

Slowing Down In Order to Show Up: Mindfulness In Intimate Relationships

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One of life's deepest and most profound human needs is to love and be loved. Our heart's longing is to be "known" and to be unconditionally accepted for who we are. This genuine, authentic connection with another human being is one of life's most precious gifts, and when it happens we count ourselves as blessed to have such intimacy grace our lives.

Yet often difficulties get in our way of giving and receiving this kind of emotional closeness, and our intimate relationships at times are fraught with conflict, disappointment, and disillusionment. Mindfulness offers us a way to slow down from the frenetic pace of our 21st century lives, and give our relationships the time and quality of attention they need and deserve. It also teaches us that the difficult emotions and entanglements we experience in our primary relationships are actually opportunities for growth. Could we learn how to accept whatever feelings arise as an integral part of the couple journey? This process of learning to embrace both our own and our partner's imperfections and rough edges is what numerous authors have described as a mature, conscious, mindful love. (Hendricks, 1988; Richo, 2002; Welwood, 1990)

"When two partners appreciate that their connection invariably points them in the direction of growth, they can begin to regard any situation that comes up as a teacher."

- John Welwood

Mindfulness can be viewed as a prism through which we can learn to shine light on all our thoughts and emotions, and in so doing transform them into an eyes-wide-open, compassionate, wholehearted way of being in relationship.

Disconnection and conflict seem to arise as difficulties in the day-to-day lives of so many couples. Too often, any one of us may describe our lives as so busy with careers, children, and outside commitments that we forget to make our relationship a priority in our lives. It is not unusual for our busyness to harden into a habit and our lack of feeling "in love" can lead us to question the relationship. Our "we-ness" is often sorely in need of a transfusion of time, positive regard, and attention filled with genuine presence. In short, we need to learn how to slow down in order to show up for each other. Learning the art and skill of mindfulness is one way to do just that.

Mindfulness, using Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition, is "paying attention, on purpose, without judgment." It is both an attitude and a practice. Mindfulness comes down to us from ancient Buddhist teachings, which suggest the value of cultivating a fresh awareness of the present moment (i.e. noticing a thought, feeling, impulse, reaction), and accepting it just as it is. As we practice acceptance of the way it is, we realize that this acceptance applies to our own and our partner's thoughts and emotions. The phrase "This is the way it is, it is just this way," may end up being a useful affirmation to remind us that acceptance is the doorway to understanding. So instead of reacting, blaming, defending, labeling as right or wrong, or being irritated about what the feelings are, we begin to see the situation as it is, and create a space in which to observe thoughts and feelings. In this way we develop an observing ego or a watcher inside of us that gives us some space to gain perspective. Such space allows us to choose how to respond rather than be tossed about in our usual maelstrom of reactivity. This is mindfulness.

This is particularly relevant in relationships where reactivity often rules the day. Partner A says or does something that pushes their partner's buttons, or triggers an emotional response, usually an engrained, habitual response. Partner B, who is triggered, then usually reacts by saying or doing something that triggers partner A, and the two are off to the races. These reactive interactions are often flavored with attack and defense strategies, with each person focused on what the other is doing, and feeling justified in defending oneself from attack.

Cultivating Mindful Listening is what is called for here. This is listening that is first focused on understanding the other person. This can be practiced by learning the skill of containment, or containing one's own thoughts and reactions until a true understanding has been achieved by just listening attentively (paying attention, on purpose, without judgment). Once this has been achieved for partner A, partner B talks while partner A practices deep listening with full attunement. By slowing down the interactive process each partner has a chance to be fully heard, acknowledged, and understood.

It is my belief that feeling misunderstood is at the heart of many couple conflicts and disconnections. When each partner simply (actually, it's not so simple in real life) stays with mindful listening until there is an empathic understanding of the other's innermost feelings and needs, a connection naturally occurs. Once a mutual understanding has been achieved in this manner, the couple may intuitively have arrived at a deeper realization, or be ready for a next step - perhaps a problem solving strategy. This process is at the heart of a healthy, intimate relationship—learning how to accept, allow and embrace the other. In learning to go outside of our self-centered universe and enter empathically into our partner's world, true intimacy develops. This is the fruit of bringing mindful and compassionate attention into the relationship.

Another central concept that mindfulness practice has to offer couples is that of Mindful Speech – the skill of speaking in such a way as to communicate honestly and kindly, taking care of when and how one chooses to speak so that the receiver may be able to receive the message. Thich Nhat Hanh expresses this beautifully in this poem.

*In due season will I speak, not out of season.
In truth will I speak, not in falsehood.
Gently will I speak, not harshly.
For the benefit of the other will I speak,
Not for their loss.
In kindness will I speak, not anger.*

Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that living by this precept is a wholesome way to cultivate loving relationships. Mindful speech is not reactive or defensive, not filled with judgments or blaming. It consists of “I” statements rather than “you” statements, and descriptions rather than accusations. Its purpose is deeper than just allowing the speaker to say what they have to say. It puts full responsibility on the speaker for communicating with intention, with thoughtfulness, and with an attitude of care.

An intention which strives to deepen understanding, to heal disconnection, and to be an avenue for repair will foster openness and intimacy. In order for this to happen each partner needs to take responsibility for being mindful (aware of) their own feelings, reactivity, and triggers. When these practices are integrated into a couple's way of relating to each other, compassion and empathy grow and blossom between them. In this way mindfulness practice waters the seeds of intimacy, and intimacy between partners is healing, fulfilling some of our most basic needs as human beings.

Cheri Desmond May is a certified Imago Couple's therapist who is continually practicing slowing down in order to show up for clients, her family, and herself.

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