

“My Story”: A Simple Mindfulness Tool In Couples’ Communication

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Everyone is talking about Mindfulness these days. It seems that everywhere I turn, someone is lauding the benefits of Mindfulness toward wellbeing, productivity, and connection to joy. Mindfulness is a very old concept, with origins in the Buddhist faith where *right mindfulness* holds a place as one of its essential Seven Factors of Enlightenment. The word *sati* (in Pali) has been translated into many English words, such as *mindfulness, awareness, presence, retention, or consciousness*, to name a few. While the Buddhist tradition coined the term, the practice of Mindfulness is a key aspect of other faith traditions as well, such as Contemplative Christianity and Hinduism. These faith traditions have discovered the concept of mindfulness as a journey toward spiritual growth and have thus developed rich language, practices, and disciplines to develop it.

You don’t have to be inculcated in a faith tradition to explore and utilize concepts of Mindfulness. Very simply, we can understand mindfulness as a state of active awareness without judgment – awareness of your body, your emotions, your thoughts, even awareness of your awareness, all with an attitude of acceptance. Western psychology is increasingly using mindfulness for its benefit to mental health in managing depression, anxiety, and a host of other kinds of daily stressors.

Since I live in Langford, I drive past the Colwood Pentecostal Church billboard sign nearly every day, and I always enjoy seeing the little quotes they have posted on their sign. Today it said, **“It’s not what you look at that matters; it’s what you see”**, which fittingly strikes at the theme of mindfulness that I’ve been contemplating over the past few months, particularly in the realm of communication with our closest relationships, and especially with our partner.

We can expend a lot of energy attempting to understand the words of our loved ones and making sure that we clearly articulate. Yet I believe the most productive (and maybe the most difficult) work toward effective communication is the work that precedes the actual speaking. Before we speak, we do well to practice the discipline of self-awareness and mindfulness.

Here is a little piece of language that my spouse used with me the other day in response to some behaviour of mine:

“I realize that *my story* of you right now is...”

What a great reflection of mindfulness! When I heard her say this, I was more curious than defensive. First, she identified that she had placed her **own** meaning on my behaviour, and her language reflected that. So when I heard this, I immediately noticed that she was acknowledging tentativeness to her meaning. Yet she was still able to express authentically what she was experiencing without watering it down. I found myself curious about how my behaviour was contributing to her story while at the same time reflected on whether my own story matched hers. Nice!

We've all had our share of "mindless" communication, and maybe it's even our default. It is way easier to just react mindlessly when we're feeling afraid or threatened or cranky, and we can all identify times when we just spout our story as if it's certain reality. Usually, this ends us up in the doghouse.

In contrast, the above example displays mindfulness in a few particular ways:

- **The reaction is buffered.** We all have our first reactions to events. But here, there is a buffer between the initial internal reaction and the outward expression of that reaction in order to reflect, ask some questions, and become aware. In fact, the response to my behaviour was evidence that she had done much reflecting already as part of a process, rather than just in the moment. The exchange was like a hard baseball pitch that was "caught in the mitt" of self-awareness and reflection and was lightly lobbed back to the pitcher.
- **Ownership is expressed.** In expressing ownership, I don't mean that you just take the blame. Ownership means identifying accurately what **you** are feeling and thinking (as opposed to jumping to what you "know" the **other** is feeling and thinking). By identifying your feelings and thoughts you can begin to see how they contribute to a story or meaning that you attach to another's behaviour. We often attach meaning to things so quickly and intuitively that we don't even recognize we're doing it. This is where the discipline of mindfulness can be helpful, because it slows things down and works to identify, question, and be curious about one's own meanings.
- **Ownership is expressed.** Language is important, but to be useful, it can't be canned. By using the word, "story", what is conveyed is an authentic attitude of tentativeness that is willing to be reframed if it can. The sentiment could be expressed as, "Help me unpack how I got this story...". We could just as easily use the word "story" in a mindless way and with a completely different sentiment, as in, "This is my story, and I'm sticking to it!" In the above example, a curious and tentative sentiment was conveyed, and it was voiced out loud, so I heard it.

Sometimes we need to see examples of Mindfulness in order to become interested enough to develop it for ourselves. As with anything worth learning, understanding how Mindfulness works isn't the same as learning to practice it. Here are a couple resources where you might begin to learn and practice Mindfulness skills:

- My colleague, Jacqueline Nikolejsin, facilitates an "Open" DBT (*Dialectical Behaviour Therapy*) Skills Training Group which very much uses mindfulness skills to identify and manage emotion. She is now offering two group meeting times.
- In Victoria, check out the non-profit organization, BC Association for Living Mindfully (BCALM). This group offers courses and seminars in mindfulness training and opportunities to practice, and it's a great resource.