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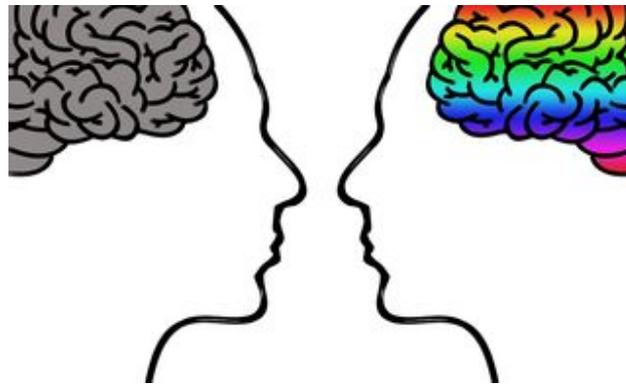
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[The Mindful Self-Express](#)

Does Mindfulness Make Us Less Sensitive to Rejection?

Does a mindful response to rejection recruit different brain processes?

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[Mindfulness](#) is both a practice and an attitude to living which emphasizes focusing [attention](#) on the present moment, acknowledging feelings, and redirecting attention away from judgmental or unkind thoughts about self or others. Mindfulness can help us let go of [attachment](#) to things being a certain way, and live more in the present, rather than being consumed by regrets about the past and worries about the future. Humans are wired to be sensitive to social rejection, given that our ancestors lived in tribes and were dependent on the tribe for survival. But for many of us, experiencing social rejection can activate negative views of ourselves and ongoing self-criticism and rumination about our perceived deficits. Could mindfulness, with its emphasis on self-compassion and detachment from negative stories, actually help us be less distressed by rejection? A June 2018 study in the *Journal of Social and Affective Neuroscience* suggests that it can.

In this study of 40 people, the researchers first measured dispositional mindfulness using the *Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS)*, which measures attention to and awareness of present-moment experience. The researchers then induced a state of social rejection using a widely used computer game paradigm (*Cyberball*) in which 3 people (including the subject) were playing initially, but in later rounds, the two other players (actually confederates of the researcher) started playing only with each other, excluding the participant. During both phases of the task, participants were hooked up to a fMRI scanner. By comparing the brain's response to inclusion versus exclusion rounds, the researchers could determine which brain areas were activated by rejection. Social distress in response to rejection was assessed by the *Needs Threat Scale*, which measured threats to four basic 'needs': *belongingness*, [*self-esteem*](#), *control*, and *meaningful existence*.

What were the results of the study?

Results showed the following:

- Participants who were higher in dispositional mindfulness (as measured by the MAAS) reported less social distress in response to rejection following the Cyberball task.
- The brain scan analyses showed that mindful people had less connectivity between the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex (VMPFC) and midbrain regions involved in stress response (amygdala and anterior cingulate cortex (ACC)). The amygdala and ACC have been shown in previous studies to be active in both physical pain and social rejection.
- Statistical analyses showed this reduced connectivity of the VMPFC partially accounted for the lower social distress in mindful people.

What does this finding mean?

The VMPFC is an area of the brain that serves to down-regulate negative emotional responses. For example, it may help people to appraise the rejection as less personal and less important. However, there is some evidence that overactivation of the VMPFC may result in failure to manage negative emotion later on. The researchers suggested that mindfulness may make the emotional centers of the brain less reactive to rejection, so there is not as much need for the cortex to intervene and try to cognitively reframe or reinterpret the situation. Other studies have shown that mindfulness training can beneficially affect amygdala and ACC pathways in [*stressed*](#) individuals.

Take-home message

If you are sensitive to social rejection, mindfulness may help your brain's emotional centers become less automatically reactive. Without mindfulness, your cortex has to work harder to reappraise the rejection situation as less of a personal threat. Mindfulness can help you live more in the present moment and be more self-aware and self-accepting, so you are less caught up in negative stories and judgments and therefore rejection is less "triggering." These results are preliminary and more research needs to be done using actual mindfulness training interventions.

References

When less is more: mindfulness predicts adaptive affective responding to rejection via reduced prefrontal recruitment

Alexandra M Martelli David S Chester Kirk Warren Brown Naomi I Eisenberger C Nathan DeWall

Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience, Volume 13, Issue 6, 1 June 2018, Pages 648–655, <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsy037>

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In Print:

[The Stress-Proof Brain: Master Your Emotional Response to Stress Using Mindfulness and Neuroplasticity](#)

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