

# The Kindness Cure

Mindfulness meditation is best known for its positive effects on practitioners' brains and bodies. My research suggests it may also encourage compassion toward others.



Gosia Wozniacka / AP

DAVID DESTENO | JUL 21, 2015

How do you cultivate compassion? How do you ensure that at the end of the day, it's your kindness and generosity for which you'll be remembered? It's a good question, for as much as we all agree that compassion is a virtue to be admired, as a society, we don't seem to be very effective at instilling

it. In fact, [research by Sarah Konrath](#) at the University of Michigan suggests we're actually getting worse on this score. In reviewing the results of a standard assessment of empathy and compassion taken by 13,000 college students between 1979 and 2009, Konrath discovered that self-reported concern for the welfare of others has been steadily dropping since the early 1990s. According to this analysis, levels of compassion and empathy are lower now than at any time in the past 30 years, and perhaps most alarming, they are declining at an increasing rate.

Since acting compassionately usually means putting others' needs ahead of your own, prompting yourself to act with kindness often requires not only vigilance but a bit of willpower. That's not to say that relying on religious or philosophical guidance to prompt kindness won't work at times. It will. But any method that depends on constant redirection of selfish urges and top-down monitoring of one's moral code is apt to fail. Perhaps cultivating compassion situationally—so that it automatically emerges at the sight of others in need—would be more foolproof. As a psychologist interested in moral behavior, I have long wondered if there might be a way to develop precisely this sort of reflexive compassion.

As it turns out, I didn't have to look too far; a means was hiding in plain sight. Mindfulness meditation involves guided contemplation as a way to focus the mind. It commonly entails sitting in a quiet space for periods ranging from 20 minutes to an hour (depending on your level of advancement) and learning to guide awareness to the current moment rather than dwell upon what has been or is yet to come. The practice has lately been promoted for its abilities to enhance the brain and heal the body, but many of its most experienced teachers argue that its fundamental purpose involves the soul. As Trungram Gyaltrul Rinpoche, one the highest lamas in the Tibetan tradition, recently pointed out to me,

meditation's effects on memory, health, and cognitive skills, though positive, were traditionally considered secondary benefits by Buddhist sages. The primary objective of calming the mind and heightening attention was to attain a form of enlightenment that would lead to a deep, abiding compassion and resulting beneficence.

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Yet for all the emphasis meditation instructors place on kindness, solid evidence linking mindfulness to compassion has been lacking. By historical accident, the first psychologists to study meditation were experts in neuroanatomy, information processing, and physiology, which, as you might guess, meant that these topics were where they focused their research. The result was a decade's worth of findings confirming that meditation enhances the functioning of brain and body—findings that continue to appear regularly, and serve as the basis for much of the publicity surrounding meditation. Unfortunately, the question of how meditation might influence social behavior wasn't, until very recently, on anyone's radar.

A few years ago, my research group at Northeastern University set out to

change that. If meditation was indeed capable of fostering compassion—a quality this world seems at times to have in short supply—we wanted to find proof. To do that, we conducted a simple experiment, led by Paul Condon, a graduate student in my lab at the time, and subsequently published in *Psychological Science*. We recruited 39 people from the Boston area who had never meditated before and assigned them to one of two experimental groups. Those in the first completed an eight-week meditation course led by Willa Miller, a Buddhist lama. Those in the second were placed on a waitlist for the course.

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After eight weeks had passed, participants returned to our lab one by one, supposedly to complete measures of attention and memory. In reality, the true experiment occurred in the waiting room, which had three chairs, two of which were already occupied by actors. A few minutes after each participant arrived and took the remaining seat, a third actor appeared, this one on crutches, wearing a boot typically used for a

broken foot, and wincing in pain. Upon entering, she leaned against a wall, sighing audibly, as there was nowhere for her to sit. By design, the other actors ignored her. They thumbed through books or scanned their smartphones, paying no mind to her discomfort.

Situations like this—in which other people seem to be ignoring a person in distress—are known to inhibit helping behavior, a phenomenon termed the “bystander effect.” If no one else is helping, why should you? In our

study, among participants who didn't meditate, the bystander effect was on clear display. Only 16 percent of our subjects (or three people out of 19) offered their chair to the actor on crutches. But of those who meditated, half (10 of 20) immediately and spontaneously offered their seat to the woman. It's important to note that none of the participants had meditated before, and were all equally interested in signing up for the course (even though they knew some might be assigned to a waitlist). The resulting differences, then, didn't stem from any factors related to a pre-existing interest in or experience with mindfulness. The only difference between the groups was that one meditated for eight weeks and the other didn't. Nonetheless, eight weeks of meditation proved enough to triple the likelihood of this benevolent behavior, even under conditions known to discourage acts of kindness. And as any research psychologist will tell you, an intervention that can shift human behavior by three-fold holds a lot of promise.

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To be certain about this level of promise, however, we wanted to replicate the finding while also examining whether it might be scalable. After all, how realistic is it to imagine that substantial populations of people will seek out a meditation master and sit at her feet to learn the practice of mindfulness? With these questions in mind, we set out to see whether mindfulness training using mobile devices might do the trick when it came to enhancing compassion. To this end, we repeated our previous

experiment using a smartphone mindfulness app designed by an individual with Buddhist monastic training. In this version of the experiment, led by my graduate student Daniel Lim and recently [published in \*Plos One\*](#), we randomly assigned 56 people to complete three weeks of either mindfulness training using the app, or cognitive skills training using a web-based, brain-training program. When we later exposed our participants to the waiting-room scenario, the results were similar to those from the original experiment: While only 14 percent of non-meditators (four people out of 29) offered their chair to the woman on crutches, 37 percent of the meditators (10 people out of 27) acted to relieve her pain.

Outside of the waiting room, however, there are people everywhere who need compassion. But there's only so much to go around. As the Yale psychologist Paul Bloom [regularly points out](#), it's well established that we feel more empathy for single individuals in pain than for larger numbers of suffering masses. Based on this fact, techniques for building compassion might seem futile. And yet, it's this very contradiction that helps to explain why meditation may be uniquely suited to fostering compassion.

Concern for others tends to nosedive as suffering grows because, thanks to our natural empathic response, distress is a bit contagious. When we encounter people in pain, we not only recognize their discomfort, we feel it—an experience that can quickly become overwhelming. As a result, people can shut down emotionally and turn away, a result known as “compassion fatigue.” Attesting to this fact, research confirms that compassion fatigue is quite prevalent among physicians and nurses whose work centers on oncology and palliative care—specialties that require daily confrontation of suffering, pain, and emotional loss.

But recent research by the neuroscientist Tania Singer and the Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard has shown that meditation-based training reduces activation of the brain networks associated with simulating the feelings of people in distress, in favor of networks associated with feelings of social affiliation. In other words, shared pain rapidly dissipates, but compassion remains.

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## **When it comes to enhancing compassion, it may not matter much whether you begin the practice for self-advancement, health, or character building.**

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This finding appears to offer a neuroanatomical basis for something many long-time practitioners of meditation have observed: a lack of compassion fatigue among meditators. As Thupten Jinpa, a Buddhist scholar and long-time translator for the Dalai Lama, told me “meditation-based training enables practitioners to move quickly from feeling the distress of others to acting with compassion to alleviate it.” Put simply, contemplative training appears to teach the mind to move directly from an observation of suffering to benevolent action, without becoming paralyzed by others’ pain.

In short, then, our research suggests that mindfulness’s most profound benefit may not be the one that’s most often touted—adapting to a



stressful, competitive, even unkind 24/7 world. Instead, meditation might fundamentally alter how we treat those around us. Corporations, physicians, and policy-makers who now push mindfulness as a technique for self-enhancement and physical wellbeing would do well to focus more on its potential for preventing everything from bullying to domestic violence to callousness and indifference. To see why, one only need look at the impressive results stemming from a meditation program that the Center for Wellness and Achievement Education recently offered in Visitation Valley School—a junior-high school in one of San Francisco’s poorest neighborhoods where violence was a frequent occurrence. After providing instruction and instituting twice-daily meditation periods known as Quiet Time, a noticeable difference began to emerge. Over a four-year period, school records show that suspensions decreased by 79 percent. It’s important to note that unlike the work from my lab, this was not a scientific study designed to control extraneous factors. Accordingly, it’s possible that the decline may have as much to do with the benefits of meditation as it does with a school culture that decided to adopt Quiet Time in the first place. Either way, though, the result is striking and calls for additional study.

Perhaps most interesting, though, is that when it comes to enhancing compassion, it may not matter much whether you begin the practice for self-advancement, health, or character building. Arianna Huffington, the *Huffington Post* co-founder and one of today’s most prominent evangelists for mindfulness, emphasizes this point. “It doesn’t matter why you start meditating,” she told me, “as you’ll get all the benefits—those you intended and those you didn’t—if you stick with it.” Both she and Chade-Meng Tan, the creator of Google’s immensely popular Search Inside Yourself course, which teaches mindfulness skills to the company’s

employees, compared it to exercise. “Even if you start going to the gym with the purpose of buddying up to the boss,” Meng recently told me, “You’ll gain the benefit of better health if you keep on going. “Mindfulness, practiced correctly, works much the same way.”

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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