

Mindfulness in Behavioral Health

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Mindfulness for Everyday Living

A Guide for Mental Health Practitioners

 Springer

Editor

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Contents

Mindfulness and the Middle Way of Stress Reduction	1
Patrick R. Steffen, Sheilagh Fox, and Brodrick Brown	
Mindfulness and Positive Living	11
Jared S. Warren	
Compassion for Everyday Living	25
Jenn Fox and Gary Burlingame	
Mindfulness for Pediatric Health Conditions	43
Kara M. Duraccio and Chad D. Jensen	
Autism, Emotions, and Mindfulness	53
Mikle South	
Mindful Parenting	69
Corinne E. Ruth and Kat T. Green	
Mindfulness in Marriage	85
Sam Ryland and Lee Johnson	
Strengthening Emotional and Physical Intimacy: Creating a Mindful Marriage	91
Jason B. Whiting, Chelom E. Leavitt, and Jeremy S. Boden	
Mindfulness and Mental Health	105
Meredith S. Pescatello and Tyler R. Pedersen	
Index	123

Mindfulness in Marriage



Sam Ryland and Lee Johnson

Remember how interested you were in your partner when you were falling in love? Minor details were fascinating, and you enjoyed getting to know them on every level. But as the relationship progresses through the accumulating distractions of everyday life, can you relate to the following?

Husband: My wife is missing. She went shopping yesterday and has not come home!

Sheriff: Height?

Husband: I'm not sure. A little over five-feet tall.

Sheriff: Weight?

Husband: Don't know. Not slim, not really fat.

Sheriff: Color of eyes?

Husband: Sort of brown I think. Never really noticed.

Sheriff: Color of hair?

Husband: Changes a couple times a year. Maybe dark brown now. I can't remember.

Sheriff: What was she wearing?

Husband: Could have been pants, or maybe a skirt or shorts. I don't know exactly.

Sheriff: What kind of car did she go in?

Husband: She went in my truck.

Sheriff: What kind of truck was it?

Husband: A 2016 pearl white Ram Limited 4X4 with 6.4l Hemi V8 engine ordered with the Ram Box bar and fridge option, LED lighting, back up and front camera, Moose hide leather heated and cooled seats, climate-controlled air conditioning. It has a custom matching white cover for the bed, Weather Tech floor mats. Trailing package with gold hitch, sunroof, DVD with full GPS navigation, satellite radio, Cobra 75 WX ST 40-channel CB radio, six cup holders, 3 USB port, and 4 power outlets. I added special alloy wheels and off-road Toyo tires. It has custom retracting running boards and underglow wheel well lighting.

At this point the husband started choking up.

Sheriff: Take it easy sir, we'll find your truck!

As therapists, we often hear the story of a couple who started to drift apart without really noticing. Life can get busy, and the rose-colored glasses you wore as

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newlyweds eventually lose their tint. Maybe you wake up one day and realize your partner feels like a roommate, or even a stranger. Feeling this kind of “drift” in a relationship is common (Amato & James, 2018). Sometimes it’s hard to see what is happening right in front of you because it’s all you see, every day, and you are just used to it.

It’s easy to stop *appreciating* your partner for what they are. Remember when your relationship was starting out and every little thing seemed so exciting and new? Back then, your partner was messy, and you loved their carefree attitude to life. Now, they are still messy, and it drives you crazy having to pick up after them. Maybe they spent hours on different projects, and you loved watching them work, but now, you just want them to come help you clean the kitchen and put the kids to bed.

When your focus is on the daily grind of family life, it’s easy to see your partner’s quirks as inconveniences and flaws. But if you can pause for a second and really *notice* your partner, you might rediscover things about them that spark your love and interest. You might even find some new things you hadn’t noticed before!

If you want a relationship that feels good, where you feel close to your partner, you need to wake up and *pay attention*. Gift giving is a great example of this: buying expensive flowers won’t mean as much as coming home with a jar of their favorite jam, or organizing to see a movie they’ve been looking forward to after they’ve had a difficult week. You don’t need a lot of money for these gifts, but you do need to know what is happening in your partner’s life!

Appreciation, noticing, and paying attention, these are the core concepts of *mindfulness*. While mindfulness can help us enormously as individuals, it can also help us appreciate our partner and pay attention to the most important parts of our relationship that lead to happiness and security (Kozlowski, 2013). So, we hope you are sold on the importance of mindfulness in marriage. With that in mind (pun intended), we can suggest four things you can do right now to pay more attention and become more present in your relationship.

Appreciation: Stop and Smell the Flowers

The classic film “It’s A Wonderful Life” introduces us to George Bailey who, after experiencing a series of setbacks, tries to jump from a bridge. An angel named Clarence intervenes to help George see the positive impact he’s had in other people’s lives and help him appreciate the things he had taken for granted. It’s easy to focus on the undesirable things we’d like to change, but this negative focus can make us miserable. When this pessimism takes over, it’s important to remember the good things that are happening around us, especially in our relationship (Gottman & Silver, 2015).

There are almost certainly things you can find to appreciate about your partner. Maybe these are things that they do or maybe just the way they are. It may be tempting to say we appreciate what they *don’t* do—but we want to aim higher than that.

For example, appreciating that your partner doesn't spit in your food doesn't really say anything good. Appreciating that your partner always gives you the larger portion does.

Let's try putting this into action in an experiment that will take only a few minutes. First, think of something about your partner that you appreciate but that you've never put into words before. If you need to close the book for a minute and think about this—that's great! That's a very mindful thing to do. Got something? Great! Now, tell them about it. Send them a text message or email, or write it on a note, and put it in your pocket to give to them later, or hide it somewhere that they will find it.

Now, the most important part—how did that feel? Spend a minute just noticing how it felt to appreciate your partner. Notice how this changes the way you feel in general. This is the power of mindful appreciation. By bringing a positive thought into your relationship, we can start to feel better about that relationship, and we can start to feel better in general. It only takes a second, but it usually won't happen unless we make the mindful decision to do it.

You can carry this exercise further. Try setting an alarm each day for the next week to remind you to have a positive thought about your partner or your relationship. Send the positive thought along if you want. Or you could make it a long-term thing with a weekly reminder. It's up to you, but we hope that even this one attempt will create a positive change in your relationship.

Intimacy: To Know You Is to Love You

How well do you know your partner? Often, not as well as you think you do (Kouros & Papp, 2018). It can be easy to assume that because you have spent so much time together that you must know each other really well. But during that time, were we really paying attention? We might build an image of our partner in our head over time; how often do we make choices and assumptions based on that image in our head, instead of paying attention to the living, breathing person right in front of us?

Intimacy is about knowing someone as they really are and removing the barriers that interfere with connection. Some barriers are the assumptions we carry around with us. Other barriers can be our busy lives or little resentments or a million other distractions. Both you and your partner have changed over time, but have these barriers kept you from noticing these changes or made you forget what you had noticed before? Do you really know what your partner is thinking or how they are feeling, on a day-to-day basis? Maybe that kind of knowledge sounds impossible, but it's not as hard as you think. You don't have to be a mind reader, but you do have to spend more time thinking about and showing interest in your partner (Gottman & Silver, 2015).

Once again, let's try a quick exercise. Where is your partner right now? What do you think they might be feeling right now or thinking about? Don't worry too much about knowing this exactly; just take a guess. Now, talk to your partner. Maybe they are there with you right now, or maybe you will have to call them or text them. Just

ask them (in your own words) something like, “What’s going on for you right now?” “How are you feeling?” “What are you thinking about?” If they can’t answer right away, keep reading, and come back to this thought later when you do make contact.

If you did make contact, how accurate were your guesses? Chances are good you didn’t have a complete picture. If you did, great job! But ultimately, it doesn’t really matter. Thinking about your partner and checking in with them helped you get closer. You just created more space in your mind for your partner: not just an image of your assumptions about them, but the real them! If you keep doing this, you will start to respond to your partner in ways that bring you closer and show them that you are really interested in them. Again, this kind of relationship shift can only come by mindfully paying attention.

Here’s another activity to try: *pay attention* to your partner for the next 24 h. Notice the things that they do, things that you might not have noticed before. At the end of the 24 h, tell them about some of the new things you noticed, and see if you can find out more about these things. Notice how your partner responds to your interest, but more importantly, notice how you might think about your partner differently after doing this.

Resolving Problems: How to Sweat the Small Stuff

Inevitably, when you spend every day with someone and weave your lives together, little things they do or say might bug you. Small issues can grow and fester over time until the relationship feels poisoned, and you have built so many walls it is hard to reconnect. A small fracture, given enough time, can bring down a mighty tree.

People often say, “don’t sweat the small stuff,” but sometimes we just need to sweat the small stuff out of our system. If we push it below the surface, it can grow into deep resentment. But we might also be afraid that if we bring it up, misunderstanding and hurt could make the problem worse. Mindfulness can help us figure out what is really bothering us and then decide how to respond (Childre & Rozman, 2005). Let’s try it:

- First, think of something about your partner or about your relationship that has been bothering you. It could feel small or big; it could be a new issue or an old one.
- Now, imagine reaching inside yourself, taking hold of this thing that has been bothering you and then placing it in the air in front of you. Make some space for it. Take a second to notice what it looks like or what it sounds like or what it is trying to say. If you want to, you could even give it a name. Remember, this thing is a part of your experience, but it is not *you*.
- Now, holding this thing in front of you, listen to your *true* self—that is, move inward, beyond your feelings and thoughts, and get to the core part of you. Now ask, what should I do? Give your true self a couple of moments to respond.

You might have felt an impression to talk about your problem or to leave it alone or to do something completely different. It is likely, however, that you will feel better about whatever solution presented itself. If nothing clear did present itself, that's ok; maybe try again another time. Either way, hopefully you will feel less "caught up" in the problem. This is how mindfulness can help us sweat the small stuff—by separating ourselves from the heat of the moment and letting our true self respond.

Rituals: A Stitch in Time Saves Nine

In the honeymoon stage of the relationship, it's usually easy to find time to spend together. Eventually, life gets busier; it can be easy to drift apart. The things we discussed—appreciation, intimacy, and resolving problems—won't happen unless we are regularly checking in. If you want to practice mindfulness individually, you will need to set aside regular times to do it. It is the same in your relationship: if you want to practice these ideas, you will need to make time for them.

We all participate in rituals: things we do on a regular basis that follow the same patterns. Some we are aware of, like singing "happy birthday"; some develop automatically, like the pattern we follow when we get ready in the morning or come home from work.

Rituals are critical to relationships (Doherty, 1999)—as we learn to live with each other, we start to move in familiar patterns, and this familiarity can provide a sense of security and reliability. If your partner always kisses you goodbye before leaving, think of how it feels when they don't. We can build rituals into relationships that help us connect and respond to each other. Leaving and coming home rituals are an example—what can we do for each other in the morning and the evening to make sure we're ok, to check in with what is happening in each other's lives?

For some couples, it works to set aside a brief window of time each day. For example, Bill Doherty helped develop the concept of relationship rituals: every night he and his wife had 30 min of connection time set aside with each other, where they would just sit and talk over a cup of coffee. Their children knew not to interrupt them during this time!

Rituals can happen in a lot of different ways, date nights, leaving and arriving, nightly chats, and pillow talk, but to be successful, they need the following elements:

- **Reliable:** You must both know that it will happen or at least have a backup plan should there be any interruptions.
- **Regular:** The more frequently you connect, the less pressure there is coming into your time together.
- **Brief:** It doesn't need to be very long—agree on a short length and stick to it. Rituals that take too long can increase pressure and are hard to work into your schedule.
- **Pleasant:** Relaxing, distraction-free environments are ideal. If appropriate, plan something to do afterward that you both enjoy.

- **Non-blaming:** As you start out, there may be a temptation to tell your partner all the ways they are bothering you. Try to have faith in the process: you will have plenty of opportunities to process all of this later (if you need to). Try to emphasize appreciation and connection.

This week, try building a ritual with your partner. Your ritual will be as unique as your relationship, but if you use the principles above and try to make it a pleasant experience, you might be surprised how nice it can feel to have these reliable points of connection. Complacency is the enemy of good relationships: once we start taking our partner and our relationship for granted and lose focus, pressures under the surface can start to erode the foundation. Mindfulness will help you be aware of potential threats to your relationship, but more importantly, it can help you see and appreciate all the good things you already have together.

You are reading this book because you are interested in how mindfulness can improve your life. We wholeheartedly agree that mindfulness is incredibly beneficial in developing peace and self-control. This enhanced frame of mind can be enormously beneficial to your marriage. We encourage you to incorporate your partner relationship into your mindfulness practice: consider what they mean to you, develop greater awareness of them, identify new responses to difficult situations, and, most importantly, keep practicing! This will put you on the road to a relationship that feels happier, safer, and more fulfilling in every way.

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