

Kindness vs. Happiness: What Meditation Is Really Teaching Us

4 MIN READ

MAY. 4, 2025

BY HEATHER HURLOCK

The modern pursuit of well-being often centers on one thing: happiness.

Meditation is often touted as the key to unlocking true thriving and joy. And it can be. But what if the real value of meditation isn't just in feeling better but in becoming someone better equipped to meet the world with clarity, care, and courage?

A new study published in ***BMC Psychology*** just dropped a subtle but important wake-up call. Even though loving-kindness is seen as a research-backed meditation that can re-wire your brain for thriving, most people aren't particularly interested in cultivating kindness. In fact, researchers found that among over 1,600 participants, the least popular reason to engage in loving-kindness and compassion meditation (LKCM) was to actually become more kind.

Instead, the overwhelming preference? Boosting personal happiness, reducing stress, and enhancing calm.

It's not hard to understand why. We're tired, overstimulated, and often emotionally depleted. Meditation that promises more ease, peace, or joy feels like a lifeline. And it is! But the short-term emotional gain is just the surface layer.

Why We Resist Kindness Meditation Even Though It Works

Researchers conducted two studies: one with university students, and another with adults who participated in a 21-day online LKCM program. In both, researchers asked people how willing they'd be to engage in different types of meditation, each aimed at

a specific outcome:

- ■ **Subjective well-being** (boosting happiness, reducing negative emotions, feeling more peaceful)
- ■ **Kind attitudes** (cultivating compassion for others, self-compassion, and appreciative joy)
- ■ **Other benefits** (like improving focus, strengthening relationships, or deepening spirituality)

Across both groups, meditations focused on cultivating kindness were consistently rated as the least appealing. Most people preferred meditations that promised personal emotional relief or practical improvements over those rooted in prosocial values (prioritizing the well-being of others, and encouraging behaviors like cooperation, helping, sharing, and altruism).

And yet, here's the twist: when people actually practiced compassion-based meditation, they experienced an increase in interpersonal feelings like love and gratitude regardless of whether they wanted to become kinder in the first place. Interestingly, those who came to the practice seeking happiness did see measurable gains in the personal well-being domain (happiness, peacefulness, etc), which was the thing they came in wanting. This suggests that the intentions we bring to the cushion shape what we get from the practice.

Beyond Stress Relief: What Meditation Really Offers

We're selecting meditations based on what we *think* we want: emotional ease, improved productivity, better moods. But those are often surface-level aims. What we might truly need, especially in midlife, is deeper emotional capacity, relational

resilience, moral courage, and the ability to connect genuinely with others with kindness and grace.

That mismatch reflects what researchers call a hedonic bias (pursuit of happiness) over eudaimonic values (moral virtues like kindness) common in modern positive psychology and society. Kindness becomes a side effect of meditation, not the main event, and therefore, may be overlooked. This means people may be missing out on a core concept: Compassion in contemplative traditions has always been a practice of awakening, of widening the circle of who matters, and expanding our capacity to care for others.

When we frame meditation primarily as a tool for stress relief or mood improvement, we may overlook one of its most profound gifts.”

When we frame meditation primarily as a tool for stress relief or mood improvement, we may overlook one of its most profound gifts: the quiet cultivation of inner capacities that shape who we are and how we relate to others. These aren't quick fixes; they're enduring qualities like patience, compassion, clarity, and courage. And in a time when more of us are recognizing that connection, integrity, and meaning matter more than performance or perfection, these inner qualities become less like soft skills and more like essential muscles for modern life.

A Quick Check-In: Why Do You Meditate?

If you're reflecting on your own well-being journey, here are a few prompts to explore:

1. 1 When I think about meditation, do I imagine feeling calm? Do I consider how that inner calm makes me kinder?
2. 2 Would I continue a practice even if it didn't make me feel immediately better, but made me a kinder presence in my family or community?
3. 3 What's one practice I can do today that's more about giving than getting?
4. 4 What does it feel like in my body to consider these questions?

Try This: A 3-Minute Kindness Reset

Those are big questions that get close to the heart of the transformative nature of meditation. We call meditation a practice because it's not something you're meant to perfect; you're not meditating to become "the world's best meditator," you're meant to experience meditation as an unfolding journey that expands your capacity to meet the world with more kindness and yes, more happiness. Take a moment to try a simple 3-minute compassion micro-practice with no expectation of feeling good, just feeling open.

- ■ Settle in your seat wherever you are.
- ■ Close your eyes, if that feels comfortable to you.
- ■ Feel your natural breath in your body wherever it's most alive for you. Your belly? Your nostrils? Your chest? Just notice how your body breathes without you having to do anything at all.
- ■ Take a moment to relax into your breath. Nothing to do. Just feel your body supported.
- ■ When you're ready, bring to mind someone you care about deeply.
- ■ Silently repeat the phrases: *May you be safe. May you be healthy. May you be free from suffering.*
- ■ After a minute or two, shift the image to yourself. Repeat the same wishes.

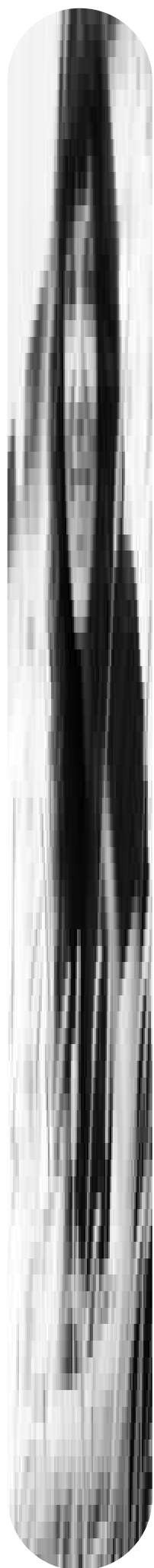
- Finish by directing the phrases toward someone neutral or difficult in your life.
- ■ When you're ready, come back to your breath. Wiggle your toes. Open your eyes.
- ■ May your practice be for the benefit of all you come in contact with.

If you have time, write down what it felt like to practice in this way. Was there any resistance? How can you be kind to yourself about your experience of this practice?

In a world that sells happiness as the ultimate goal, choosing to value kindness is quietly radical. Not because it will always feel good but because it makes us better humans. And in the Super Age, that might just be the most powerful practice of all.

The information provided in this article is for educational and informational purposes only and is not intended as health, medical, or financial advice. Do not use this information to diagnose or treat any health condition. Always consult a qualified healthcare provider regarding any questions you may have about a medical condition or health objectives. **Read our disclaimers.**

WRITTEN BY:



Heather Hurlock