

Stanford Report, June 3, 2009

More than just relaxing, meditation helps improve self-image of anxiety sufferers

BY CASEY LINDBERG

The thought of public speaking gives most people butterflies in their stomach. But for those suffering from social anxiety disorder (SAD), the idea of addressing a crowd or being evaluated in any other social situation often triggers more than just jittery nerves. Headaches, sleep problems and persistent thoughts of failure and embarrassment are common problems for those with SAD.

Researchers at Stanford now have some advice for those prone to such anxiety: Slow down and listen to the sights and sounds around you, including those of your own body.

In a study headed by psychology researcher Philippe Goldin, participants with SAD underwent Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction—a form of meditation that helped them direct their attention to the sensations of simple things like breathing, lying down or just walking around. After the two-month meditation training, participants were less anxious and thought of themselves more positively.

Results of Goldin's study were published in the *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*.

People with social anxiety disorder tend to be overly critical of themselves and often believe others are assuming the worst about them. While many people beat themselves up once in a while, people with SAD get stuck on negative views of themselves, Goldin said.

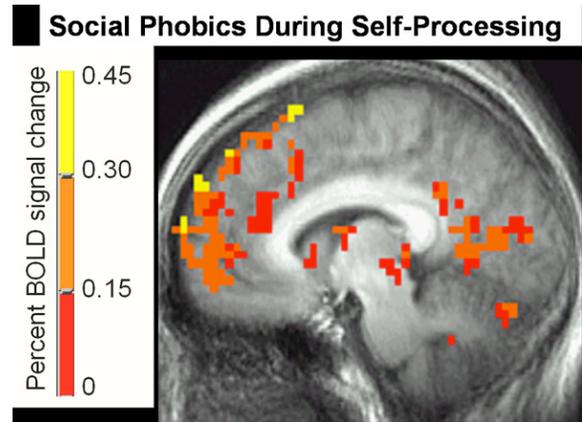
"The idea is that if a person has the psychological flexibility to shift freely from one mode of thinking to another mode, then that is a sign of health," said Goldin. "It's when we get stuck in certain thinking patterns that our beliefs become maladaptive."

Helping people make even small changes to how they think about themselves is a difficult task, but one that has the potential to improve the lives of millions of people, Goldin said.

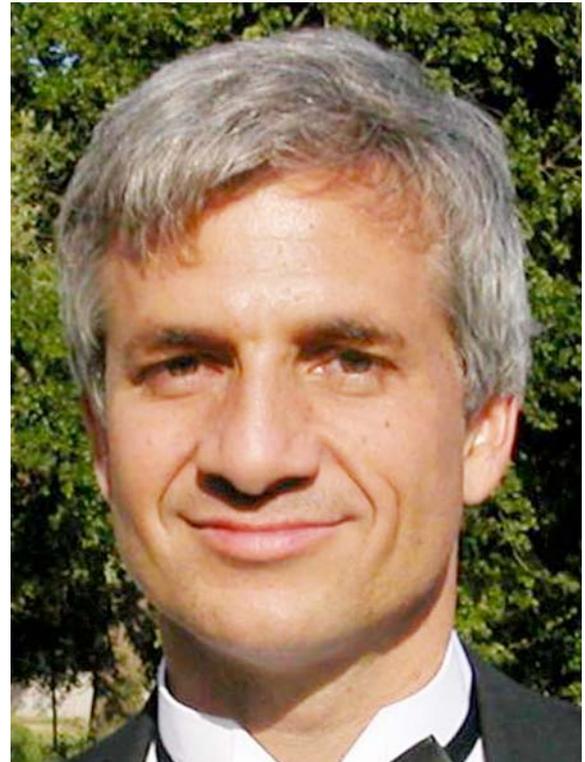
SAD is one of the most common psychological disorders, affecting up to 12 out of every 100 Americans. It usually strikes early—at around 10 years of age. But the disorder is often not diagnosed or treated and leads to other psychological problems later in life, Goldin said.

"Often people will subsequently show up in their 20s or 30s with depression or substance abuse and then if you dig below that you find that what preceded all of that was an internal anxiety about performing in social

PHOTO COURTESY OF PHILIPPE GOLDIN



Before and after meditating, participants in the study went into an MRI scanner that observed their brain activity. The findings suggest that mindfulness meditation might help people view themselves differently.



Philippe Goldin

situations," Goldin said.

Goldin—along with postdoctoral scholar Wiveka Ramel and psychology Professor James Gross—found that nine sessions of mindfulness meditation training made people with social anxiety disorder feel less anxious and less depressed and improved their self-views.

Goldin said the mindfulness meditation works because it teaches people how to focus on things other than their personal criticisms.

Before and after meditating, participants went into an MRI scanner that observed their brain activity and were told to decide if various positive and negative adjectives presented on a screen appropriately described them.

After meditation, participants were more likely to pick positive words like "admired" and "loved" and less likely to choose negative adjectives like "coward" and "afraid."

Mindfulness meditation helped reduce people's habit of grasping at negative attributes, Goldin said.

"Often, people who have either depression or anxiety have a poor or negative self-view," he said.

The meditation also appeared to calm the brain circuitry associated with self-describing adjectives such as "weak" and "insecure" or "strong" and "able." The finding suggests that mindfulness meditation might make it easier for people to shift between ways of viewing themselves, Goldin said.

The mindfulness meditation also caused an increase in brain activity in areas that involve visual attention. People with social anxiety often try to avoid things by diverting their gaze from people and things that might be threatening. But this increase in visual attention "means that instead of running away they were staying with the stimulus," Goldin said.

Goldin said the next step in his research is to compare the long-term effects of the mindfulness meditation training to aerobic exercise and cognitive-behavioral therapy. This work is currently under way and the researchers are offering free training sessions to people interested in participating. More information can be found at <http://waldron.stanford.edu/~caan/>.

Casey Lindberg is a writing intern at the Stanford News Service.