

Dear Mindfulness Study Volunteer,

Thank you for your participation in our project and your interest in our findings.

First, a surprise: Our study was not actually about mindfulness, but about kindness. Research has shown that being kind is associated with a variety of positive mental health outcomes, including higher self-esteem, increased positive mood, and better ability to cope with stress. What is not well understood is the means by which being kind makes you feel better. Our experiment explored this issue by having volunteers engage in different types of behavior and report their mood before and after each activity. Specifically, we predicted that participants would show a greater positive mood change when they did activities that:

1. Involved being kind, rather than just thinking about it
2. Benefitted someone else, rather than themselves
3. Had a high emotional reward, rather than a low one

The tasks you completed over the course of the study varied in these dimensions. For example, you may have been asked to “Make your bed” (Kind action, Self-directed, Low reward) or “Think about sharing a book you love with a friend” (Mind action, Other-directed, High reward). There were eight possible combinations of activities, and each volunteer was assigned to do each possible combination one time.

What we found was pretty interesting. Being kind, and only being kind, resulted in a significantly positive mood change -- *but only for people who completed all eight days of the study*. Volunteers who reported both pre- and post-activity mood on fewer than eight days showed no impact from any of the activity characteristics we manipulated.

So what does this mean? The short answer is that if you want to improve your mood, do something nice for yourself or someone else, and do it *regularly*. The nice thing can be small: make yourself a cup of your favorite beverage or wash a dish for someone so they don’t have to. Choosing to do a kind thing every day or so and *actually doing it* generates the effect, even if the beneficiary of your action doesn’t know you did it.

The major caveat to our study is that it took place during a pandemic. People who are willing to do a brief experimental task once a day for eight days (and report their mood before and after) *during a worldwide viral outbreak and national shutdown* may be different from your average person. They might be the type, for example, that gets great emotional satisfaction from fulfilling commitments. So, it could be that the volunteers who completed our whole study reported a positive change in their mood not because they had been doing kind things, but because they were keeping a promise, even when it wasn’t easy. Also, emotionally navigating a pandemic is challenging, even under the best of circumstances. It seems likely that the backdrop of COVID-19 influenced our volunteers’ mood scores, suppressing some and amplifying others. The demands of stay-at-home orders also place a variety of restrictions on people’s time; under more

normal circumstances, our daily completion rates would likely be higher and our overall volunteer attrition rate would likely be lower. In order to understand the full impact of the coronavirus on our outcomes, we will have to replicate our experiment when the worldwide situation has stabilized.

So you may be wondering: What was that mindfulness stuff all about? One of the challenges when doing an experiment is making sure that your volunteers' ideas about the study don't bias your results. Many people are aware of the notion that [being kind can help you feel good](#), so we chose never to mention kindness, niceness, or generosity in any of our study materials (until now). We asked our volunteers to be mindful because it is also supposed to have [positive consequences for physical and mental health](#) and it is something they could do as part of every activity in our study. If we were able to observe an effect of kindness *on top of* any effect of mindfulness, this would suggest that kindness itself was truly impacting people's mood and doing so in a meaningful way.

So that's the story! If you have any questions or would like to know more about the project or our findings, just let us know. Again, we thank you for your help with our project and hope that you found your participation a positive experience.

Stay mindful and be kind 😊

Team Mindful (a.k.a. Team Kindness)