

Mindful

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The benefits of mindfulness in reducing stress, anxiety and depression have been widely documented. However, mindfulness does not affect everyone in the same way. A growing body of research points to unwanted or adverse effects in some people. These include anxiety, emotional distress, resurfacing of painful memories and dissociation – feeling detached from oneself or one’s surroundings.

Most people do not experience these lasting problems, but researchers are increasingly trying to understand why they occur in a minority of practitioners.

As a scholar of Buddhism, I have studied traditional contemplative practices and also followed the growing scientific research on their effects. I believe some of the confusion arises because Buddhist traditions have long expected that meditation can sometimes be difficult, whereas mindfulness is often presented primarily as a way to reduce stress and promote relaxation. In many Buddhist traditions, meditation is learned from experienced teachers who can guide the practitioner and help manage difficult experiences that might arise.

The scientific debate

Scientists do not always agree on what counts as an adverse effect of mindfulness. Some make a distinction between temporary discomfort – such as anxiety or difficult emotions during meditation – and lasting harm, such as worsening mental health symptoms. Others take a broader approach, measuring a wider range of difficult experiences that occur during or after meditation practice, including intrusive memories and lasting emotional distress.

A 2017 survey of meditation practitioners found that about 25% reported unwanted effects, such as anxiety, fear or unsettling thoughts. Most, however, said these were temporary and did not require medical attention.

Other studies have identified more serious effects. In another widely cited study from 2017, researchers interviewed 60 experienced Buddhist meditation practitioners who had reported challenges that they associated with their meditation practice. These includ-



The benefits of mindfulness in reducing stress and anxiety are well-documented, but its effects vary from person to person. Having a trained instructor can help guide practitioners through difficult experiences that might arise. GETTY IMAGES

ed severe anxiety, traumatic memories, altered perceptions and difficulties functioning in everyday life.

A 2021 study of meditators in the United Kingdom found that lasting effects, such as feeling constantly on edge or detached from oneself or one’s surroundings, occurred in roughly 6%–14% of participants.

Some participants viewed these experiences as valuable parts of their meditation practice. Others found them to be distressing and disruptive.

Estimates of how many practitioners are affected vary widely across studies, but evidence suggests they affect only a minority.

The Buddhist perspective

Many people today turn to mindfulness expecting stress reduction and relaxation. In Buddhist traditions, however, meditation serves other purposes. Buddhist texts often present meditation as a way of confronting uncertainty, grief, mortality and impermanence.

In the Pali canon, the earliest collection of Buddhist texts, the “Maranasati Sutta” teaches practitioners to reflect on the certainty and unpredictability of death. Another text in the Pali canon, the “Upajjhathana Sutta,” guides readers to reflect on aging, illness and death, and to take responsibility for one’s actions.

Meditation is often used to face the realities of human existence. Difficult emotions may arise, and they are not al-

ways seen as signs that something is wrong. The texts speak of approaching these reflections with “fearlessness.”

Understanding difficult experiences

Why do some people experience meditation-related difficulties, while others do not? One important factor may be the context in which it is practiced.

In clinical settings where mindfulness is used as part of treatment, some difficult experiences, such as temporary sadness or anxiety, may simply be part of working through difficult emotions rather than signs of harm.

Clinical psychologist Willoughby Britton distinguishes between temporary distress and experiences that negatively affect daily functioning. Temporary distress is part of the treatment, but it may be considered an adverse effect if it persists, worsens or significantly impairs functioning.

Other researchers compare mindfulness with psychotherapy, exercise and medication and argue that soreness after exercise, while unpleasant, is not necessarily evidence of harm.

Why guidance matters

This distinction between expected discomfort and lasting harm echoes long-standing features of Buddhist traditions. Difficult experiences are not always seen as signs that something has

gone wrong. They may instead be understood as part of the process of learning through meditation.

Buddhism assumes that meditation is learned from experienced teachers. Practice frequently occurs within a monastic or lay community. Training typically proceeds step by step, beginning with living ethically, then learning to focus the mind and finally gaining deeper understanding.

Modern mindfulness often presents meditation as something people can learn on their own, whereas Buddhist traditions emphasize learning meditation from experienced teachers and practicing within a community. Research also suggests that support may influence how difficult experiences are interpreted and managed.

Researchers have also found that “influencing factors” such as relationships with teachers, meditation instructions and support from one’s meditation community play a role. The same experience could be disruptive for one practitioner but manageable for another, depending on how it was interpreted and supported.

What scientists are learning and why

The question is no longer “Does mindfulness work?” Scientists now ask: “For whom does it work?” “Under what conditions?” “What kinds of support are needed?” To answer these, there is growing interest in screening, safety protocols and individualized approaches.

For example, some programs now ask about trauma or mental health history before beginning mindfulness training. Others encourage participants to work with a trained instructor and adjust or stop practices if they become overwhelming.

It has become clear that mindfulness is neither a cure-all nor inherently dangerous. It remains beneficial for most people. Difficult experiences should neither be ignored nor automatically treated as failure.

For many people, mindfulness apps and self-guided practice work well. Some who experience problems may benefit from working with a trained instructor or in a structured program.

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HAPPY BIRTHDAY

Musician **Ramblin’ Jack Elliott** turns 95. Guitarist **Robert Cray**, 73. Musician **Michael Penn**, 68. Singer **Joe Elliott** (Def Leppard), 67. Rapper **Chuck D** (Public Enemy), 66. Singer **Adam Duritz** (Counting Crows), 62. Director **Sam Mendes**, 61. Model **Roshumba Williams**, 58. Actor **Tempestt Bledsoe**, 53. Actor **Jason Momoa**, 47.
– *USA TODAY Network*



Momoa

TODAY IN HISTORY

Today is Aug. 1. On this date in:

1818: Scientist Maria Mitchell was born. She was the first woman astronomer in the United States and the first American to discover a comet.
1834: The British Empire outlawed slavery in most of its colonies, including Australia, Canada and India, as the Slavery Abolition Act went into effect. The move inspired abolitionists worldwide.
1866: Cherokee chief Tsan-Uddi, known as John Ross in English, died. After unsuccessfully resisting the government’s efforts to seize his tribe’s lands in Georgia, he was forced to lead his people on the Trail of Tears migration west of the Mississippi River.
1876: Colorado became the 38th state. President Andrew Johnson had rejected one of four previous statehood attempts. The “Centennial State” nickname is due to its year of entry – the country’s 100th birthday.
1879: Mary Eliza Mahoney graduated from the New England Hospital for Women and Children’s nursing graduate school, becoming the first Black licensed nurse in the United States.
1893: Henry D. Perky of Colorado and William Ford of New York patented a machine to make the pillow-like shredded wheat biscuit. The invention was shown off at the World’s Columbian Exposition, also known the Chicago World’s Fair.
1914: Germany declared war on Russia, turning the smoldering World War I into a conflagration. Within the week, Germany was also at war with France and Great Britain.
1920: Marcus Garvey hosted the international convention of the Universal Negro Improvement Association in New York City. He argued that Black Americans should emigrate to Africa because white Americans would never allow

them full rights.

1936: Yves Saint Laurent was born in Oran, Algeria. The fashion designer became known for his sleek, masculine-tailored “Le Smoking” trouser suit for women and his decadent Opium perfume.
1943: In Harlem, community anger over racially unjust treatment boiled over into the Harlem Race Riot of 1943 when a Black soldier tried to intervene in the arrest of a Black woman in a hotel lobby for disorderly conduct, and a White police officer shot him.
1944: Anne Frank wrote her last diary entry in Amsterdam’s “Secret Annex.” The 15-year-old described herself as a “bundle of contradictions” and wrote that she was “trying to find a way to become what I’d like to be.”
1946: President Harry S. Truman signed the Atomic Energy Act, transferring control of nuclear technology from the military to the civilian Atomic Energy Commission. The law’s goal was to use atomic energy for “assuring the common defense” and “improving the public welfare.”
1966: Charles Whitman, a student and veteran, opened fire from the clock tower of the University of Texas at Austin, killing 15 people. At the time, it was one of the country’s worst mass murders.
1980: Vigdís Finnbogadóttir took office as president of Iceland. A teacher and politician, she was the first woman in the world to be voted a nation’s head of state.
1981: “Video Killed the Radio Star” as the Music Television Network – MTV – debuted on cable. Though the station’s first video is famous, the second video is less so: “You Better Run” by Pat Benatar.
– *USA TODAY Network*

CATCH A CLASSIC!

Summer Under the Stars: Doris Day

TCM, beginning at 6 a.m.

The legendary Doris Mary Anne Kappelhoff, more commonly known as Doris Day, kicks off TCM’s annual Summer Under the Stars, the monthlong programming event that dedicates each day to a Hollywood legend, which was first launched in August 2003 with James Stewart. TCM has picked 12 of Day’s films to show, beginning with her first film, **Romance on the High Seas** (1948), which follows a nightclub singer posing as a socialite on a cruise where Day performs her Academy Award-nominated signature song “It’s Magic.” Later is **Love Me or Leave Me** (1955), the story of Ruth Etting (played by Day), taking place in the Roaring ’20s. Other films in this salute see Day playing a widowed mother after the Civil War who leads her local women’s suffrage movement in **The Ballad of Josie** (1967); as a journalism professor who meets up with a city editor in the rom-



“Midnight Lace”

PROVIDED BY UNIVERSAL PICTURES

com **Teacher’s Pet** (1958); and portraying a terrorized woman receiving death threats over the phone in the horror flick **Midnight Lace** (1960), where Day’s performance was so intense and captivating she was nominated for a 1961 Best Actress Golden Globe. Day strived to be known for more than just musicals and was willing to do controversial movies that delved into uncomfortable themes. One of the last movies in the tribute is the heavy **Storm Warning** (1950), in which a woman sees a reporter killed by white supremacists. It was Day’s first non-singing role.

MOVIES | CONTENT BY TV WEEKLY

Superbad

(2007, Comedy) Jonah Hill, Michael Cera **IFC, 6 p.m.**

Dirty Grandpa

(2016, Comedy) Robert De Niro, Zac Efron **COMEDY, 6:30 p.m.**

John Wick

(2014, Action) Keanu Reeves, Michael Nyqvist **AMC, 7 p.m.**

National Treasure

(2004, Adventure) Nicolas Cage, Diane Kruger **FX, 7 p.m.**

Sing 2

(2021, Children) Matthew McConaughey, Reese Witherspoon **NICK, 7 p.m.**

Killer Clown

(2026, Suspense) Sara Paxton, David Cubitt **LIFETIME, 8 p.m.**

While They Were Sleeping

(2025, Suspense) Alicia Leigh Willis, Dakota Volker **LMN, 8 p.m.**

Cruella

(2021, Comedy) Emma Stone, Emma Thompson **FREEFORM, 8:25 p.m.**

Billy Madison

(1995, Comedy) Adam Sandler, Darren McGavin **COMEDY, 9 p.m.**

American Underdog

(2021, Biography) Zachary Levi, Anna Paquin **FXM, 9:30 p.m.**

Ace Ventura: Pet Detective

(1994, Comedy) Jim Carrey, Courteney Cox **VH1, 10 p.m.**

Casino

(1995, Crime drama) Robert De Niro, Sharon Stone **SUNDANCE, 11 p.m.**

Network broadcasting shows are listed in Eastern/Pacific Time, unless noted otherwise. Shows air one hour earlier in Central/Mountain Time. Cable broadcasting shows are listed in Eastern Time.