

## 3 Reasons Why Mindfulness Meditation Helps Relationships

by MARSHA LUCAS, PHD a neuropsychologist's exploration of mindfulness meditation and the brain

In my work as a psychologist, I see a lot of very bright, insightful people who still struggle with relationships, and when I suggest that they start practicing mindfulness meditation, they want to know why and how sitting and meditating can help their love lives.

They may know that they "should" meditate because it's good for them, but how is it going to make things better between them and their [fill in the blank:

Wife/Husband/Boyfriend/Girlfriend/Partner...]?

Here are three of the many reasons I give to them, with some examples we can all relate to.

### **1. Mindfulness meditation turns down the volume on stress.**

One of the most widely known benefits of meditation is reduced stress. "Stress" in this case doesn't mean that meditating will reduce the number of urgent e-mails in your inbox, but rather the reaction that your brain and your body have to what's going on inside you and around you.

**What I see in myself, and in the people with whom I work, is that the response to stressors is less intense, takes less time to recover from, and doesn't tend to linger on the sidelines. "Well, sure," you might say, "anybody can be relaxed right after meditating."**

**What seems to happen, though, is that the effect of meditation on decreasing the stress response extends well beyond the meditation session itself, for more and more of the day as people develop a consistent practice.**

When you're less stressed, your nervous system is less likely to overreact, less likely to be hypervigilant to potential "threats." You're less defensive, and better able to hear and respond to what's actually going on. As Jon Kabat-Zinn says, mindfulness leads people to be better at approaching stressful events as a challenge, rather than a threat.

Under threat, we're geared to quickly — and without much thinking — fight, flee, or freeze. With challenge, we see an increase in the

brain's ability to pull ideas together and come up with informed, balanced solutions.

So what does this do for improving relationships?

Imagine that your brain is stressed out over deadlines at work. You're already late for your date with your girlfriend. Your body, thanks to the brain's messages that things are dangerous, is tight, prepared to fight, flee, or freeze, and in a magnificent feedback loop, your brain gets the body's tightness as a message to keep on the lookout for trouble.

You walk into the restaurant for your date, aware that you're late, and you see a look of annoyance on her face — which your brain detects as an additional stressor-threat.

Your girlfriend sees the body language of your stress even before you get to the table, and her fight/flight/flee response gets further ratcheted up. Add in the restaurant noise she's been sitting with, the problems she had finding a parking spot to meet you close to your office, and the fact that you're both hungry.

In the bad date scenario above, we've got an overabundance of stress hormones raging through both bodies, tight muscles ready to react — basically, two hungry people with hypervigilant "danger detectors" in their brains chomping at the bit to help them rapidly and decisively defend themselves. And neither one of them is able to readily access perceiving any of this as a challenge, rather than a threat. How well do you think the date is going to go?

Now imagine that at least one of them practices mindfulness meditation regularly. At the very least, if all we're looking at is the benefit of overall decreased stress and an ability to recognize, let go of, and recover from stress more easily, we can see how much better the evening is going to be.

There's so much more to mindfulness meditation than stress reduction, though.

Let's take a look at two other ways that mindfulness meditation gives your relationship a boost.

## **2. Mind the Gap.**

Research on the effects of mindfulness meditation on the brain is increasingly showing that there is a beefing up (in activation and even in size) of the middle prefrontal cortex (mPFC). The mPFC is an area which neuroscientists believe plays an important role in integrating our higher, "intellectual" brain areas (for example, your

frontal cortex) with those down below in our more raw, “emotional” areas (like your amygdala).

Having a more formidable mPFC allows your brain to bridge the gap, as it were, between your “thinking” and your “feeling” areas. Your brain can better integrate what’s going on in your “emotional” brain areas and your “intellectual” brain areas.

Here’s an example of relationship argument, with emotions and intellect banging into one another instead of being integrated — as you read it, see how this plays out in each individual, as well as in the couple:

*A wife comes home, somewhat exasperated after being out with a good friend, but one who can be self-involved at times. “She did it again!” she exclaims to her husband. “Jane managed to make the whole evening about her!” Afraid of losing a friend, and also tired, she begins to cry, bemoaning how hard it is to make friends, how alone she feels, and wondering what’s wrong with her that she can’t figure it out.*

*Her husband sees her distress and wants to scramble to respond, to help her “fix” the problem. So, he tells her, “First, you need to stop beating up on yourself. Jane’s the problem, not you. I don’t know why you stay friends with her, anyway; you’re always upset after seeing her. Just go out and make some new friends who treat you better. Weren’t you going to join that book club to meet new friends?”*

*She proceeds to lash out at her husband for being insensitive and overly intellectual, and accuses him of not caring. He’s hurt and angry that his attempt to help her solve the problem has gotten her angry at him – again – and he responds by yelling at her “Of course I care!” and that she’s too emotional and can’t think straight enough to remember that.*

Here, the wife came in the door with a flailing amygdala, almost pure, raw emotion. The husband responded with a rational frontal cortex, trying to help while also trying to avoid or staunch the emotions. The result is that they’ve completely missed each other. Imagine if they could integrate the two: Being tuned in to the emotions, but not overwhelmed by them; searching for a calmer, rational response, without losing sight of the emotions. **That integration and connection is what mindfulness meditation helps cultivate and grow, quite literally, in the brain — as well as between couples.**

“Minding the gap” — shorthand for practicing mindfulness in order to bridge that gap between thinking and feeling — helps protect you from the dangers of having either your emotions or your intellect

become a runaway horse, dragging your partner and your relationship in the dirt behind you.

### 3. “Getting” your partner better.

As you practice mindfulness meditation, you’re practicing, over and over again, the act of noticing when your mind has wandered off. (By the way, if you think your brain is too busy for you to meditate — think again (pun intended) — Being more aware of when your mind isn’t “in the moment” lets you become more aware of what *is* going on in the moment.

You get more attuned to what’s going on inside you, instead of being on “autopilot” or in distracted-reactive mode. You also become more aware that even if you’re feeling something in this moment, it’ll feel a little different if you just sit with it a bit. Your emotions aren’t bags of wet concrete sitting on your head (or in your heart); they’re more like weather patterns moving through.

Getting to be more aware of your internal state allows you to be more attuned to yourself and your experiences — allows you to have greater understanding and empathy for yourself. (If a baby is upset and crying, the caregiver needs to “tune in” and empathize in order to effectively understand what’s going on, and how best to respond — in effect, you’re doing this for yourself when you practice mindfulness.)

As you increase your ability to be more attuned and more empathic with yourself, your capacity to be attuned and empathic with your partner increases as well.

Let’s say that the couple in the example above were both in the process of learning mindfulness meditation. They’d been at it long enough that they knew to stop for a moment, even in the middle of their distress. In this case, it could go quite differently:

*The wife stops, takes a breath, and silently checks in with herself: “Tired; mad at Jane for ignoring my feelings; mad at my husband for... hmm, ignoring my feelings; lonely.” She looks at her husband, and reminds herself that they’re on the same team — they both want to feel more connected. She understands that he’s angry but wanting to help her.*

*Through her tears, she manages to say, “I’m feeling tired, and lonely, and I need room for my feelings, even if they don’t make sense. Having you hold me quietly would really help.”*

*Her calm helps him remember to take a breath and check in with himself:*

*“Frustrated that I blew it; mad at my wife for pointing out that I blew it... but she’s letting me know how I can do it better right now, and right now she seems to be open to me.” He reaches out, awkwardly but with an awareness of loving her, and they both feel themselves begin to relax.*

Mindfulness increases the degree to which you are open to your partner’s thoughts, emotions, and well-being — how well you “get” him or her — and the degree to which you are open to those very same things in yourself. By practicing mindfulness meditation regularly, you’re better able to be aware of thoughts and emotions in a way that allows you to be present, rather than reacting on “autopilot,” which can so often be impulsive, habitual, or destructive.

There are more ways that mindfulness meditation helps relationships, but maybe the best thing that I can do now, rather than stimulating your intellectual, rational frontal cortex any further, is to invite you to start your own mindfulness practice, and see for yourself.