

# Why Wandering Minds Can Be Less Caring; Plus How to Cultivate Compassion



By Hooria Jazaieri | [Greater Good](#)

Where is your attention right now? Humans are thought to spend [many](#) of our waking hours not in the present moment. What's more, we are [rarely even aware](#) of the fact that our minds have wandered.

Past studies have suggested that mind-wandering has [negative effects on our mood](#) and even our [physical health](#). In a recently published study in the [Journal of Positive Psychology](#), my colleagues and I sought to understand whether mind-wandering also makes us less caring—and what we can do about it.

We recruited 51 adults and pinged them twice a day for nine weeks while they were enrolled in a [compassion cultivation training course](#). We were interested in a few things: First, we

wanted to find out how much people's minds were wandering, and to what types of things (pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant topics). Because participants were enrolled in the compassion meditation course, we wanted to find out (on a given day) whether they had completed any formal compassion meditation practices and whether they had engaged in a kind, caring, or helpful behavior toward themselves or someone else.

Caring behaviors toward themselves might include asking for help, taking care of their body (with sleep, diet, or exercise), engaging in nourishing, soothing activities (e.g., cooking, gardening, taking a bath, massage). Caring behaviors toward others might include letting someone go ahead of them at the checkout, smiling at a stranger, picking up a piece of trash in the street, or mindfully listening to a friend.

Our findings showed that a wandering mind can be less caring. Specifically, mind-wandering to unpleasant or neutral topics (rather than pleasant topics) predicted less caring behavior toward oneself and others on a given day. Meanwhile, mind-wandering to pleasant topics actually predicted more caring behavior toward oneself and others.

Given prior research suggesting that [when our minds wander we're unhappy](#), it's possible that mind-wandering to negative events produces negative emotions that narrow our attention and lead us to miss opportunities for caring. In contrast, when our minds wander to positive events, we may experience [positive feelings that broaden our attention](#) and allow us to more fully engage in the present moment and the potential for caring. Past research is a bit mixed on [whether people are actually happier when thinking about pleasant topics](#) rather than engaging in the present, so additional studies are needed to explicitly investigate this.

Fortunately, our research suggests that training in compassion may be able to alter the habitual patterns of mind-wandering. Prior to the compassion program, participants' minds were

wandering about 59.1 percent of the time, a higher rate than [earlier studies](#) have reported (46.9 percent). At the end of the nine-week program, however, their overall mind-wandering had decreased to 54.5 percent of the time, including a slight increase in mind-wandering to pleasant topics.

More importantly, when participants reported engaging in compassion meditation practices on a given day, they also reported *less* mind-wandering to unpleasant topics and *more* mind-wandering to pleasant topics. Thus, regular compassion practice may have the dual effect of increasing *and* decreasing different types of mind-wandering.

If you find that your mind often drifts to negative topics, consider trying [some exercises](#) and meditations that are part of the compassion cultivation training program:

- **Settling and Focusing the Mind:** When you notice that your attention has wandered, gently bring it back to your breath.
- **Lovingkindness and Compassion for a Loved One:** Bring to mind a loved one and wish them well. Think about a time when this person was experiencing difficulties and wish them well.
- **Lovingkindness and Compassion for Oneself:** Bring to mind an image of yourself and wish yourself well. Think about a time when you were experiencing some difficulties and wish yourself well.
- **Embracing Common Humanity:** Call to mind three different people in your life: someone whom you're close to, a neutral person, and someone with whom you've had some difficulties. Think about how all of these people share a basic yearning to be happy and free from suffering; in this respect, all of these people are the same.
- **Compassion for Others:** Expand your scope of awareness to include people living in your neighborhood, city, state, country, continent, and so forth. Reflect on how just as you wish to be happy and free from suffering, so do

they. In this respect, we are all connected.

- **Active Compassion (“Tonglen”)**: When breathing in, imagine taking away the pain and suffering of others; when breathing out, imagine sending out happiness and good fortune.

Our study adds to the growing literature that suggests that, more often than not, our minds are wandering. While mind-wandering has received a lot of criticism, the story may be a bit more nuanced—perhaps not all mind-wandering is bad. One thing seems to be clear, though: We can train our minds to intentionally shift how often and where our minds wander, and this may be part of becoming a more compassionate and caring person for the benefit of ourselves and others.

### **About The Author**

**Hooria Jazaieri, MFT**, is a researcher and cognitive-behavioral therapist currently in the psychology graduate program at the University of California, Berkeley.

[\*Read more great articles at Greater Good.\*](#)