To the Use of Mindfulness in Couple's Psychotherapy

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The single most effective tool in couple's psychotherapy is the use of mindfulness. Mindfulness involves turning one's attention inside to notice, from a nonjudgmental point of view, the flow of one's internal experience.

When Jane returns home at the end of the day and talks to Michael, she may notice that his jaw is slightly clenched and his eyes are a little bit tighter than they were in the morning. Although this information may not arrive at her prefrontal cortex, she may feel somehow uncomfortable and decide that something is off in their relationship. Subsequently she may talk to him in a tone with a slight edge. Again, he may not be conscious of the effect her timbre is having on him, but he then may speak to her in an irritated tone. The rest of the evening will probably continue to deteriorate. Much of couples’ interactions and communication in general takes place on nonverbal levels. The tilt of the head or a hint of impatience in the voice can unconsciously start ripples that generate emotional effects for hours. Attempting to achieve resolution through verbal communication is often doomed to failure, since the mindsets used in discussing the matter are likely to be the same as the ones that were interpreting each other's non-verbal cues. The subtleties of their interaction can be best explored by using a mindful state in therapy.

Through the use of mindfulness, a couple can notice and begin to explore their current dynamics and then pursue new options for interacting with each other. The call for mindfulness is essentially the call for an impartial, fact-based observing ego to notice what is happening. It allows each individual to step back and notice the thoughts, emotions, sensations, beliefs, images, memories, and impulses that are just under the surface, to welcome them and explore them with curiosity. This is an antidote to the kind of volatile jousting that often takes places in couples therapy and leaves both clients and therapist feeling frustrated and helpless.

Much of couple’s interactions occur so quickly that they are not perceived consciously. By asking members of a couple to become mindful to study their internal worlds, couples therapy can begin to address interactional patterns on a level that goes underneath ordinary conversation and accesses a deeper and more vulnerable level of emotions and self.

For instance, Hal and Brenda started one session by him complaining about household tasks. She became increasingly defensive and soon counter attacked. At this point, the remainder of the argument became predictable. It is important here for the therapist to stop the interaction and ask each member of the couple to become fully mindful. They can then be encouraged to study what is happening internally rather than continue the fight. The therapist might say the following: “OK. Mark, you have some things that have been bugging you that you want Brenda to hear. Brenda, you are feeling a bit under attack here and you are both about to spin into a fight that is already beginning to spiral down. You can do that at home for free! Let’s try something different to see if we can get some more room and understanding for each of you so that this interaction can soften a bit. If its OK, Brenda, why don’t you close your eyes and let your attention go inside so that you can follow exactly what happens when Mark says these things to you. You can notice thoughts, feelings, images, memories, emotions, sensation, changes in muscle tension, anything that comes up even if it doesn’t at first seem connected. When you are ready, let him know and he can just say the first sentence of his gripe to you. Mark, let yourself distill it down to one sentence and also study inside where this comes from, whatever goes along with it like memories, feelings, sensations, etc. as you say it. Let’s slow this down so you can each notice the subtle details that underlie the argument.”

From here, each person reports what occurs inside. In this actual example, she became aware that she could not tolerate his disappointment. Encouraged by the therapist to stay with this feeling, she remembered with great emotion that her parents would never punish her; they would just tell her that they were disappointed. This softened both of them. By engaging their interest in
the spirit of warmth and curiosity they were able to notice an entirely different level of their experiences. Communication on this level builds empathy and begins to soften defenses.

Any interaction can be studied in mindfulness. Hakomi Experiential Psychotherapy specializes in this approach with both individuals and couples. It is helpful to direct a couple to explore any juncture where upset arises by simply asking the couple to repeat the transaction in mindfulness.

By slowing it down and noticing the subtle details, the couple was essentially “acting in” instead of acting out. Much more detail from the psyche is available in mindfulness as it is, in essence, exploration in vivo rather than in vitro. Much more material is available by studying a relationship in action rather than listening to a report about it.

By using mindfulness, deeper levels of the brain are accessed. The areas where deep decisions are made and object representations are buried starts to become available. It is an indispensable tool for psychotherapists.

Rob Fisher is an MFT in private practice in Mill Valley where he specializes in training other therapists in working with the present moment. He is the author of numerous articles and the book *Experiential Psychotherapy with Couples* (Zeig/Tucker 2002). He teaches at JFK University and CIIS. He is a Hakomi Trainer who teaches trainings internationally for the Hakomi Institute. He presents at national conferences such as the Psychotherapy Networker Conference, the USABP Conference, and as a master presenter at annual CAMFT Conferences. More information about him is available through contactone@aol.com, or www.hakomicalifornia.org