (1997) observe that constant mindfulness training may lead to a higher self-esteem level, which would also benefit emotional regulation. This claim has been corroborated by Fox et al. (2014), and they illustrate that the impact on the brain structure mindfulness meditation exerts could have a long-lasting influence on a person's personality. Hence, emotional regulation could be cultivated positively through mindfulness meditation in the long term.

However, some studies argue that those research results could not be extrapolated to the practical significance of mindfulness meditation on all meditators, and even reveal some unwanted effects (UEs) exerted by this practice. A multi-cultural study receives UEs reports from more than a quarter of the meditators, and of those UEs, worse anxiety symptoms and depersonalization, which is the feeling of being detached from self, are reported most frequently (Cebolla, 2017). This study implies that anxiety symptoms of some meditators may not be alleviated effectively, yet this practice may trigger other new unwanted symptoms. In addition, the drawbacks of non-judgment awareness in mindfulness practice may overweigh its benefits. Hafenbrack and Vohs (2018) observe that mindfulness meditation reduces concerns about stressors, thus impairing motivation to some extent. Most human psychological mechanisms by natural selection could enable better adaptation to constantly changing surroundings (Wright, 2017). In contrast to abnormal anxiety which negatively affects mental health, normal anxiety is an inevitable human reaction to cope with daily difficulties. A notable example is that motivation could be boosted by anxiety (Strack et al., 2017). Nonetheless, as mindfulness meditation may diminish the anxiety that some people experience, their motivation could be diminished together. Apart from motivation, normal anxiety would facilitate self-reflection, while Tangney et al. (2017) indicate that

mindfulness meditation may inhibit criminogenic cognitions, from which incarcerated population could benefit to weaken criminal thinking. Its mechanism, which is appropriate judgment may be diminished together with abnormal anxiety through non-judgment awareness, is comparable to the previous one that results in decreased motivation. In addition to its side effects on individual ability, non-judgment may contribute to social obstacles. A study of narcissistic personality disorders notes that some mindfulness meditators share several key features with these patients (Ritter et al. 2011). Those features include that they could be cognitively aware of others' emotions but lack empathy for them, which indicates that prosocial effects of non-judgment awareness could be limited. As stated previously, the influence on the brain exercised by mindfulness meditation would be lasting. Thus, it could be speculated that this practice may not play a role in emotion regulation but hamper practitioners from tackling daily difficulties in the long term.

Another argument that highlights the benefits of mindfulness meditation on the mind is that mindfulness practices would promote attention control. Moore and Malinowski (2009) argue that mindfulness practices have a positive impact on people's attention and productivity after their examining the difference in the Stroop Errors (SE), which indicates concentration performance level, between meditators and non-meditators. They claim that this positive influence should be attributed to moment-to-moment awareness in mindfulness meditation. A classic practice of mindfulness meditation is the breathing exercises, which require meditators to be absorbed into the breath to foster the ability to focus. Mindfulness meditators would apply this skill to daily lives, and thus the concentration may be improved through this practice. However, some other scholars question these virtues. Dimidjian and Segal (2015) estimate that fewer than 10% of study designs among mindfulness-related research involve active treatment concurrent control, and they point out that the longitudinal studies are relatively rare. According to Nair (2019), active treatment concurrent control is used to "compare combination of new and standard therapies vis-a-vis standard therapy alone". Since it could be hard to design a standard therapy to distinguish the

effectiveness of mindfulness meditation (Dam et al., 2018), most study designs of mindfulness research merely involve examinations of the difference between meditators and non-meditators. However, these designs fail to acknowledge the significance of psychological factors. For example, some people may learn to expect and value concentration after practicing mindfulness meditation, and then produce the illusion that their concentration is improved by mindfulness meditation, while non-meditators do not have similar psychological changes. Therefore, it is very likely that the beneficial effects of mindfulness meditation on attention should be attributed to placebo effects instead of the efficacious components in mindfulness meditation.

This essay contends that mindfulness meditation should be treated with caution until more research. In contrast to the recent “mindfulness hype” in social culture, there is still insufficient scientific evidence to support its actual, significant benefit on the mind. Although some research reveals some tentative benefits of mindfulness meditation, these conclusions could not be extrapolated to its practical significance. On the other hand, a growing number of recent studies have noted its potential adverse effects, such as depersonalization and decreased motivation, and moreover, its negative influence on the mind could be long-term. Meanwhile, this essay points out some possible drawbacks of mindfulness-related research design. In the field of mindfulness meditation research, a considerable amount of future work is needed to refine study design and methods, along with more government supervision on the accuracy of popular media. Also, it is recommended that people should treat the therapy that has yet to be rigorously tested with extra caution. Only with multipronged endeavors may we eliminate public misunderstandings, understand the mechanisms of mindfulness meditation, and provide better therapy for the individuals and communities.

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