

Do shared life experiences make it harder to understand others?

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Understanding each other's thoughts and feelings is a vital component of

successful relationships. For example, when we're discussing emotional or stressful situations with other people, our intuition may tell us that someone who has gone through a similar experience is better at understanding what we're going through. But a new study, led by Annenberg School for Communication's Yoona Kang, has found compelling evidence to counter that assumption.

The study, "Experience similarity, mindful awareness, and accurate interpersonal understanding," published in *Mindfulness*, reveals that having similar life experiences to another person can—perhaps counterintuitively—lead to a less accurate understanding of their feelings and factual details of the event.

When we seek support from others, we want them to really hear and understand the details of the event and nuances of our feelings. Kang, a research director at the Annenberg School for Communication's Communication Neuroscience Lab, endeavored to figure out what conditions could best facilitate this type of interpersonal understanding. Kang also wanted to learn more about how having similar past experiences interacts with [mindful awareness](#), which she describes as having present-moment attention to awareness of internal and external experiences.

Evidence suggests that mindfulness may be beneficial in interpersonal communication and promoting prosocial (positive and helpful) behaviors towards others. Mindfulness, both dispositional and learned, has been associated with a tendency to be more empathetic and compassionate toward others. However, less has been clear as to whether mindfulness promotes the accuracy of interpersonal understanding.

"One possibility is that having similar past experiences could mislead people into viewing another person's life experience through a biased lens that is colored by [personal history](#)," Kang says. "Although our data

do not speak to this directly, it is possible that having similar past experiences to the other person may let your own biases kick in and undermine the benefits of mindfulness in [interpersonal communication](#)."

According to Emily Falk, a senior author on the study and director of the Communication Neuroscience Lab and professor of [communication](#), psychology, marketing, and operations, information, and decisions at Annenberg, the paper's findings suggest that our past experience might cloud our ability to perceive others' feelings and thoughts clearly.

"Feeling connected to other people is so fundamental to our well-being. It's fundamental to the human experience, and it's something that we all crave deeply. And maybe it's fine if I impose my interpretation onto your experience or give you a different perspective," Falk says. "But what the data show is that if I've had an experience that's similar to yours and I'm listening to your story and trying to understand you, it may be harder for me to do that accurately than somebody who's coming to it fresh."

Results showed that when listeners had similar life experiences to the speaker, they showed less factual accuracy and less empathetic accuracy.

More information: Yoona Kang et al, Experience Similarity, Mindful Awareness, and Accurate Interpersonal Understanding, *Mindfulness* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s12671-022-01859-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-022-01859-x)

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