

“THE SECRET TO REALLY CONNECTING WITH YOUR SPOUSE”

SECRET 1: HOW TO BE PRESENT WITH YOUR SPOUSE”

In working with many couples, coming from varied situations and circumstances, time and again, I hear spouses repeat words that go something like “I just don't feel seen” or “I never feel heard.” To talk of the senses, especially seeing and hearing in terms of our emotional experience gives us an opportunity to better understand what can so commonly occur in our closest relationships.

What are we trying to communicate when we use this language of not feeling seen or heard? I believe that what is actually being described is a deep sense of disconnection - “I'm standing right in front of you, but you're not really here with me.”

Mindfulness is a way of being; it is a way of remaining present in the given moment. We bring a certain posture to every moment. Perhaps we often lean into the future, even into the next moment and find ourselves worrying about what could happen. Maybe our posture leans into the past and dwells in resentment and regret. Mindfulness is the posture and the discipline of staying present to the current moment.

It may seem that remaining present to the moment shouldn't be all that difficult, but if we begin to take notice of our habitual posture we will quickly realize how infrequently we allow ourselves to be present right here, right now.

Our marriages benefit greatly from our presence. That may seem like an obvious statement, but in the work of couples therapy, time and time again, many marriages are suffering from a lack of exactly that, real presence.

The next time you find yourself in conflict in your marriage, take a moment to pay attention to your posture. What obstacles are ability to be present? Is there fear, anger, hurt, or anxiety that feels too uncomfortable, too painful, to be present to? Attempt to name that emotion and make your spouse aware of your struggle. Remember that your spouse is probably experiencing an uncomfortable emotion too. Mindfulness gives us permission to be present, even to the uncomfortable emotions and it helps us make sense of the conflict.

Becoming a more mindful couple will take time. Be patient, and practice. Notice your reflexive responses that pull you into postures of worry and/or regret. Developing a more mindful/present posture can feel emotionally vulnerable. If it feels too vulnerable you might consider seeking a therapist who can help you and your spouse develop your own mindfulness practice.

SECRET 2: HOW TO MAKE ROOM FOR NEEDS

As couples develop skills of mindful presence it is not uncommon for there to arise new understanding of areas in the relationship that have been neglected, sometimes for many years. a contributing factor to the lack of presence may have been that the needs of the other in the relationship felt like too much, or produced a feeling of inadequacy

Often in our marriages there exists an unspoken rule: Your needs make me feel an uncomfortable feeling, so it's better if you just keep them to yourself. You do not get to have the needs you have.

Growing in mindfulness allows us to be present to the uncomfortable feelings of inadequacy or failure and therefore begins to make space for the needs of the other. Instead of moving to defend yourself against your spouse's need, you begin to open yourself to the possibility of seeking to understand their need. The principle of first response says: The course of a conflict is not determined by the person who initiates, but by the person who responds. That may not seem fair, and it certainly isn't easy, but it does clear up the role of the person responding to a partner's need.

As this "new move" of seeking to understand is put into practice you will be amazed to see that the defensive posturing in your marriage is greatly reduced. What is there to defend when the need is being heard openly?

Admittedly, writing about the speaking and meeting of needs is easier than actually speaking and meeting them. Our defenses have been with us a long time and often we aren't even aware that we're being or feeling defensive. In the final marriage booster we'll tackle some of the pitfalls of defensive behaviors in marriage.

SECRET 3: HOW TO STOP BEING OVERLY DEFENSIVE WITH YOUR SPOUSE

In a historical sense, it is a very good thing that we as human beings developed the ability to defend ourselves well from environmental and other dangers. Among the many skills we have developed over the millennia, survival is chief among them. We are hardwired to keep ourselves safe. It may seem like a stretch to equate survival in the wild and uncivilized places we lived historically to survival today, but our need to survive runs deep. fact, it plays a role in our everyday relationships; the more intimate, the more problematic our drive to survive can become.

Stress in the environment signals our brains to shift into survival mode. It can actually be seen in brain scans that blood flow decreases to the prefrontal cortex, where you do all your best thinking, weighing options, and problem solving, and increases flow in the part of your (hindbrain and medulla) where instinct to survive lives. This is what is happening in your marriage when the intensity rises and you feel the need to fight or escape.

This may come as no surprise, but mindfulness can also help us master our defensive reactions with our spouse. Along with survival and safety, we've also developed a real love for comfort. So much so, in fact, that we can seek to keep ourselves emotionally comfortable at all costs. When emotions arise that are uncomfortable we can become undone as we struggle to get back to our comfortable state of being. Mindfulness allows us to begin to recognize that even in the discomfort "I can be here." Through mindful being we grow in our capacity for discomfort without engaging that instinct to survive.

Consider growing into a more mindful person. As you become more mindful, you will increase your capacity to be present to the people you love and you'll experience more gratitude in your everyday life. If you feel that presence remains elusive consider sitting with someone who can help you develop your personal practice of mindfulness.

"If you would like reconnect with your love one, there's hope. Give us a call and we can pair you with a couples specialist."

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