

Using Mindfulness to Keep Relationships Healthy

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What is mindfulness and what does it mean to be “mindful”? How can it help our relationships? In this article, we will explore these questions about mindfulness and how it can be applied to enhance relationships and keep them healthy. The term “mindfulness” originates from philosophical and meditative traditions. However, it should be made clear that the term mindfulness as used in this article pertains to specific behaviors and traits, that have been shown by recent studies to correlate to better communication, higher relationship satisfaction and a greater capacity to respond to relationship stress.

Mindfulness has two important parts. The first part is defined as attentiveness and awareness of the present moment, both internally (what is happening inside of you) and externally (what is happening outside of you - i.e. with others). The second part involves not judging, comparing, or evaluating the present experience as you observe it.

This seems deceptively simple: just pay attention to the situation and stay in the present. Usually it's not too hard to pay attention when the conversation is friendly and the issues being discussed aren't problematic. The difficulty arises when negative emotions become a part of the discussion. When voices start getting louder and pulses start to rise, being mindful becomes much more difficult. Consider the following two scenarios:

A husband has a major project due tomorrow and comes home from a busy day at work. He is tired and is not feeling well, but wants to have a little time to talk to his wife before dinner. The wife has taken care of a sick child all day and is also not feeling well. She works part time from home, and has recently been feeling pressure from co-workers to go back to work full-time and wants to talk it over with her husband.

Scenario one: The husband starts the conversation by asking his wife what she did during the day. She immediately is on the defensive. She assumes that what he is really asking is if she did anything because she stays at home now instead of going to work. This wife is now angry. She begins to vent about her horrible day and that she didn't get anything done, and that maybe she should just go back to work full-time. He is shocked because she has never brought it up before. He becomes angry and doesn't really know what to say, so he stomps off to the other room to work on his presentation.

Scenario two: The husband comes home from work and wants to ask the wife what she did during the day. However, he is mindful of the fact that his wife finds this irritating when he phrases it that way. He also notices she doesn't look well and knows that she took care of their sick son all day. The husband starts off the

conversation by asking his wife how her day was. The wife does not feel well and is tired from taking care of a sick child all day. She feels like blowing off a little steam. However, she is attentive to the fact that he looks tired and remembers him commenting about a presentation due tomorrow. She also notes her own feeling of frustration with her coworkers. She really wants to talk to him about the pressure to go back to work, but also wants to make sure they have the time and energy to really talk about it, so decides it would be best to address it later.

As shown in scenario two, mindfulness allows us to observe how we are feeling while also being attentive to how the other is feeling. This attentiveness to ourselves and others as our anxiety/anger/frustration starts to rise helps us to stay in the moment without judgment. Being mindful also takes hard work and practice! As shown in the examples above, training ourselves to become more mindful can be beneficial to our own well-being as well as helping to keep our relationships healthy.

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