

Study finds mindfulness training may not be enough to increase eco-friendliness

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Could general well-being practices like meditation encourage eco-friendly behaviors and attitudes? As the climate crisis accelerates ecological disasters around the world, scientists' investigations into this

longstanding question have taken on greater urgency. A study from the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison explores the connection between meditation and environmental consciousness and suggests the relationship might not be that simple.

"Given the urgency of the [climate crisis](#), it is essential to investigate the potential relevance of strategies that have been shown to promote well-being and modify behavior," says Simon Goldberg, a core faculty member at CHM who led the study. "Mindfulness is one of those strategies, but the effects of mindfulness [training](#) on attitudes and behaviors relevant to the environment have largely not been rigorously examined."

The [innovative study, appearing in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*](#), marks the first time that researchers have conducted a [randomized controlled trial](#) to test whether a direct relationship exists between [meditation](#) and eco-friendly attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, it's one of very few studies that compares the attitudes and behaviors between experienced meditators and people without meditation experience.

The study included about 150 participants, from experienced meditators with more than 9,000 meditation hours on average to individuals without any significant meditation experience. One group without meditation experience completed eight weeks of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) training, and another completed a similar health training with no mindfulness practice. Instead, this group did activities such as physical exercise, diet planning and more. Another group did not participate in any training.

Each group of participants' eco-friendliness was assessed by three main factors:

- Eco-friendly behavior, defined as behavior that intentionally seeks to benefit or reduce harm to the environment. It was measured through self reports of one's carbon footprint using the [Ecological Footprint Calculator](#).
- Eco-friendly attitudes, defined as a moral concern for the environment. These are important to measure when seeking to promote eco-friendly behavior because a populations' attitude informs policy-making.
- Sustainable well-being, which is an assessment of the degree to which one's psychological well-being/happiness is dependent on environmentally harmful behaviors (e.g., consumption of natural resources). It's measured by the amount of well-being divided by the amount of consumption.

The new research is somewhat in contrast to other studies that have shown a potential for meditation to promote environmentally friendly behavior, including studies around the Mindful Climate Action program.

While long-term meditators did show greater eco-friendly attitudes compared to non-meditators, they showed no difference in eco-friendly behavior.

Participants who completed MBSR training did not show measurable changes in eco-friendly attitudes and behavior, nor did they show sustainable well-being when compared with another active health promotion training or a group who did not receive training.

Possible reasons for this could be that eight weeks may not have been enough time, the groups may have been too small and the MBSR training doesn't focus specifically on the environment.

"It's possible that other meditative practices, such as compassion-based meditation, may be more effective than mindfulness when it comes to

pro-environmental behavior," says Kevin Riordan, the study's lead author.

"It's also important to consider people's ethics and motivation to practice mindfulness," says Riordan. "It's possible that mindfulness practices may produce larger effects on sustainability-related variables when explicitly rooted in an ethical or ecological framework."

However, when researchers examined the effects of mindfulness and alternative health promotion training together as one larger group, a slight increase in eco-friendly behavior resulted compared to the control group. Goldberg says this may be because the size of the two groups combined was large enough to detect a small difference.

These results suggest that a variety of health and well-being training, rather than mindfulness training exclusively, may be effective in increasing environmentally friendly behavior.

"It's hard to know for sure at this early stage, but it may be that a variety of psychological interventions designed to promote health and well-being may impact behaviors that are healthy for individuals and the planet," Goldberg says. Future research should more thoroughly investigate the relationship between meditation, interconnectedness, mindfulness and eco-friendly [behavior](#), he adds.

As another International Day of Climate Action passes on Oct. 24, researchers at UW–Madison continue to develop interventions addressing environmental concerns and "eco-anxiety" through the Loka Initiative and Mindful Climate Action. Bruce Barrett, a physician researcher and a professor in UW–Madison's Department of Family Medicine and Community Health developed Mindful Climate Action, a program he describes as a "mindfulness-based program to help people with their health behaviors and sustainability choices."

"I was gratified to be involved with this study and am excited to see where this avenue of investigation may lead," says Barrett.

More information: Kevin M. Riordan et al, Does meditation training promote pro-environmental behavior? A cross-sectional comparison and a randomized controlled trial, *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jenvp.2022.101900](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2022.101900)

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