

Does loving-kindness meditation elicit empathic emotions? The moderating role of self-discrepancy and self-esteem on guilt

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Abstract-

Our understanding of the emotions elicited by loving-kindness meditation (LKM) at early stages of practice is limited, despite the influence that these emotions may have on later engagement. Past work suggests that LKM may elicit emotional ambivalence at early stages of the practice, but it is still unclear whether the content of LKM activates this ambivalence and who is more likely to experience it. Given the specific content of LKM, we defend that this meditation is likely to elicit empathetic emotions, both positive (compassion and gratitude) and negative (guilt), to a greater extent than an active control. Guilt is likely to be elicited by memories of incidents where naïve meditators were not able to experience compassion and/or by the difficulties in sending compassionate love to disliked others during the meditation. Furthermore, individuals with greater self-discrepancy and lower self-esteem are more likely to experience guilt. These hypotheses were tested in two experimental studies with community and student samples (n=55 and n=33, respectively) and using a brief intervention. The results support the hypotheses. These findings have implications for instructors of LKM, especially when organizing meditation practices with naïve meditators who should be aware of the potential negative emotions elicited by this meditation.

Index Terms- compassion, gratitude, guilt, loving-kindness meditation, self-discrepancy, self-esteem

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Citation:

Carrero, I.; Martínez de Ibarreta Zorita, C.; Valor, C.; Merino, A. "Does loving-kindness meditation elicit empathic emotions? The moderating role of

self-discrepancy and self-esteem on guilt", Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being, vol.15, no.3, pp.919-937, August, 2023.