

Chapter 2

Using Mindfulness with Couples: Theory and Practice

Monica O’Kelly and James Collard

As a concept, mindfulness is common to a range of Eastern and Western religions and philosophical traditions. It is a mode of being that appears central to the human experience, as it is fundamentally rooted in conscious attention and awareness (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). The influence of mindfulness on the practice of psychology in recent years, however, has been predominantly influenced by Buddhist traditions. In this form it has experienced increasing interest over the past 30 years, due largely to the efforts of Jon Kabat-Zinn who pioneered a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program for medical and psychological patients in the early 1980s (Kabat-Zinn, 2009).

The practice of mindfulness, as described by Kabat-Zinn (1994), is “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (p. 4). As suggested by this description, mindfulness relies on an awareness of the present moment and an open, noncritical attitude. In attempting to facilitate the transition of mindfulness into the practice of empirical studies of psychology and medicine, Shapiro and Carlson (2009) recently posited three fundamental components of mindfulness practice: *intention*, *attention*, and *attitude*. For *intention*, it is important that one is clear about their reasons for practicing mindfulness and that such reasons are based upon functional values. Consequently, motivation and pragmatic goals are of importance. *Attention* involves the direct observation

M. O’Kelly, Ph.D. (✉)

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy Australia, Melbourne, Australia

Australian Institute for Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, Melbourne, Australia

School of Psychology and Psychiatry, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

e-mail: moka@starnet.com.au

J. Collard, D.Psych.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy Australia, Melbourne, Australia

Cairnmillar Institute, Melbourne, Australia

e-mail: jjcol01@hotmail.com

of each moment and what happens in it. As noted by others (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007; Brown et al., 2007), this is for both internal and external occurrences and has a present focus that encompasses the ability to disengage from thoughts about the past and the future. *Attitude* refers to how the individual pays attention. It is critical that mindfulness is practiced with an “open-hearted compassionate” quality featuring nonjudgmental acceptance for all that is brought into awareness.

The mindful way of being is therefore suggested to reduce one's tendency to respond on automatic processes in which one's sensations, perceptions, actions, and emotions, and those of others, pass by without conscious awareness (Langer, 2009). Such automatic processes have otherwise been labeled mindlessness (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Another key feature of mindful living includes a flexibility of awareness and attention (Brown et al., 2007). This flexibility of attention is voluntary and fluid, enabling one to move out of particular states of mind to gain a larger perspective on situations, while also allowing one to focus in on situational details. Mindfulness also stresses an empirical stance towards reality (Brown et al., 2007). It seeks an objective observational perspective that helps one to gather all information about the experience of each moment.

Unsurprisingly, the benefits of mindfulness have been suggested to help enhance the quality of life in general and romantic relationships. For example, Kabat-Zinn (2009) theorized that mindfulness leads people to approach stressful events as a challenge, rather than as a threat, which would ameliorate the impact of stress upon relationships. It has further been suggested that mindfulness may promote a greater connectedness and closeness in relationships. Research investigating these claims has been initially promising, but is still quite new.

Cultivating Mindfulness

The ability to be mindful, as stated previously, is an inherent capacity of all humans. Its development is thought to be influenced by genetics and environmental factors, as reviewed by Brown and colleagues (2007). The influence of environmental factors can have either a positive or negative impact on the development of one's capacity to act mindfully, depending on the nature of the event. Similarly, it is thought that the capacity for mindfulness can be enhanced through training, just like any other skill. Simply put, mindfulness reflects the individual's skill at staying present in the moment and maintaining a nonjudgemental awareness of internal and external events.

Cultivating mindfulness involves practicing intentional attending to the present with an open, accepting and discerning attitude. Exercises to practice mindfulness can be categorized into formal and informal types (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). While the recent interest in mindfulness emerged from the study of Buddhist traditions, the practice of mindfulness is not based on any particular religious or spiritual beliefs. Instead, it is cultivated by purposefully paying attention to things we ordinarily

never give a moment's thought to (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). As Kabat-Zinn (2009) stated, "Mindfulness is basically just a particular way of paying attention. It is a way of looking deeply into oneself in the spirit of self-inquiry and self-understanding. For this reason it can be learned and practiced (p. 12)."

Formal exercises designed to help practice mindfulness, and perhaps the best known, are meditative exercises. These include sitting meditation, body scan meditation, and walking meditation. The practice of such meditations can be relatively brief, but they can also be practiced in a more intensive manner for extended durations. This is often the case in retreats where mindful meditative exercises can be practiced for hours or even days.

The informal practice of mindfulness involves the application of mindfulness skills in everyday life. It is practicing and maintaining a mindful state of being, such as being open, accepting, attentive, and nonjudgmental, relative to whatever one is doing. For example, people can practice mindful eating, mindful driving, or even mindful reading. Shapiro and Carlson (2009) suggested that this informal practice helps generalize to everyday life the skill for mindfulness that is developed through formal practice.

It has been shown that mindfulness practitioners score higher in terms of trait mindfulness, as measured by the *Mindfulness Attention and Awareness Scale* (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003). This provides support for the notion that mindfulness can be developed through deliberate behavior. However, while the benefits of practicing mindfulness, particularly as detailed by MBSR have now been well established according to Baer (2003), Brown and colleagues (2007), Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, and Walach (2004), the direct mechanisms that lead to these benefits are not well understood. Nor do we know the optimal ways for cultivating mindfulness. Baer (2003) has suggested that mindfulness interventions could work through a number of mechanisms including exposure, cognitive change/restructuring (especially at a metacognitive level), self-management for coping with stressors, and through activation of the relaxation response.

Treatments utilizing formal practice of mindfulness have been conducted in many forms. In its original form MBSR was designed as an 8-week program (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). Others, however, have developed alternative meditative programs for developing mindfulness of longer durations. For instance, Tanner et al. (2009) designed a 3-month Transcendental Meditation program. From this they reported that participants demonstrated significant increases in mindfulness over the period of the program, as compared to a waitlist control. Whether individuals require such periods of training is questionable, however, as others have demonstrated that individuals can demonstrate increasing treatment effects from mindfulness programs even after treatment has been discontinued (Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008). Furthermore, it has recently been shown that a number of meditative practices, influenced by both Eastern and Western traditions can help to cultivate mindfulness (Shapiro et al., 2008).

Similarly, it is unclear as to what degree individuals need to practice mindfulness-based meditations to achieve benefit. While some research has indicated that there may be a dose response (Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004), others have found that there is no relationship between the amount of formal practice and

reported levels of mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Moreover, mindfulness has been integrated into a number of other psychological treatment programs, such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) (Linehan, 1993), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MCT) (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), and Metacognitive Therapy (Wells, 2009). In a number of these mindfulness is not necessarily taught through meditation. For example, in both DBT and Metacognitive Therapy, mindfulness is instead taught as a variety of skills.

Benefits of Mindfulness for the Individual

While the mechanisms for change induced by mindfulness are not yet well understood (Carmody, Baer, Lykins, & Olendzki, 2009; Chiesa & Serretti, 2009), research over the past few decades have consistently supported its use in enhancing psychological well-being for individuals. These benefits have been observed for a range of populations including medical patients and those with psychological disorders, in addition to nonclinical populations. Mindfulness has been associated with improvements in a range of psychological constructs, both in terms of reducing negative and enhancing positive functioning.

There have now been a number of meta-analytic reviews demonstrating the effectiveness of mindfulness for reducing psychological stress, particularly in the forms of depression and anxiety (Baer, 2003; Bohlmeijer, Prenger, Taal, & Cuijpers, 2010; Grossman et al., 2004; Hofmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010). In general, these reviews have found moderate effect sizes for pre- and post-intervention measures of depression and anxiety symptoms. For example, Grossman et al. (2004) both found through meta-analytic studies that mindfulness interventions resulted in average effect sizes of approximately 0.5 across a range of physical and psychological conditions. The reported effect sizes in these studies ranged between 0.30 and 0.92. For Axis I psychological disorders the reported effect sizes have often been stronger (Baer, 2003; Hofmann et al., 2010). An exception to this was a review conducted by Bohlmeijer et al. (2010) who found the average effect sizes to be weaker when restricting their sample to more tightly controlled studies. For instance, mindfulness interventions for anxiety were found to have an average effect size of 0.24 and for depression an average effect size of 0.26. Their research was restricted to benefits of mindfulness to individuals with chronic medical diseases, however. It may also have been influenced by a ceiling effect whereby participant's room for improvement may have been limited by low pretest reports of depression and anxiety. Effect sizes for changes to specific anxiety and depressive symptomatology have not generally been studied to date.

Furthermore, mindfulness has been found to have a negative relationship to aggressive behavior. In research conducted by Heppner and colleagues (2008) it was found that individuals who demonstrated a higher disposition for mindfulness self-reported lower levels of aggression and hostile attribution styles. They also

found that in an experimental setting those who went through a mindful induction (mindful eating, exercise) reported lower levels of aggression when given rejection feedback, as compared to those who did not receive the mindfulness intervention.

The proposed mechanisms for changes arising from cultivating mindfulness are still largely based on qualitative reports at this point in time. However, in several studies, other constructs related to psychological stress have been demonstrated to have an inverse relationship to mindfulness. For example, Brown et al. (2007) found that mindfulness was negatively associated with neuroticism and with negative affect. It has also been associated with reduced engagement in ruminative thinking processes (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009). On a neurological level, an fMRI study conducted by Creswell, Way, Eisenberger, and Lieberman (2007) found that higher levels of mindfulness have been associated with greater activity in the prefrontal cortex and reduced bilateral amygdala activity. This is possibly a result of cognitive reappraisal resulting from mindfulness and is consistent with previous research which has shown that such patterns of neurological functioning are associated with better emotional regulation (Ochsner, Bunge, Gross, & Gabrieli, 2002).

In addition to ameliorating detrimental influences to psychological health, mindfulness has been suggested to enhance positive aspects of mental health. For instance, Brown and Ryan (2003) found that mindfulness could enhance positive affect, independent from its influence on reducing negative affect, and that it is positively related to extroversion and autonomy in day-to-day activities. They also found that mindfulness, volitional regulation of behavior, and hedonic experience were interconnected. Adding to these findings, Chiesa and Serretti (2009) have shown that mindfulness promotes empathy and self-compassion.

Benefits of Mindfulness for Couples

There has been limited research focusing on the application of mindfulness to relationships. Mindfulness and the exercises designed to promote it have typically been individual activities, yet recent advances have explored the impact of this individual activity on the intimate relationship between a couple. In addition, more interactive meditative practices have been developed.

Relationships that stand the test of time need to deal with stressors that invariably occur across the lifespan of a relationship. However, stress has not been as widely studied as other factors that contribute to relationship dissatisfaction (Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2006). Given that a meta-analysis of 115 longitudinal studies clearly showed that a couples' ability to cope with stress enhanced the relationship (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), this is an area that is worthy of attention. For some time, researchers in the field have been suggesting that enhancing the emotional functioning and stress management of individuals in a relationship is advantageous in the belief that healthy individual functioning is important for successful relationships (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 1994). This knowledge has been the impetus for the use of mindfulness with couples to enhance their individual and relationship well-being.

Empirical Support

Research studies that explore the relationship between mindfulness and relationship measures fall into two categories: those that consider mindfulness as a personality trait which measure mindfulness at a set point in time and those that study change as a result of mindfulness-based intervention programs. Results from both approaches indicate a positive relationship between mindfulness measures and measures of relationship satisfaction.

Mindfulness as a Personality Trait

Studies exploring the relationship between trait mindfulness and relationship satisfaction have largely focused on the psychological functioning of individuals and couples who are not presenting with relationship problems. In a study investigating the relationship between mindfulness and marital satisfaction, the results indicated a stronger relationship between mindfulness and marital satisfaction than for other variables (Burpee & Langer, 2005).

Other studies exploring mindfulness in intimate relationships have in general terms conceptualized mindfulness as present-centered awareness. In a study of 33 married couples exploring the relationship between mindfulness, marital quality, and emotional repertoire, an association was found between mindfulness and a measure of marital adjustment (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Further exploration indicated that the mindfulness scores were negatively correlated with hostile anger expression and positively associated with control of anger and self-soothing. Regression analysis revealed that the relationship between mindfulness and marital adjustment was mediated by the anger reactivity variable. The authors concluded that the trait of mindfulness offers specific benefits in an intimate relationship. In particular the more mindful couples exercise more control over aggressive impulses and keep hostility to a minimum (Wachs & Cordova, 2007).

Similar results were obtained in a study of dating college students (Barnes et al., 2007). Using the MAAS, mindfulness was positively related to measures of relationship satisfaction. They also found positive correlations between mindfulness and self-control and accommodation. The authors claimed support for their hypotheses that mindfulness is related to greater satisfaction in romantic relationships as well as to a greater capacity to manage the stresses that are experienced in an intimate relationship.

In a second part of the study conducted by Barnes and his colleagues (Barnes et al., 2007), the responses of dating college students were measured pre- and post-discussion regarding areas of conflict. Mindfulness was again correlated with romantic satisfaction. In addition, the participants with higher mindfulness reported less severe emotional post-discussion anxiety and anger-hostility. These individuals did, however, go into the conflict discussion with lower anxiety and anger-hostility. Trait mindfulness scores also predicted less negative changes in love and commitment.

As a result, the researchers maintained that those individuals with higher trait mindfulness experienced lower levels of negative emotions and more positive perceptions of their partner and their relationship after a negative exchange. Interestingly, Barnes et al. (2007) stated that the positive impact of mindfulness occurs for the individual's own experience but had no effect on the experience of their partner. This result suggests that relationship satisfaction is subjective and can be independent of the state of the relationship.

In an online-based study, the relationships between hostile conflict, attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety, and mindfulness were explored (Saavedra, Chapman, & Rogge, 2010). This was a large study with over 1,000 respondents. After the initial response, participants completed questionnaires 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, and 12 months later. Follow-up sets of questionnaires were completed by 865 participants. Mindfulness was shown to be positively associated with relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, high levels of mindfulness moderated and reduced the impact of attachment anxiety on relations over time thus buffering the relationship from increased risk of breakup.

In a recent study (Jones, Welton, Oliver, & Thoburn, 2011) the relationship between mindfulness and marital satisfaction was again reported. Jones and her colleagues also explored the role of spousal attachment as the mechanism through which trait mindfulness contributed to greater marital satisfaction. They suggested that the growth of neural circuitry associated with safety, security, and positive affect within the romantic relationship is promoted by mindful atonement to one's partner.

These studies of mindfulness as a trait are a snapshot in time. They are correlational in nature and all clearly show a positive relationship between mindfulness and relationship satisfaction. That these two variables occur together is not unexpected, although the direction of the interaction cannot be ascertained. Without intervention studies we do not know if this trait of personality or behavior patterns simply occur together in a static fashion or whether mindfulness can be taught as a skill and influence the individual's marital satisfaction.

Intervention Studies

Mindfulness-based relationship enhancement has been studied with positive outcomes reported. Carson and his colleagues (Carson et al., 2004) designed an intervention program for non-distressed couples based on the MBSR program of Kabat-Zinn (1982). The authors considered mindfulness not only as a set of meditative exercises but also as a way of being with three salient aspects: first, that mindfulness would lead to relaxation and de-arousal; second, that mindfulness leads to acceptance of an emphasis on one's experience without judging; and third, that the practice of mindfulness exercises has a generalization of effect.

In the study, 44 non-distressed couples were randomly assigned to an intervention group, involving attendance at the Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement group or a wait list control. The group program consisted of 8 weekly

150 min group sessions plus a full day retreat. Measures were taken pre- and posttreatment and at 3 months follow-up. Details of the program are outlined later in this chapter. Homework practice of mindfulness techniques guided by audiotapes was encouraged throughout the program as well as informal mindfulness exercises.

Results indicated superior scores in the mindfulness group posttreatment in comparison to pretreatment. This was the case for the measures of relationship satisfaction, autonomy, relatedness, closeness, acceptance of partner, and relationship distress. The mindfulness treatment group also had superior scores on the relationship satisfaction measure in comparison with the wait-list control group. Furthermore the gains were maintained at the 3 month follow-up. Individuals in the mindfulness treatment group had superior outcomes posttest in comparison with pretest for optimism, spirituality, individual relaxation, and psychological distress. The diary records indicated that couples in the mindfulness groups improved in comparison with the control group in the areas of relationship happiness and relationship stress in the individual areas of stress coping and were more resilient. In fact, greater practice of mindfulness was associated with increased relationship happiness, decreased relationship stress, increased coping efficacy, and decreased overall stress. There was a clear dose-dependent effect. In any 1 day greater levels of mindfulness practice led to greater experience of relationship satisfaction.

In their follow-up study Carson, Carson, Gil, and Baucom (2007) reported on which process of change could account for the improvements in the mindfulness group. They found that the only factor enhancing relationship satisfaction was that participant couples sensed that by attending the mindfulness group they were participating in a self-expanding and exciting activity together. In the context of the study mindfulness was seen as a shared domain with insights, feelings and behavior change shareable with their partner. Relaxation and acceptance were surpassed by the self-expanding nature of the activity.

These studies provide clear evidence that both individual psychological well-being and relationship functioning can benefit from a mindfulness-based relationship enhancement program for relatively well-functioning couples. To date, there is no research reported using mindfulness as the only intervention with distressed couples.

Promising results have, however, been reported in two intervention studies for intimate partner violence by Kazdin, in which mindfulness was one component of treatment (as cited in Rathus, Cavanaugh, & Passarelli, 2006). These studies were designed for males and involved a group program over 22 weeks. The program included mindfulness, in addition to skills modules to develop distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness, and emotional regulation as in a dialectic behavior therapy program. In both studies, physical, emotional, and verbal abuse reduced from pre- to posttreatment. Decreases in interpersonal difficulties, emotional deregulation, and impulsivity were also reported. In the second study, evidence showed that gains were maintained at 9 month follow-up. Improvements were further confirmed by the participants' partners. These results are promising; however, further research is needed to tease out to what extent mindfulness contributed to the gains made.

Mindfulness Interventions for Couples

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to describe in detail all the mindfulness techniques that can be used with couples. However, examples will be given to illustrate how these techniques can be used in counseling couples.

Interventions for Individual Members of the Couple

As the theory and research have indicated, individuals who demonstrate better levels of psychological functioning have more rewarding relationships. Consequently, many mindfulness techniques can be used with individuals to enhance relationships. The following is an example of such an exercise adapted from Kabat-Zinn (2009, p. 58).

1. Find a comfortable position either lying on your back or sitting. If sitting, keep the spine straight with relaxed shoulders.
2. Close your eyes if comfortable.
3. Focus on your abdomen. Observe it rise when you inhale and lower on the exhale.
4. Ride the waves of your breathing, focusing on your breathing for the full breath in and the full breath out.
5. When you notice your mind wandering off then gently refocus your attention on your abdomen and your breathing.
6. Every time your mind wanders simply bring your attention back to your breathing not matter how many times you mind if drawn to something else.
7. Practice this exercise for 15 min every day whether you feel like it or not. After a week see how it feels to have a meditation practice in your life. See what it is like not having to do anything but be with your breath.

An advanced breathing exercise adapted from Kabat-Zinn (2009, p. 58) is as follows.

1. At different times during the day focus on your breathing, paying attention to the movement of your abdomen as you do so.
2. Tune into your thoughts and feelings, and just observe them without judging or reacting to them.
3. Notice any changes to the way you see things and to your feelings.

Other contemplative techniques include body scans and walking meditations. An adapted example of a walking meditation is provided below (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 116):

1. Decide on a period of time (e.g., 10 min) to focus formally on a walking meditation.
2. Choose a location where you can walk slowly back and forth (Note—it is best to choose a private place to avoid observation and interruptions from others).

3. To maximize your mindfulness focus your attention on one aspect of your walking (e.g., your feet), rather than changing from one part of the body to another.
4. Walk at a slower than normal pace for the selected period of time.
5. You may choose to focus on different aspects of your walking during subsequent walking meditations.

Mindful eating exercises have also been developed, often focused on contemplation of sensations and experiences while eating foods such as chocolate and raisins. The following is adapted from Kabat-Zinn (2009, pp. 27–29).

1. Taking a raisin, focus on it as if you had never seen one before; notice its color and the nature of its surface.
2. Feel the texture of the raisin with your fingers.
3. Be aware of any thoughts about raisins or food in general. Note any thoughts of liking or disliking raisins.
4. Smell the raisin.
5. Bring the raisin to your lips, being aware of the movements of your arm and of any salivation in anticipation of eating the raisin.
6. Place the raisin in your mouth and chew it slowly, experiencing the taste and the textures of the raisin.
7. When ready to swallow, observe the impulse to swallow so that it is experienced consciously.
8. Note any lingering tastes or sensations in the mouth after swallowing the raisin.

Non-meditative skills for practicing mindfulness have also been developed by Linehan (1993). These include:

- Observing: noting one's experiences without reason, judgment or labels. It can include observations of own thoughts and feelings, the actions of another, or even the physical environment.
- Describing: applying verbal labels to the observations, without presuming they are factual or jumping to conclusions.
- Participating: engaging in a task with focused attention, being present in the moment. Such mindful engagement can be practiced with any activity (e.g., driving, eating, running, and communicating).

Descriptions of other mindfulness exercises can be found elsewhere (e.g. Kabat-Zinn, 2009; Segal et al., 2002).

Couple-Focused Interventions

Carson and colleagues (Carson et al., 2004) have been leaders in the adaptation of mindfulness interventions for couples. As stated previously, they developed a program based on MBSR which was designed to enrich the relationships of relatively happy, non-distressed couples. In addition to the individual activities of MBSR they

Table 2.1 Main topics of intervention sessions (Carson et al., 2004, p. 478)

Session 1	Welcome and guidelines, loving-kindness meditation with partner focus, brief personal introductions, introduction to mindfulness, body-scan meditation, homework assignments (body scan and mindfulness of a shared activity)
Session 2	Body-scan meditation, group discussion of practices and homework, introduction to sitting meditation with awareness of breath, homework assignments (body scan plus sitting meditation, and pleasant events calendar including shared activities)
Session 3	Sitting meditation, group discussion of practices and homework with didactic focus on pleasant experiences, individual yoga, homework assignments (alternating body scan with yoga plus meditation, and unpleasant events calendar including shared events)
Session 4	Sitting meditation, group discussion of practices and homework with didactic focus on stress and coping, dyadic eye-gazing exercise and discussion, homework assignments (alternating body scan with yoga plus meditation, and stressful communications calendar including communications with partner)
Session 5	Sitting meditation, taking stock of program half over, group discussion of practices and homework with didactic focus on communication styles, dyadic communication exercise, homework assignments (alternating sitting meditation with yoga, and attention to broader areas of life [e.g., work] that impact relationship, exploration of options for responding with mindfulness under challenging conditions)
Session 6	Partner yoga, sitting meditation, group discussion of practices and homework with didactic focus on broader areas of life (e.g., work) that impact relationships, homework assignments (alternating sitting meditation with yoga, and attention to obstacles and aids to mindfulness)
Full day session	Multiple sitting meditations and walking meditations, individual and partner yoga, mindful movement and touch exercise, dyadic and group discussions
Session 7	Sitting meditation, group discussion of experiences during full day session, discussion of obstacles and aids to mindfulness, loving kindness meditation, mindful touch exercise and discussion, homework assignments (self-directed practice)
Session 8	Partner yoga, sitting meditation, group discussion/review of program focusing on lessons learned, personal and relationship-related changes, and wrap-up

developed a number of couples-focused mindfulness activities. Their program is outlined below (Table 2.1).

The following is an example of the *Loving Kindness Activity* outlined by Carson and colleagues in their program (Carson et al., 2006).

Partners are asked to recall the days when they first fell in love and decided to be together, and observe whether they could actually feel again in the present moment the sense of discovery, closeness, trust, sweetness, or fun that they had at that time (p. 318).

Interactive mindfulness exercises were also included in the program to encourage collaborative practice between the couple, including a dyadic eye gazing exercise and a mindful touching exercise. The dyadic eye gazing exercise is a two part exercise that is conducted as follows.

During the first part, partners enter into a brief “facing stress” experiment in which they gaze into one another’s eyes without diverting their attention. In many partners this sustained gazing soon elicits a vague sense of discomfort and vulnerability. Rather than react based on these feelings, couples are encouraged to simply take notice of whatever feelings

and urges come up, while remaining attentive and open to any shifts that occur in their experience. In the second part of the exercise, couples are asked to continue their gaze, while now doing their best to recognize and inwardly welcome a “deep-down goodness” present within their partner and also within themselves. The exercise ends with a group discussion of its implications for learning to remain mindfully nonreactive and receptive to one’s partner in the face of stress-inducing circumstances that might otherwise lead to hurtful arguments or withdrawal from one another (Carson et al., 2006, pp. 312–313).

The mindful touching exercise includes each member of the couple giving and receiving a back rub. Either as the giver or the receiver of the back rub, each individual focuses on the sensations, thoughts and feeling arising in response to their involvement in the exercise. Following the back rub the couple discusses the sensations, thoughts and feelings they experienced, and how this could enhance their physical intimacy (Carson et al., 2006). This exercise could be adapted for hand-holding, foot rubs, hugging, and other physical contact.

Like many other programs for couples, mindfulness-based programs have also tended to be developed with guidelines for communication. They attempt to help the couple learn how to mindfully pay attention to how they are communicating with one another. Mindful communication focuses on typical aspects of effective communication such as taking turns, succinct expression, and attentive listening, and also focuses on spontaneously speaking from the heart (Carson et al., 2006). This occurs in the context of the individual remaining mindful, trying to maintain awareness of their present experiences without responding to them in a judgmental manner. It would also likely be enhanced by incorporating the practical mindfulness skills describe by Linehan (1993), such as observing, describing, and participating, with a focus on increasing the effectiveness of communication.

Case Study

Tom (40 years old) and Sarah (38 years old) have been married for 17 years. They have two sons, aged 2 and 5. Tom owns his own construction business and finds this work very stressful. Sarah works in the business office of their company.

Their relationship had been rewarding and satisfying until their second son was born, which coincided with Tom working longer hours. Sarah became depressed and resentful towards Tom, as she considered Tom to be unsupportive. He found it difficult to cope with Sarah’s complaints and the demands of two young children. They frequently argued over a range of issues and had difficulty communicating effectively. Physical intimacy between them had also suffered. When they first presented in therapy, they were considering separation.

Therapy commenced with a focus on their individual psychological problems. They were both initially taught mindful breathing exercises which they practiced over the course of several sessions. This technique helped Tom manage his work-related stress more effectively and helped Sarah manage her stress regarding the children and their household. As a result of this intervention, Tom was calmer when he returned home from work at the end of the day, which allowed him to assist more

with duties relating to the children and the household. Sarah appreciated this and noted that she had become more aware of her own emotional reactions to stressors at home and wasn't taking her frustration out on Tom as frequently. She also reported being more organized and effective in her time management.

Mindfulness strategies were then implemented to enhance their communication. This taught them to observe and describe their experiences in an objective manner, with a focus on not reacting to them. Participation skills were directed towards encouraging them to actively attend to what their partner was saying.

They reported that this helped them to communicate more openly and to understand each other better. They were less judgmental and more supportive. They also shared that they were able to effectively resolve conflicts in short period of time due to their improved communication, and arguments had become infrequent.

To increase intimacy, a sensate focus exercise was suggested, to be practiced in a mindful manner. Both Tom and Sarah reported increased relationship and physical intimacy as a result of this intervention. At the end of treatment Tom and Sarah were no longer considering separation. While they still had a number of stressors in their lives, they were dealing with these in a calmer manner and Sarah was no longer feeling depressed. In general, they were both happier within themselves and with each other, were more empathetic towards each other, and were communicating more effectively. They also reported that they were content with the level of physical intimacy expressed in their relationship.

Conclusion

With its integration into psychological therapy over recent decades, mindfulness has been shown to be effective for a range of problems, particularly relating to stress management. Over the past decade attempts have been made to extend mindfulness to interventions for couples. Theoretically this has initial promise, but the research to date is limited. Initial studies regarding the use of mindfulness as an enhancing and preventative strategy for the relationships of well-functioning couples have shown positive outcomes. Mindfulness has also been used as a component of effective treatment for distressed couples. With a foundation based on mindfulness exercises for individuals, work in this area has recently led to the development of couple-focused activities.

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