- Mind and body / Emotions

Feeling mad? Research suggests mindfulness could help manage anger and aggression

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There's no shortage of things to feel angry about these days. Whether it's politics, social injustice, climate change or the cost-of-living crisis, the world can feel like a pressure cooker.

While anger is a normal human emotion, if it's intense and poorly managed, it can quickly lead to aggression, and potentially cause harm. Feeling angry often can also have negative effects on our relationships, as well as our mental and physical health.

Our new research suggests mindfulness can be an effective tool for regulating anger and reducing aggression.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness is the ability to observe and focus on your thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations in the moment with acceptance and without judgment.

Mindfulness has been practised for thousands of years, most notably in Buddhist traditions. But more recently it has been adapted into secular programmes to support mental health and emotional regulation. Mindfulness is taught in a variety of ways, including in-person classes, residential retreats and through digital apps. These programmes typically involve guided meditations, and practices that help people become more aware of their thoughts, feelings and surroundings.

Mindfulness is linked to a range of mental health benefits, including reduced anxiety, depression and stress. Neuroscience research also suggests mindfulness is associated with reduced activity in brain regions linked to emotional reactivity, and greater activity in those involved in self-regulation (the ability to manage our thoughts, emotions and behaviours).

In this way, mindfulness could foster emotional awareness essential for the effective regulation of emotions such as anger. And when people are less overwhelmed by anger, they may be better able to think clearly, reflect on what matters and take meaningful action, rather than reacting impulsively or shutting down.

WE REVIEWED THE EVIDENCE

To better understand whether mindfulness helps with regulating anger and aggression, we conducted a meta-analysis, which combines the results of many previous studies to look at the overall evidence.

We analysed findings from 118 studies across different populations and countries, including both people who were naturally more mindful and people who were randomly assigned to take part in interventions aimed at increasing mindfulness.

People who were naturally more mindful were those who scored higher on questionnaires measuring traits such as present-moment awareness and non-judgmental thinking. We found these people tended to report less anger and behave less aggressively.

However, mindfulness isn't just something you have or don't have, it's also a skill you can develop. And our results show the benefits of lower anger and aggression extend to people who learn mindfulness skills through practice or training.

We also wanted to know whether mindfulness might work better for certain people or in particular settings. Our results suggest these benefits are universal. Practising mindfulness was effective in

reducing anger and aggression across different age groups, genders and contexts, including whether people were seeking treatment for mental health or general wellbeing, or not.

PEOPLE TURN TO STRATEGIES NOT SUPPORTED BY EVIDENCE

Research suggests that “letting off steam” while thinking about your anger is not a healthy strategy and may intensify and prolong experiences of anger.

For example, in one experiment, research participants were asked to hit a punching bag while thinking of someone who made them angry. This so-called cathartic release made people angrier.

Breaking things in rage rooms, while increasingly popular, is similarly not an evidence-based strategy for reducing anger and aggression. All that said, mindfulness is not a magic bullet. Like any new skill, mindfulness can be challenging at first and works best when done regularly. It’s also important to note that mindfulness may not be suitable for everyone, particularly when used for managing more complex mental health concerns. For ongoing emotional challenges it’s always a good idea to seek support from a qualified mental health professional.

However, if you’re looking to dial down the impact of daily frustrations, there are plenty of accessible ways to give mindfulness a go.

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