

A RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL OF TWO LOVING-KINDNESS INTERVENTIONS

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CONTEXT

Peter Singer's (1981) concept of the expanding moral circle suggests that humanity includes an increasing number of social identities within the scope of its moral consideration. Debates continue over whether reasoning or empathic abilities drive this expansion, in some ways reflecting a tension between the head and the heart. Previous research shows that loving-kindness meditation interventions for example can reduce implicit intergroup bias (Kang et al., 2014) and increase altruistic behaviours (Galante et al., 2016; Leiberg et al., 2011; Weng et al., 2013).

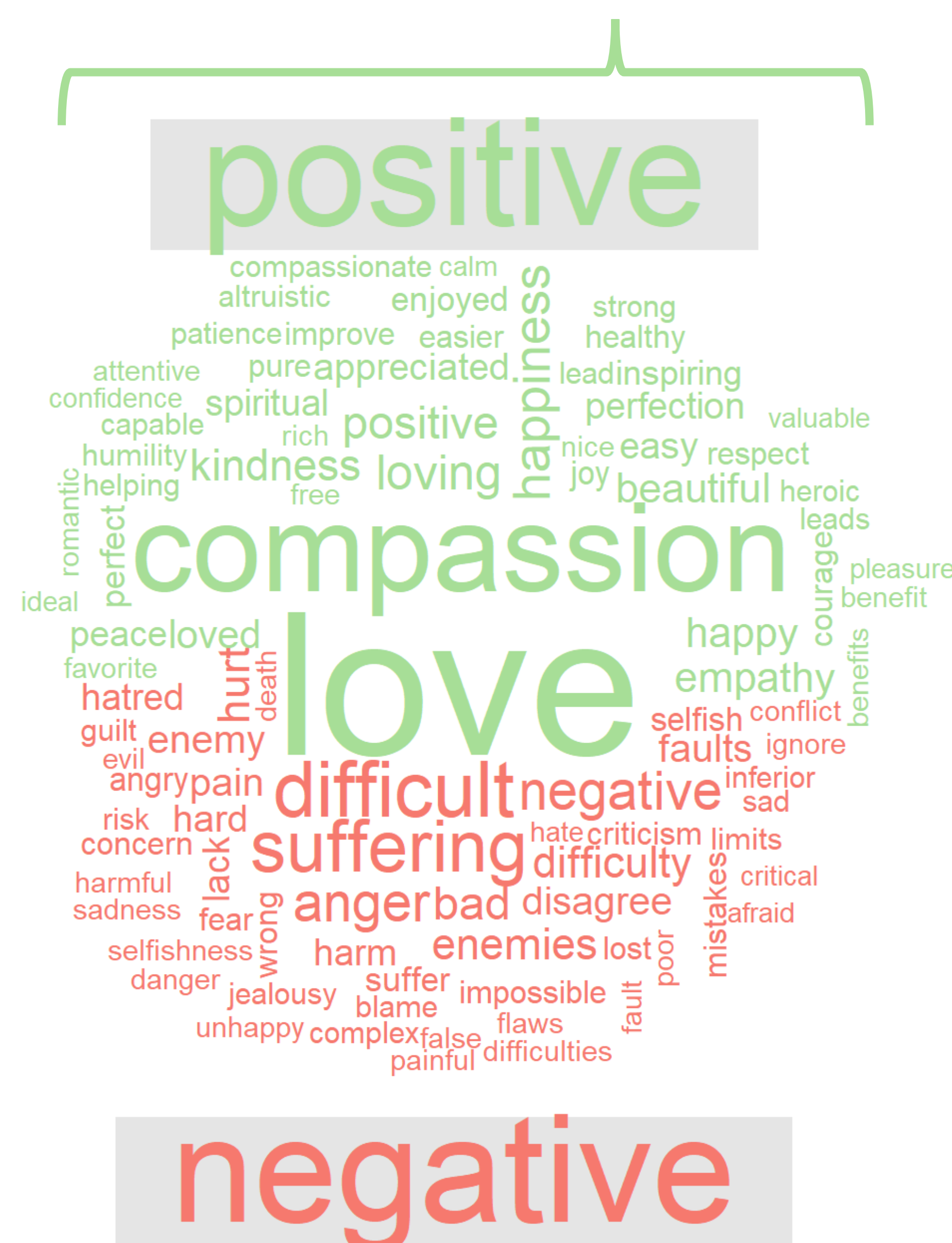
However, several questions remain: what of the effects on aggression, attitudes, and altruism? How long do the effects last? How does a loving-kindness meditation group compare to a more intellectual group reading excerpts of self-help books on loving-kindness?

METHODS

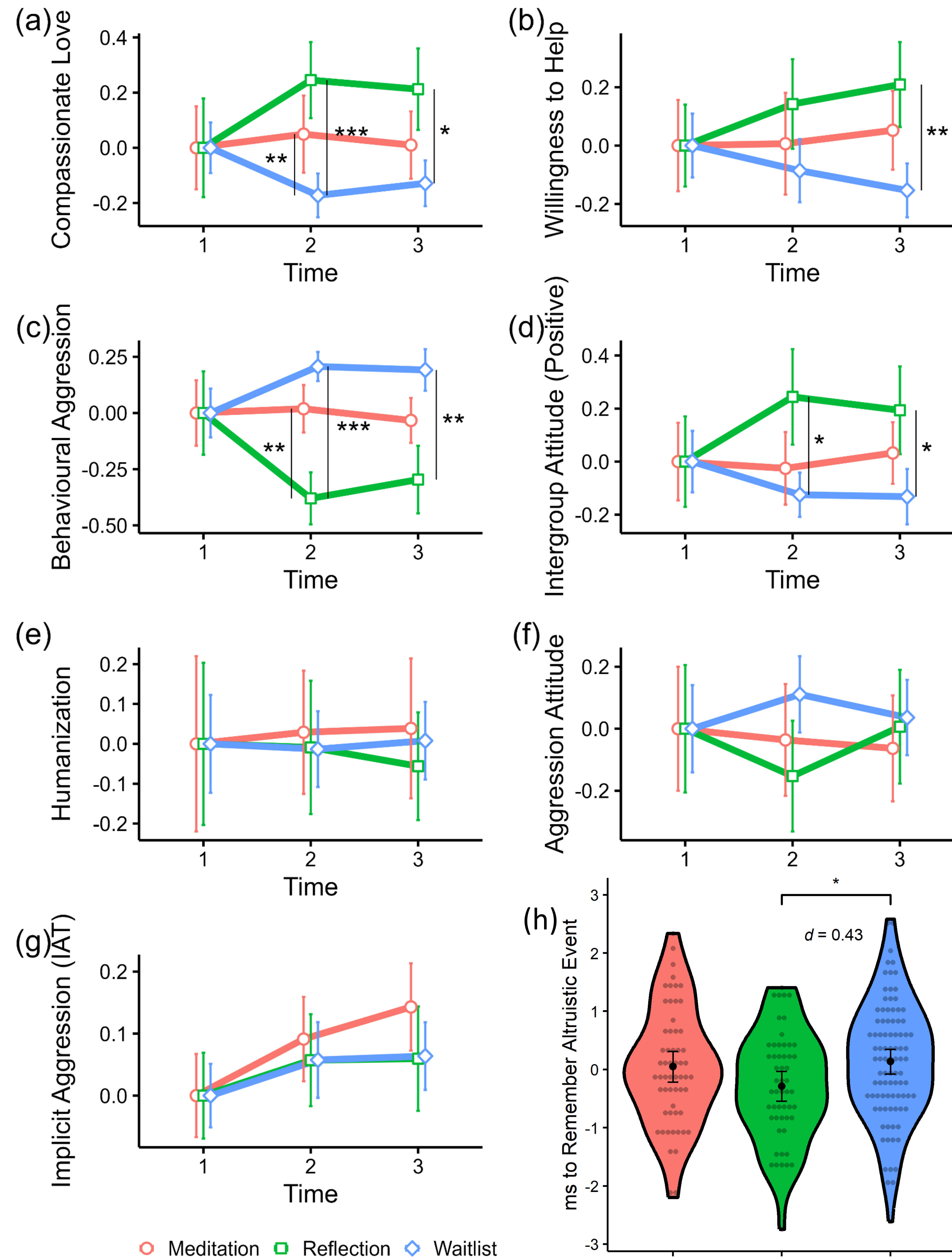
Design

Fully online preregistered parallel-arm RCT: <https://osf.io/gkd8s>. 6-week training + 6-week follow-up after the end of the intervention. The waitlist control group only receives the loving-kindness meditation intervention optionally at the end of the study.

Group (total N = 203)			
	Loving-Kindness Meditation Group	Loving-Kindness Reflection Group	Waitlist Control Group
Daily exercise	Listening to audio recordings of guided loving-kindness meditations (~10 minutes)	Reading book excerpts on loving-kindness AND Writing a short reflection about it (~10 minutes total)	None
Weekly exercise	Listening to audio recordings of guided loving-kindness meditations (~30 minutes)	Listening to podcasts on loving-kindness (~30 minutes)	None
Sample size	58	53	92



RESULTS



DISCUSSION

This study further adds to the literature by showing the unique effects of a novel intervention, namely that reading texts and listening to podcasts about loving-kindness can help reduce behavioural aggression and explicit social attitudes and increase compassion, cognitive accessibility of altruistic memories, and willingness to help.

Results show that for novice non-meditators, it may be more effective to develop a cognitive/reflective practice relative to attempting to install a more formal meditation-based practice. It could be because meditating is hard, whereas reading texts and listening to podcasts are not only culturally available activities but they are also considered by many as being more pleasant and easier. Indeed, in Western cultures, individuals must learn to read and listen at a young age, but they do not necessarily learn to meditate.

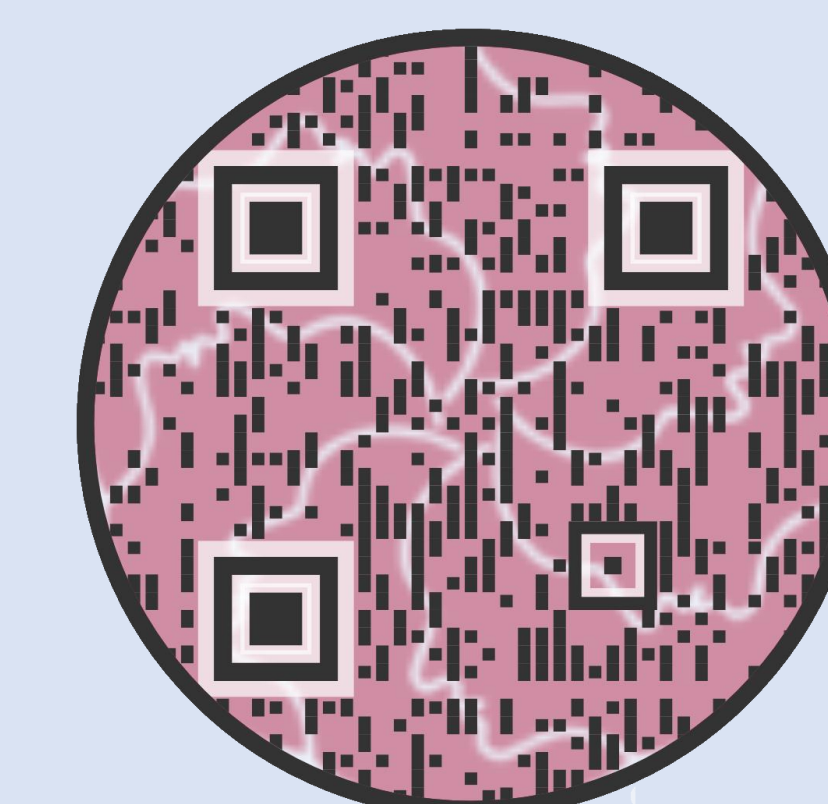
This is especially relevant in the current study since participants could not, in fact, have any meaningful meditation experience to be eligible, but certainly, they had reading and listening experience (which was required to participate in the study). In this sense, developing a formal meditation practice may not be strictly necessary to benefit from the prosocial benefits and teachings of the loving-kindness philosophy.

With the advent of apps and training regimens trying to instill a sustained meditation practice, our results open the door to an alternative route to developing loving-kindness, namely a more cognitive/reflective approach that may be at least as beneficial.

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