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Mindful relationships

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Mindfulness is a simple yet powerful practice. It has the possibility of transforming relationships. It cultivates some foundational attitudes towards one's self and others. It gives rise to non-judgmental awareness of arising experience, acceptance, presence, openness, spaciousness, letting go, empathy, calmness. It is also a practice of awakening the heart to loving-kindness and compassion for self and others. In this paper, I explore the possibility of offering mindfulness practices not only for individual therapy, but also for a couple within a therapeutic setting through a case illustration. Mindfulness is offered through the lens of an existential therapeutic perspective which values the uniqueness of every client and every couple relationship. It acknowledges choice and responsibility and the possibilities of relational transformation within the givens of each unique context.

Keywords: mindfulness; mindful dialogue; transformation; uniqueness; co-creation; existential therapy; openness; intention; choice; responsibility

Introduction

This paper explores the introduction of mindfulness in relationship counseling from an existential perspective for couples. Fundamental to existential therapy is a relational stance, which moves away from notions of objective truth and reality and recognizes the contextual and co-created nature of self, reality and others/world (Heidegger, 2001; Spinelli, 2005, 2007; van Deurzen, 1997, 2002). As Cohn (1997) points out, "The client you meet is the client who meets you. There is no client *as such*. If two therapists meet the same client, it is not the same client" (p. 33). This clearly expresses the co-creational stance between therapist and client. Existential therapy recognises the uniqueness of each therapeutic relationship. It values an 'I Thou' relationship in which the client's uniqueness can stand disclosed. It values openness, presence, mutuality and directness (Buber, 1958, 1947; Friedman, 2003).

This paper recognizes the unique needs of this couple and shows through a case illustration the rationale for introducing mindfulness for this particular couple. Therapy starts with individual mindfulness and is followed by mindful dialogue for the couple. This paper highlights the therapist's reflective attitude in offering mindfulness in this manner and the outcome.

Mindfulness is defined as an intentional practice of paying attention in the present – and non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness practices are drawn flexibly from Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) practices and Insight Dialogue (Kramer, 2007) in offering them to the couple. A conclusion follows.

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Relational challenge and possibility

Existential therapy recognizes the challenge of being with others. Sartre (1958) famously expressed this challenge as “Hell is other people”. However, Sartre also makes clear that while conflict is a given of existence, the way in which we choose to relate to this conflict is not pre-determined.

Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (2001) offers hope in being with others. With mindfulness practice, we can generate the energy of mindfulness in which powerful emotions can be embraced. Just as anger is an energy, mindfulness is also an energy. From a mindfulness based existential therapy perspective, we have the *choice* to practice mindfulness and to generate the energy of mindfulness to take care of our emotions, so they do not destroy us and others.

Mindfulness makes possible transformation and healing (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1998b, 2006a, 2006b). It develops presence as well as the attitude of compassion (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1991, 1998b; Gehart & McCollum, 2008; Bien, 2008), the four immeasurable minds of love, compassion, joy and equanimity (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1998b; Bien, 2008), the attitudes of non-judging, acceptance, patience, non-striving, beginner’s mind and letting go (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). It develops a tender heart for self and others (Welwood, 1985a, 1985b). It brings a transformational relational change, with the arising of “being qualities” in relation to self and others (Nanda, 2005). It brings awareness of the interconnectedness of self and others (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1991, 1998a, 1998b, 2006a, 2006b) and interconnectedness of therapist and client (Fulton, 2008).

However, Kramer (2007) points out that individual mindfulness is not enough to face the challenges of being in relationships with others. His guidance of “Insight dialogue” helps to co-create a mindful space between partners, which invites mutuality and reciprocity between the couple and enables the couple to speak of difficult issues in kindness.

In this case illustration, individual mindfulness of one partner within a therapeutic context had a significant impact on the couple relationship, following which the couple engaged in mindful dialogue.

Case

Andrew¹ came for therapy in a panic because his wife had given him the ultimatum and moved out with their four children to her mother’s place. Her threat was real. She and the children would leave him unless he changed his ways and ceased to throw temper tantrums and have angry exchanges with her and the children. She had had enough and this was his last chance. He had to demonstrate to her that he had changed or he would not see them again. While this was not a case of domestic physical violence, it was evident that the relational dimension had been fractured enough for his wife to move out with the children. Indeed it was she who had given him my details and asked him to meet me. Curiously, this has been the case on several occasions. Clients have often come to me on the suggestion of their partner. The implications are clear for these clients – either change or lose the relationship. It did seem that had their partners not challenged these clients, they would have felt no need to change.

It was an emergency situation for Andrew. However, there was hope. He still had one chance, perhaps his last chance to redeem himself. He spoke on the phone with urgency and wanted a session the same day. Usually this is not possible. However, his sense of panic, on the one hand, and with my staying on later in the evening than I would normally do so, on the other, I could offer Andrew an emergency session at the end of the same day. For this Andrew was grateful.

After I listened to Andrew's anguish of the potential loss of his family whom he said he loved, I asked him if he truly wished to change. It was his choice. He needed to take responsibility for his change. His reply was instantaneous and sharp. "Of course, why do you think I am here! My family means everything to me. I can't bear to go back to an empty home."

Andrew described his habitual stance of losing his temper with his wife and his children. His manner was both authoritarian and vulnerable at the same time. He felt his authority no longer carried weight. His wife was no longer going to tolerate his ways. It felt drastic for him that she should take such an extreme stance of moving out with the children.

As he recounted his story, I experienced compassion for his suffering, not anger with him as he expected from me. This came as a surprise to him. He had expected me to reprimand him and tell him how to behave. Instead, I showed him that I understood his predicament and his desire to change. I offered him hope.

I listened to his narrative attentively. I explored if he recognized how he felt *just before* he was about to get angry and say the things he regretted later. His reply was in the negative. When he was angry, he was angry! His family *made* him angry. For Andrew, the *cause* of his anger was outside himself. He had nothing to do with it. It was not *his responsibility*. *They made* him angry and then it felt so unfair that they abandoned him.

While I could see his unawareness of many Existential themes arising in his narrative – the unawareness of a relational *co-created* space of anger arising rather than it being *caused*, unawareness of *choice* and *responsibility* – I decided to explore them at a later stage.

For Andrew the pain is acute. The motivation is high. The energy of anxiety is high. I recognize that mindfulness meditation is an intentional practice for creating a different kind of energy, an energy that illuminates conflict without creating further conflict. It generates spaciousness and openness and illuminates experience in the moment, moment-by-moment. It creates a kind and gentle energy, in which powerful storms can be embraced (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1992, 2001).

I told Andrew about the benefits of Mindfulness meditation and asked him if he was willing to learn Mindfulness. He was curious to know more. I told him it would help him in recognizing physical sensations in the body as an early warning signal that signaled to him that anger was rising *before* it became too late. Mindfulness would also offer him the possibility of pausing and developing an anchor with the breath to steady him. It was also a practice of developing kindness and hospitality for the arising of all experience. Indeed, developing hospitality in allowing the avalanche of experience to arise and be present, embracing it in openness and spaciousness of awareness. As Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh says, allowing the embrace to be gentle and kind like a mother caring for her fragile baby.

All this sounded unfamiliar and foreign to Andrew. I reassured him that it was ok to not know about mindfulness from before, that it was ok to just be curious, to just see what may emerge. He wondered if mindfulness would help him with his anger. I had helped others before him with issues of anger as detailed in the case illustration with Caroline who had earned the name of "the angry woman" at work (Nanda, 2012). I offered hope and said, "Let's see. Others have been helped. I am hopeful!"

I taught Andrew mindfulness of the breath and body sensations. As with "John" (Nanda, 2010a), who had been helped with the prevention of relapse of depression, and with "Caroline", who had been helped for anger management (Nanda, 2012), I asked Andrew if he would commit to practice Mindfulness for at least 10 minutes a day, which seems doable for most clients, whereas a suggestion of 45 minutes as a commitment (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction/Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy commitment) is usually seen as undoable and daunting.

Andrew agreed to 10 minutes of practicing mindfulness. In the session, I guided him into Mindfulness practice – Mindfulness of the breath and body sensations and including the noticing of feelings, emotions and thoughts in the present. It required pausing, connecting with the breath as a physical sensation in the body, allowing conscious breathing to be an anchor. The guidance was to also notice mind wandering, just noticing it, and gently and kindly escorting attention back to the breath. He also had the possibility of widening awareness to include sensations in the whole body, noticing the tight places and playfully breathing into the tight places. This softened the tightness. Andrew promised he would practice until we met a week later. By the end of the session Andrew was already feeling calmer.

My guidance in subsequent weeks was also for Andrew to notice the arising of feeling tones of “I like”, “I dislike”, “I neither like nor dislike”, noticing the experience of sound, noticing the arising of thoughts and emotions and seeing them as not necessarily as “truth” or “reality”, but just noticing them, letting them go and choosing to come back to the focus of the breath. Noticing the connection of thoughts, feelings, emotions and body sensations in relation to the situation in which he found himself.

When we next met, Andrew was smiling. He said his wife and children were back home. He had made a solemn promise to them. He said he had practiced mindfulness for 10 minutes every day (setting a timer) and some days he practiced many times – any time he recognized he was feeling agitated. He said his body was feeling different – less tight, less agitated. The mindfulness practice had given him a valuable tool to find an anchor and the space in which to notice the rising emotion in the body and the possibility of cooling down. He was recognising embodiment of emotions (Merleau-Ponty, 1999).

While the practice of Mindfulness had a dramatic effect on Andrew, the process of therapy allowed him to recognize his feelings of loneliness and isolation within the family. His natural stance was one of not expressing himself and his needs. He recognized this resulted in a feeling of being sidelined and isolated within the family. His only way of expressing his unhappiness at this was either to sulk or a reactive outburst of anger and harsh words.

We explored relational choices that may emerge different from his habitual ones and taking responsibility for his choices.

Andrew experienced dramatic relational changes within the first few weeks, as he gained greater awareness of the interconnectedness of his mood, his thoughts, feelings, emotions, body sensations, his self-definitions in relation to the people in his life and situations in the outside world. Inner and outer could be seen as interconnected. Andrew began to develop the metacognitive ability of seeing “thoughts as thoughts” not necessarily as truth or reality. He could notice how the arising of thoughts, feelings, emotions and body sensations changed and fluxed. He noticed how his mood arose within situations through how he felt and how he defined himself. He moved from the stance of “they don’t love me or care for me” to taking responsibility and recognizing that “I don’t feel loved when”:

- they go out together and don’t stay back with me (because I don’t want to go out with them!)
- they don’t obey me and do as I say
- I don’t feel I am the boss in the family
- she argues with me
- she questions me
- she doesn’t like what I like
- she likes what I don’t like
- . . . and the list goes on.

Andrew had not realized before that he, too, had a part to play in the situation. He was no longer the helpless victim where other people *caused* his anger. He was recognizing how he was an active player in *co-creating* his anger.

Through therapy and through the practice of mindfulness meditation, Andrew began recognizing the meanings he attached to these relational aspects and what it might mean to allow space for his wife to be different from himself. He was also willing to look at power in their relationship, and how he exercised it, and his self-definitions around power in the marital relationship.

Eight weeks into mindfulness based existential therapy, Andrew said his wife, Rita had noticed such a radical change in him, she, too, wished to learn mindfulness. Andrew, too, was keen that she learns mindfulness so they could both practice it. I explored with Andrew how he felt about his wife coming with him to see me. Wouldn't it affect our relationship in some way if she, too, came? How would he feel if I gave her attention? I was aware of his sense of exclusion in the family and this might recreate similar family dynamics if he felt I was sharing the time with his wife. However, Andrew felt that would not be an issue. He was glad they would have a common activity together. He said he liked it much better for them to come here together than going to some of the other outings that his wife had suggested. He said he trusted me.

Andrew's practice of mindfulness may be seen as an individual practice. However, clearly, mindfulness practice brings relational change that affects others too. I recall Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh saying that if even one member of a family practices mindfulness, it will affect others in the family. This is the inexplicable miracle of mindfulness. How does focusing on the breath for 10 minutes a day with a non-judgmental attitude change our relationships with others? From being snappy and reactive to responding through choice? From wanting to hurt the other to wanting to understand the situation? From frothing and fuming within oneself and with others to being in a calmer place. From taking a rigid and stubborn stance of not budging from my position to listening to another? From "I am always right and don't dare question me" to "ok, let's see". From "everyone is out to cause trouble for me" to "it is just the situation, they don't mean to trouble me".

Andrew said he did not need couple counseling in the conventional sense as, according to him, both of them were already feeling a closeness through his changed way of being. He was more loving towards his wife and she, too, had become more loving with him. Within a short period of eight weeks, Andrew was already experiencing a calmer and more loving way of being with his wife.

I sensed that Andrew wanted his wife to benefit from the mindfulness practice, but he did not wish to really share me too much with his wife! I was his therapist.

I suggested they join a group mindfulness course. However, he said, neither wanted to be in a group situation. Also, Andrew felt he trusted me and that I could understand him, something he had not experienced much in other relationships.

Andrew asked if I could do a bespoke workshop for them to learn mindfulness. After reflecting on this and exploring with Andrew how this would change the dynamics in our relationship, Andrew reiterated it would help them if both Rita and he offered a mindful space to each other. He said Rita wanted to learn mindfulness. It was Rita who had initially asked Andrew to come to see me. She was curious to learn mindfulness (and from me). I wondered if she was feeling left out and perhaps curious to know who was this woman therapist spending time with her husband!

Andrew was clear he didn't want to give up individual therapy and that he preferred not to have couple counseling in the conventional sense. He seemed clear through the exploration about what he wanted.

I agreed to Andrew's request. I believed that both Andrew and Rita would have the possibility of experiencing greater mutuality in being mindful to each other through their own practice and in relation to each other. We fixed time for two full day workshops, a fortnight apart, at a mutually convenient time between Andrew, Rita and myself. We communicated by email.

I met Rita for an initial session to assess what she wanted from the workshop. She said she just wanted peace of mind! At the bespoke workshops, I taught both Andrew and Rita the various mindfulness practices I usually teach in a workshop based on the MBSR mindfulness practices (body scan, mindful eating, mindfulness of the breath, body sensations, feelings, emotions, thoughts, sounds, being present to emerging experience and resting in awareness of what arises, mindful walking, mindful movement, mindfulness in everyday life, stress reactivity and stress response and loving-kindness meditation [Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2005]) as well as mindfulness in dialogue with others which is similar to that described by Gregory Kramer (2007) in *Insight Dialogue*. The MBSR practices were interspersed flexibly with Mindful Dialogue. After the workshops, I met Rita once individually to give her the chance to ask any questions that might have arisen for her after the workshops as a part of the workshop structure.

Three in the room

In offering the bespoke workshops to Andrew and Rita, we were now three in the room. It was important for me to recognize that this would change my relationship with Andrew in some way and that it would bring with it greater unpredictability and uncertainty as a result of changed boundaries. It would also mean that I would become not only a therapist to Andrew, but also a facilitator of mindfulness practices and mindful dialogue for both Andrew and Rita. I would be giving attention to both Andrew and Rita in equal measure, while valuing each person's uniqueness, and the dynamic in my relationship with Andrew would change. For the two workshop days, as three in the room, we would be spending intensive time with one another.

While recognizing that these changed boundaries would affect my relational dynamic with Andrew, I also felt confident that I could be open to trusting in emergence of whatever the moment offered.

Both Andrew and Rita seemed comfortable with each other within this new space of being three in the room. Andrew had told me earlier that he held no secrets from Rita. They were both committed to their relationship and this commitment within the relationship was their strength from which they wished to explore how mindfulness practices might help them improve their relationship even more.

Mindful dialogue

Kramer (2007) extends Mindfulness explicitly into the relational sphere in being with others, offering a framework of the *Insight Dialogue* practices through six guidelines – Pause, Relax, Open, Trust Emergence, Listen Deeply and Speak the Truth. Fundamental to this listening is listening with heart, with mindfulness and kindness as the basic relational stance.

While Andrew was familiar with mindfulness practice, for Rita this was new. However, for both of them mindful dialogue was a novel experience. The "Pause" invited them both to pause and connect with their breath stepping into the present moment and noticing their automatic "habits of speech", noticing their natural tendency of interrupting each other.

“Relax” facilitates a letting go and softening of the tensions in the body, which Andrew had found very useful in the therapy sessions with breathing into the tight places in the body without my using the word ‘relax’ explicitly. Now both Andrew and Rita were practicing noticing their body sensations and relaxing the tightness when being with each other.

Kramer (2007) elaborates, “Relax heals what Pause reveals. That is, the ease and acceptance of Relax enable profound wholesome shifts in one’s internal landscape. . . . As Relax and accept deepen . . . acceptance ripens as love” (pp. 125–126).

For Andrew and Rita, their fractured relationship had been considerably healed as a result of one partner practicing mindfulness. Now they both had a chance to offer mindfulness to each other.

For Kramer (2007), the next movement is into “Open”, which invites us to extend mindfulness to others and to the world around us and opens us to the world of mutuality. It brings conscious awareness of the discomfort in the presence of another – noticing both liking and disliking in the space between self and others and practicing non-clinging to whatever arises. Softening of tightness facilitates remaining “open”.

For me as an existential therapist, diversity of feelings – for example Kramer’s (2007) example of Amy (p. 134) wanting to both open and connect with another, as well as close and withdraw – becomes a valuable point of enquiry.

Multiple meanings may arise: Noticing opening and closing. Does closing down serve a purpose? In what situations does this happen? What does remaining open mean? The shift is in moving from “we should remain open” to an enquiry and choosing through conscious awareness whether to remain open or not.

Kramer’s next guidance is “Trust Emergence”, being in the present and staying with “not knowing”, relating not through pre-judgments or through planning what to say next. The stance is curious, calm, attentive and patient. Staying with the unknowing is a highly valuable stance in existential therapy. This practice helped both Andrew and Rita to notice their tendency to pre-judge and jump to conclusions about the other’s motives. (She going to see her mother means she doesn’t care for me. He wants me to stay with him means he is trying to control me.)

Kramer’s next guidance is to “Listen Deeply” – listening closely to words, to their content, to meanings, to emotions, to energy levels, to presence. Listening to the non-verbal – pauses, gestures, facial expressions showing emotions, inflections and tone in the voice, to words that are stressed, to the speed of talking – all of which reveal emotions. Listening closely to their own responses in body and mind in listening to the other. Listening to the silences and remaining receptive. Kramer’s guidance is to let the heart rest in this receptivity until it ripens into loving kindness.

Both Rita and Andrew were willing to be open to this guidance and try it out. For both, it meant recognizing their intentions and taking responsibility for their relationship. They both recognized the atmosphere they were co-creating through this facilitation as they experienced the energy between them shifting, sensing an ease and acceptance of what emerges in the space between them.

Kramer’s next guidance is “Speak the Truth” – speech with the intent of non-violence. The intent is kindness, speech that facilitates expression of what arises in the moment, while recognizing inter-connectedness with others.

For Andrew and Rita, this was a new phase in their life, when they consciously decided to be mindful with each other.

Rita chose to speak first of something that felt meaningful for her and Andrew agreed to listen. Andrew was to give her the time and space to complete saying what she wanted

to without interruptions, as well as not to break the silences in which she paused and listen with heart. Rita was required to indicate when she had finished speaking:

Rita: I want you to know that I really wanted us to spend time together. And it used to upset me that whenever I would want us to go to meet my mum with the children, you would get into a bad mood. [Silence] I wanted you to come with us, but you wouldn't come, just be in a bad mood. When we got back, you either wouldn't talk to us or speak very roughly and get angry with us. If we went, it would make me feel guilty for wanting to meet my mum. If I didn't go I felt you were controlling me too much, and I couldn't enjoy the time we spent together anyway. I felt I couldn't be myself, and do what I wanted to do. Not that I was doing anything terrible. Just wanting us to meet my mother and for the children to meet their grandmother. It's quite normal you know. It was coming in the way of our being intimate. Thankfully it has changed now. Thankfully. [Silence, then Rita indicated that she had finished speaking].

Before moving to the next phase, my guidance was for them both to pause and step into mindfulness, widening awareness to include sensations in the whole body, breathing into the tight places (the equivalent of "relax" without using the word relax), opening to inner experience and noticing what emerges, remaining receptive and then speaking or listening as the case might be.

Andrew and Rita would have normally found it hard to speak to each other without fearing that this would escalate into more arguments, each trying to defend their point of view. Both Andrew and Rita could notice tightness in their body sensations and were breathing into them and softening them. Andrew could notice his desire to jump in and interrupt her and say that she did not understand how he felt when she behaved like this, but his mindfulness practice was helping him to stop and just notice the arising experience and give Rita a chance to finish speaking.

After stepping into mindfulness, it was then Andrew's turn to reflect back to Rita what he had heard Rita say without interruptions from Rita, while Rita "Listened with Heart" and full attention to Andrew until he indicated that he had finished speaking:

Andrew: You said, when you go out with the children to see your mum, I don't like it. I get into a bad mood. I either don't talk to you or when I do I get angry. It makes you feel guilty, and it was coming in the way of our being intimate. But now I have changed. You also said this softly, not in a loud or shouting way.

He also noticed his default reaction, and inner speak:

What do you expect, you spend all your time with your mother and take the children with you and expect me to follow you in tow. You don't care for me. You don't love me. If you did you wouldn't leave me like this all by myself. I don't matter to you. Only your mum does!

But he didn't because that is not what Rita had said. In recognising his pre-suppositions and bracketting them (Husserl, 1913, 1962) he could return to hearing what Rita had said. Also from the therapy sessions he knew that thoughts are just thoughts not necessarily truth or reality. Andrew had not wanted to verify his internal dialogue with Rita because he felt she just wouldn't understand how he felt!

Before moving to the next phase, once again it required from Andrew and Rita to pause and step into mindfulness as before. Then it was Rita's turn to give feedback to Andrew to say whether what he had heard and reflected back to her was accurate.

As they spoke of difficult issues, in mindful dialogue, they were allowing kindness in their tone of speaking and listening:

Rita: Yes, it was mostly correct. Only you missed out saying that I really wanted us to spend time together, and I wanted us to go together.

This cycle of mindful dialogue continued, where Andrew became the speaker and Rita became the listener. But, first, they stepped into mindfulness again before listening and speaking:

Andrew: You say you really want us to spend time together. Will you also do some things that I like doing like staying at home on a weekend and spending time together as a family? I get tired working the whole week, and on the weekend I like being home. I don't like that every weekend we have to go and meet your mum. So we just end up each doing our own thing and we don't do anything together. Or then the only things we do together is what you want to do. You say that I am controlling of you. And I am working on that, so I want you to be happy, and meet your mum. I am fine with coming sometimes. But funnily enough, I also have felt that you are controlling of me. It just sometimes feels like you don't care for me enough. But this is changing now.

This practice of being together, pausing together, connecting with their inner experience and becoming available for the other and offering each other their full attention co-created a different space between them. What felt palpably powerful for both Andrew and Rita was the experience of their spoken words being reflected back to them within an underlying atmosphere of kindness and that they felt heard by each other. The power of hearing their own speech reflected back, especially when accurately reflected back, deepened their connection and their feelings of being understood and increased their feelings of intimacy with each other. They were now communicating in order to speak kindly to each other and be heard kindly. They were giving each other the space to actually stop and listen with their full attention. They were better able to experience each other not only from their own viewpoint, but also from the viewpoint of the other.

Significant issues of existential polarities (van Deurzen, 2002) emerged for both of them in their relationship. They were of power and dominance, control and freedom, need for space – too much or too little – aloneness and togetherness, isolation and inclusion, sameness and difference. They could also tell each other how much it meant for them to have the full attention of each other and to be present to hear each other speak of difficult issues. They now had the possibility of deepening their relationship through the way they communicated with each other – a kinder and more inclusive way of co-creating their relationship together.

While my meeting with Rita was only to offer her the practices of mindfulness and facilitate mindful dialogue, she was perhaps surprised to recognize that the “peace of mind” that she wished for was far more possible if she gave up the idea of “peace of mind” but allowed herself to be present to her arising experience in the moment, whether alone or in dialogue with Andrew. They had both experienced the power of speaking and listening mindfully to each other, as they simultaneously deepened their connection with themselves.

Andrew chose to continue to see me. Every week he came to say how good things were for him now. I wondered why he continued to see me when things had improved so much for him. I asked him how he experienced coming to see me. His reply was simple: “I come here because I like to. This is time for me.” I could see anxiety in his face as if saying to me wordlessly: “Just because I don't have a problem now, will you stop seeing me?” Andrew's truthful reply challenged my assumptions that clients come to therapy only to speak of their difficulties. Andrew was choosing to share with me his successes, his happiness. Was I open enough to hear them?

Andrew wanted to share with me that he was now going out with his family. He was enjoying his family very much. He was even buying tickets for the programmes that Rita

liked, even though he thought he would never have chosen such awful programmes before. He was fine with Rita visiting her mother with the children, and he even went along some times and enjoyed it. Instead of fuming, there was humor, and he could laugh about it. His inclusiveness of difference between Rita and himself was moving. His actions spoke of care and kindness for his family. He took his children out to theme parks and enjoyed them. Earlier it was such a pain! He was also able to ask Rita to engage in activities that he liked, and Rita was happy to agree. There seemed a lot of family time spent together. He no longer felt isolated within the family, and above all he *felt* loved. For love to manifest, Kierkegaard (1962) asks us to not forget that love not only proceeds from the heart, but love also ‘forms the heart’. In cultivating deep listening and expressing themselves in loving speech to each other (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1998a, Kramer, 2007) Andrew and Rita were helping to ‘form’ each other’s hearts, and mutually transform their relationship.

Gradually Andrew’s meetings with me became less frequent though he still did not want an ending. He said it was just an insurance, in case he took a slide back. He was terrified if that were to happen as this change from his habitual patterns was all so new for him. From weekly therapy, it became fortnightly, to once a month, to one session after three months, to a session almost after a year. Finally, he felt confident to say goodbye!

In his last session, a year and a half from when we first met, Andrew said, he practices 10 minutes of sitting mindfulness now only when he gets into a problem! Then he sits and finds it can help him regain balance. Even though Andrew doesn’t practice mindfulness regularly now, his experience of mindfulness based existential therapy has left a lasting effect on him and given him a way of experiencing a different relational field of being with himself and others.

Together, Andrew and Rita took responsibility for their relationship. Their experience of learning mindful dialogue opened up the space for mutuality and reciprocity between them.

Conclusion

This paper shows that mindfulness practice has significant possibilities for transforming difficult couple relationships where the couple have chosen to practice mindfulness.

This case illustration is unique as it does not follow the usual protocol of both partners coming together to seek relationship counselling. Andrew first came for individual therapy as his relationship with his wife, Rita, was already fractured and he was on ultimatum from his wife to manage his explosive angry outbursts or lose the relationship. Through Andrew’s individual practice of mindfulness, his relationship transformed enough for Andrew and Rita to both wish to inhabit a more mindful space between them.

This paper clearly shows that client motivation and choice to practice mindfulness are important factors informing the therapist of the appropriateness of introducing mindfulness to clients. Equally, therapist’s reflective stance is required in offering mindfulness to this couple when starting with individual therapy with one partner and agreeing to the couple’s request for bespoke mindfulness workshops for them. It requires assessing how shifting the boundaries from having two in the room to three might impact the relational dynamics between the three.

The experience of mindful dialogue for Andrew and Rita was very meaningful. It co-created a mindful space between them and enabled them to speak of difficult issues to each other. It offered them a deeper sense of being *heard and understood* by each other in kindness. It increased feelings of intimacy between them.

I contemplate Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh's words, "Understanding is the essence of love. If you cannot understand this person, you cannot love properly." (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2004, p. 2).

Note

1. To ensure anonymity, all identifying details have been changed.

Notes on contributors

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