

Meditate regularly for an improved attention span in old age

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Regular and intensive meditation sessions over the course of a lifetime could help a person remain attentive and focussed well into old age. This is according to the most extensive longitudinal study to date examining a group of meditation practitioners. Published in Springer's *Journal of Cognitive Enhancement*, the research evaluates the benefits that people gained after three months of full-time meditation training and whether these benefits are maintained seven years later. Lead author Anthony Zanesco, now at the University of Miami in the US, however, cautions that further research is needed before meditation can be advocated as a sure-fire method for countering the effects of aging on the brain.

This study follows up on previous work by the same group of researchers at the University of California, Davis in 2011, which assessed the cognitive abilities of 30 people who regularly meditated before and after they went on a three-month-long retreat at the Shambhala Mountain meditation center in the US. At the center, they meditated daily using techniques designed to foster calm sustained attention on a chosen object and to generate aspirations such as compassion, loving-kindness, emphatic joy and equanimity among [participants](#), for others and themselves. During this time, another group of 30 people who regularly meditated were also monitored. Other than traveling to the meditation center for a week-long assessment period, they carried on with their lives as normal. After the first group's initial retreat was over, the second group received similar intensive training at the Shambhala Mountain Center.

As part of this study, follow-up assessments were conducted six months, eighteen months and seven years after completion of the retreats. During the last appraisal, participants were asked to estimate how much time over the course of seven years they had spent meditating outside of formal retreat settings, such as through daily or non-intensive

practice. The forty participants who had remained in the study all reported some form of continued meditation practice: 85 per cent attended at least one meditation retreat, and they practiced amounts on average that were comparable to an hour a day for seven years.

The participants again completed assessments designed to measure their reaction time and ability to pay attention to a task. Although these did not improve, the cognitive gains accrued after the 2011 training and assessment were partially maintained many years later. This was especially true for older participants who practiced a lot of meditation over the seven years. Compared to those who practiced less, they maintained cognitive gains and did not show typical patterns of age-related decline in sustained attention.

"This study is the first to offer evidence that intensive and continued meditation practice is associated with enduring improvements in sustained attention and response inhibition, with the potential to alter longitudinal trajectories of cognitive change across a person's life," says Zanesco.

He is aware that participants' lifestyle or personality might have contributed to the observations. Zanesco therefore calls for further research into meditation as an intervention to improve brain functioning among older people.

He says the current findings also provide a sobering appraisal of whether short-term or non-intensive mindfulness interventions are helpful to improve [sustained attention](#) in a lasting manner. Participants practiced far more meditation than is feasible for shorter-term programs that might aim to help with cognitive aging, and despite practicing that much meditation, participants did not generally improve over years; these benefits instead plateaued. Zanesco believes this has broad implications for meditation and mindfulness-based

approaches to cognitive training and raises important questions regarding how much [meditation](#) can, in fact, influence human cognition and the workings of the brain.

More information: Anthony P. Zanesco et al, Cognitive Aging and Long-Term Maintenance of Attentional Improvements Following Meditation Training, *Journal of Cognitive Enhancement* (2018).
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