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Health & Medicine - ***Posted by Michael Kennedy-Toronto on Thursday, June 7, 2012 14:21 - 0 Comments*** **(1 votes, average: 5.00 out of 5)**

Meditators more aware of 'uh-oh' moments

Willpower or self-control may be sharpest in people who are sensitive and open to their own emotional experiences, says psychologist Michael Inzlicht. "Willpower, in other words, may relate to emotional intelligence." (Credit: "woman meditating" via Shutterstock)

U. TORONTO (CAN) — People who meditate do better on tasks that require self-control because they are more open to their own emotions, new research finds.

For psychologists, self-control or "executive control" is the ability to pay attention to appropriate stimuli and to initiate appropriate behavior while inhibiting inappropriate behavior. It's what keeps you studying when you'd rather be watching TV, or lets you force yourself outside for a morning run rather than turn over and go back to sleep.

"These results suggest that willpower or self-control may be sharpest in people who are sensitive and open to their own emotional experiences. Willpower, in other words, may relate to ''emotional intelligence','' says Michael Inzlicht, associate professor of psychology at the University of Toronto.

Previous work has found that people who engage in meditation show higher levels of executive control on laboratory tasks. But it's never been clear why, says PhD student Rimma Teper, a co-author on the paper.

Most meditation traditions emphasize two major practices: awareness of the present moment, and acceptance of emotional states. It was possible that the practice of maintaining awareness of the moment strengthened executive control. But the researchers suspected emotional acceptance played a bigger role.

In a paper scheduled for publication in *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience,* they looked at something called the Error Related Negativity (ERN)—an electrical signal that shows up in the brain within 100 ms of an error being committed, well before our conscious minds are aware of the error.

"It's kind of like an 'uh-oh' response, or a cortical alarm bell," Teper says.

For the study, participants were asked about their experience meditating, and took tests that measured how mindful they were of the present moment, and also how aware and accepting they were of their emotions.

The participants were then hooked up to an electroencephalograph and given something called the Stroop test. In the test, participants are shown the name of a color written in letters of a different color—for instance, the word "red" spelled in green letters. Participants are asked to say the color of the letters. The test requires them to suppress the tendency to read the word, and instead to concentrate on actual colors.

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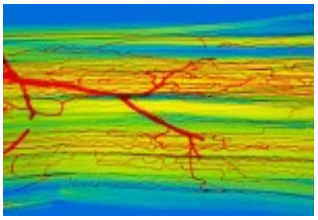

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Meditators were generally better than non-meditators at the test, and also had generally stronger ERN responses. Looking further, the best performers were those who scored highest on emotional acceptance, and that mindful awareness—the more cognitive aspect of mindfulness–had less to do with success on the test.

The ERN may have a motivational or affective component—in other words, it gives you a bad feeling about failing at a task, and the feeling may motivate you to do better. Because meditators are more aware of their feelings, they may pick up on that feeling more quickly and use it to improve their behavior, Teper says.

"Meditators are attuned to their emotions. They're also good at regulating their emotions. It fits well with our results."

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Tags: emotions, meditation, neuroscience, psychology, University of Toronto

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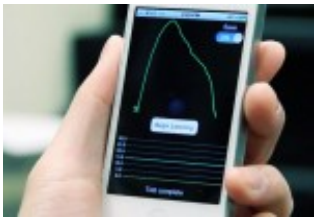

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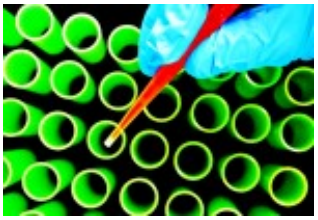

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