Can meditation make you more empathic?

A program that focuses on compassion was found to boost a person's ability to read the facial expressions of others as well as activate regions in the brain that help us be more empathic.

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According to a study announced Thursday, a meditation program that focuses on compassion was found to boost a person's ability to read the facial expressions of others as well as activate regions in the brain that help us be more empathic.

"It's an intriguing result, suggesting that a behavioral intervention could enhance a key aspect of empathy," says lead author Jennifer Mascaro of Emory University in the US state of Georgia. "Previous research has shown that both children and adults who are better at reading the emotional expressions of others have better relationships."

The meditation program is called Cognitively-Based Compassion Training, or CBCT, and was developed at Emory by study co-author Lobsang Tenzin Negi, director of the Emory-Tibet Partnership.

Derived from Tibetan Buddhist practices, the program (which is secular) include elements of concentration and non-judgmental awareness of thoughts and feelings, similar to the much-talked-about mindfulness meditation. Yet according to the university, the CBCT also focuses on training people to analyze and
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-The idea is that the feelings we have about people can be trained in optimal ways," Negi says. "CBCT aims to condition one's mind to recognize how we are all inter-dependent, and that everybody desires to be happy and free from suffering at a deep level."

In the study, 13 subjects with no prior meditation experience were randomized to CBCT meditation, where they completed regular weekly training sessions and at-home practice for eight weeks. Eight subjects in the control group didn't meditate but attended health discussion classes that covered the topics of stress and well-being.

All participants received fMRI brain scans while completing a version of a facial expression test called the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET), which consists of black-and-white photographs that feature only the eyes of people making various expressions. Subjects were asked to interpret what the person in the photograph is thinking or feeling. These tests were performed before and after the meditation training.

According to the findings, those in the meditation group improved their RMET scores by an average of 4.6 percent, while the control group showed no increase. The meditators, in comparison to the control group, "also had significant increases in neural activity in areas of the brain important for empathy, including the inferior frontal gyrus and dorsomedial prefrontal cortex."

"These findings raise the intriguing possibility that CBCT may have enhanced empathic abilities by increasing activity in parts of the brain that are of central importance for our ability to recognize the emotional states of others," says senior author Charles Raison.

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