

# **Compassion-based meditation influences thoughts' content in both young and older adults.**

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## Background and objectives

Mind-wandering experiences occur when attention drifts from the external environment to focus on internal thoughts and feelings. Often considered as negative (e.g. task errors, negative mood) they also display positive effects (e.g. future planning, creative problem solving). In this respect, thoughts' contents are critical and largely influenced by individual differences. For example, age significantly reduces mind-wandering occurrence and modulates thoughts' content. Interestingly, mental trainings, such as mindfulness meditation, have proven to be efficient at reducing mind-wandering frequency, yet no studies have measured its impact on thoughts' content. Furthermore, due to the emotional component of compassion-based meditation, we suspect that this practice will be most efficient at influencing thoughts' content in young and older adults.

## Method

In this pilot study, 24 young (18 – 32) and 30 older adults (60 – 80) were recruited and randomly assigned to the control or experimental condition. All participants visited the lab on two occasions. During these meetings, participants answered a set of ten questionnaires and carried out attentional tasks with multi-dimensional experience sampling. Between the two meetings, participants listened either to guided meditations (i.e. experimental condition) or to short stories (i.e. control condition) for 28 days.

## Results

Preliminary findings seem to indicate that the intervention was most efficient in the younger population with increases in positive and constructive thoughts and improvement of cognitive and emotional regulation. At a behavioural level and in the older adults group, meditation practice seemed to have increased attentional drifts and made the nature of the thoughts more deliberate.

## Discussion and conclusion

Overall, this pilot study is encouraging as to the positive impact of compassion-based interventions. Looking at the results, it seems evident that the practice of meditation fostered more intentional and constructive thoughts. Importantly, thoughts of this nature are related to the more positive outcomes of mind-wandering, such as future planning or creative problem solving. Therefore, this short intervention of 4 weeks is promising and should be further used and refined to generate positive and robust effects on the life of both young and older adults