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## Making a Big (or Small) Decision? How Meditation Can Help

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### Management



Forget the past. Ignore the likely future. Just spend a few minutes concentrating on your breathing, and focus on the task at hand.

The advice is almost too simple to believe. But according to new research co-authored by Wharton management professor [Sigal Barsade](#), if followed, it could save time and money for everyone — from a consumer searching for a new car all the way to the head of a billion-dollar corporation.

Barsade, Andrew C. Hafenbrack and Zoe Kinias — both with the department of organizational behavior at INSEAD — are the authors of “Debiasing the Mind through Meditation: Mindfulness and the Sunk-Cost Bias.” The paper, published in *Psychological Science*, explores how short meditation sessions can reduce the likelihood that decisions will be made based on information from the past that should have no bearing on the choice at hand.

Specifically, the researchers wanted to examine the intersection of meditation and the elimination of the sunk-cost bias, or the tendency to continue a losing course of action once time and money have been invested. Think about the difficulty in getting someone to sell a stock that has plummeted in value, or to ignore bad advice one has paid for. More high-profile examples would include continuing a disastrous military campaign or an over-budget construction project.

In all of those cases, past behavior — specifically, having already invested significant time and money toward arriving at a particular outcome — is influencing an individual's ability to clearly assess the situation and make a decision that takes the current factors into account.

Meditation has been shown to help people focus on the present and let go of both the past and future. Hafenbrack says intensive meditation training can often involve two to five classes a week for eight weeks, with the goal being to train participants in achieving a more meditative state even when they are not meditating, which will help them be less focused on the past and future.

But such involved training is often impractical, so the team wanted to look at the benefits of a shorter-term approach. "We were interested in knowing in principle if you alter your state of mind, could that influence that bias," Barsade notes. "We thought there was a good chance that even brief [meditation] would allow us to see that shift."

### **Resisting the Negative**

To test the impact of short-term meditation on making decisions prone to influence by the sunk-cost bias, the researchers set up a series of experiments. After an online survey confirmed the relationship of mindfulness and the ability of participants to resist the sunk-cost bias, the researchers examined scenarios designed to show that meditation could bring about mindfulness.

The first pair of studies asked participants to choose one of two decision-making tasks. In one task, making an affirmative decision — in other words, the choice to do something — represented the resistance to the sunk-cost bias. In the other, a negative decision — or the choice to not do something — meant the individual had resisted the bias.

According to the authors, those in the study who had listened to a 15-minute focused-breathing guided meditation recording created specifically for the research were more likely to resist the sunk-cost bias than those who had not. "People who mediated focused less on the past and future, which led to them experiencing less negative emotion," Hafenbrack says. "That helped them reduce the sunk-cost bias."

A subsequent survey, this one done online, required participants to complete a 10-item decision-making inventory, again with about half hearing the guided meditation recording beforehand. The results of the earlier studies were replicated and show the value of a short time-out when someone is placed in the role of a decision maker.

"If you can take these breaks in the day, if you can do a short time-out, you can get yourself to a place that's going to help you think better," she says. "If you find yourself in a position where you need to change the way you're thinking and be sure you're thinking in a less biased way ... meditation is a way to do that."

*"Everyone always says 'stop being emotional' when they discuss decision-making, but in essence that's the wrong thing to say. Just don't let the wrong emotions cloud the decision-making process." —Sigal Barsade*

The positive impact of taking a time-out is just as relevant to a consumer on a shopping trip as it is to a C-level executive, Hafenbrack adds. Even taking a few minutes before going through the checkout line at the grocery store can pay dividends. "When you're in line at the checkout, that might be a great place to meditate and ask if you really need everything in your cart."

### **Short-term or Long-term?**

Although it only takes a few minutes of mindfulness to have an effect, if you've already booked your tickets for a more intense meditation retreat out in the desert, don't change your plans yet.

"[The research doesn't] undermine the idea that [meditating] as a long-term practice could be effective," Barsade says. "However, one of the novel and important things [about the research] is that you can take a brief time out and get a result."

Barsade and Hafenbrack are continuing their meditation study by looking at its influence on the negotiation process. While they don't have direct results yet, they are continuing to uncover the ways that meditation can bring out positive emotional responses in situations that have traditionally been viewed as emotionless.

"We found that one of the ways meditation is influencing the reduction in decision-making bias is through your mood," Barsade notes. "Meditation changes your cognitive state and your mood, both of which are changing your decision-making. Everyone always says 'stop being emotional' when they discuss decision-making, but in essence that's the wrong thing to say. Just don't let the wrong emotions cloud the decision-making process."