

## Mindfulness Awareness Practice As Secondary Consciousness Dan F. Pollets, Ph.D.

### Convergence of the Professional and Personal:

In my 30 years of clinical practice, I have always been interested in learning and then integrating seemingly discrepant clinical theories. Also, as any competent therapist, I have pursued my own therapeutic or personal growth work, which has enhanced my technique and made me more aware of my “edge.” This interest in integration and then application will be examined further in the following discussion. In this brief paper, I will describe my personal path towards mindfulness awareness practice (MAP) and how I see MAP contributing to the effectiveness of Relationship Empowerment Therapy (RET).

For over four years I have been a serious student of RET and Terry Real’s work. I have found therapy that involves interaction between participants to be more exciting (group and couples therapy) - symphonies being far more interesting and complex than solo recital. It has been difficult, however, to find clinical theory in couples therapy that translates easily into potent technique. Plunging into Terry’s work has been like finding water in the desert, and incorporating and utilizing it has saved me countless headaches and made me a better therapist. RET is like having GPS for the long trip ahead. You may make a wrong turn, but there is always a comforting voice telling you how to get back in the right direction.

As I have worked and practiced the model, I have been fascinated with how couples differ in their capacity to adapt, learn, practice, and “get” the orienting conceptions or philosophies, and ultimately learn the skills of RET. I do not think these individual differences are a factor of IQ (although perhaps “emotional intelligence”). We all are aware of those couples who stay rooted in their core negative image (CNI) or preconceived notions of the other and resist the therapeutic work to pry them from their “stance-stance-dance (“the more, the more”). They become exceedingly activated emotionally, reactive and triggered by their partner’s stuff. It is difficult to get them to step back from the typical roles they play out with each other in the maladaptive dynamic of their interaction, even after leverage has been achieved and the latent empowered and blatant connected.

These couples require significant therapeutic energy, use a lot of the oxygen in the room, and are no fun to play with early on in the therapy. They have their “fight,” and they’re sticking to it. The neuropsychologists would say that their limbic systems have “hijacked” their prefrontal cortex where high and intense emotion holds sway over the flexible, ever so nimble executive function. In terms of RET language, *primary consciousness* from *adapted child* has won out over *secondary consciousness* of the *functional adult*. It is clear that the couples who more quickly and effectively understand, integrate, and then learn the skills of RET are more likely to be adept at what Terry is calling **secondary consciousness**.

Terry defines **secondary consciousness** as “The voice of reason, maturity and relational savvy which interrupts your initial (primary consciousness) knee-jerk reaction and offers a more constructive – usually learned alternative.” He continues, “Growing this functional adult part of the self, arming it with tools, and strengthening its power to override automatic reactions is the essence of relationship practice.” (*How Can I get Through to You*, P. 78.)

I have wondered whether relational empowerment work would be expedited by focusing and elaborating on the concept of **secondary consciousness** as defined above. In other words, is there a way to teach a “meta-skill,” if you will, to help the partner step back in awareness from over-determined automatic thought behavioral responses and become aware of what is happening as a prelude to disengaging from it (“the more, the more” that is). Could there be calisthenics, stretching, or aerobic conditioning for the mind prior to running the race (beginning the RET work) so the participant is primed to be open, flexible, adaptable, and in shape to do the work of relationship empowerment.

It is clear that awareness and attentive focus on what is happening at the moment is crucial in secondary consciousness so one can step away from automatic responses. It seems logical then that a practice that encourages one to focus on selective attention to the moment and non-judgmental acceptance might generalize to the therapy. These are precisely the capacities that are woven and utilized in **mindful awareness practice**.

### **Personal Path to Mindfulness:**

In the past year as I have been honing my RET work in supervision with Jan Bergstrom, I have had to cope with a personal medical crisis that threatened my equanimity. Due to overuse of my left shoulder joint and an inflammatory response to a drug injection, I lost the use of my shoulder function and needed a total shoulder replacement. This threatened my lifelong identity as an athlete and tennis player and the relationships that orbited the game. This was replaced by anxiety over future functioning, pain, and the ordeal of recovery.

As my wonderful wife Felice would describe, I had become a kvetch. Never one to shy away from sharing my feelings, I would overwhelm her loving patience with an endless stream of worry and complaints. Finally, in an act of self-preservation, she limited me to five minutes of complaining two times per day. My feeling of being victimized by the medical establishment fed this self-preoccupation and dwelling on loss, deprivation, sadness, and of course, pain.

Around this time, I attended the Psychotherapy Networker Conference in San Francisco. I heard the keynote address on mindfulness and the brain given by the brilliant relationally oriented neuro-psychiatrist, Dan Siegel. I was intrigued. I started reading Chris Germer, Jack Kornfield, and Jon Kabat-Zinn. I was inspired to begin my own meditation practice again. I also began to practice Yoga with my wife, who is a life-long practitioner.

As a result, while my shoulder is slowly rehabilitating, I have been successful at changing the focus of my attention from loss to the present moment and to the aspects of my life that, as Terry would say, are rich in “abundance.” Meditative and Yoga practice is helping me alter my consciousness around the thoughts of my shoulder and life. I am not so wedded to a specific outcome, measured by shoulder function, to guarantee life satisfaction. I have become better at shifting from “kvetch” consciousness to non-judgmental acceptance of the way things are now.

While I am still hoping to play tennis, I am more able to be where I am, working hard at physical therapy, but not dwelling on past glories that are lost or future anxieties about never being able to play. It is important to underline that this is a *practice* of mindful “awarenessing,” and as my imperfect mind drifts to negative thoughts, I take note in a non-judgmental manner, take a deep breath, and come back to the moment. This is the cultivation of secondary consciousness or mindfulness. It is becoming conscious of thoughts and emotions and holding them in non-judgment that allows other “realities” to become known. I am aware that one isolated thought is not the way it is.

### **Mindfulness as a Therapeutic Concept and Practice:**

Successful change in any psychotherapy alters the patient’s relationship to his particular form of suffering. In RET we ask partners to become conscious of their emotions and behavior toward each other. In fact, according to Terry Real, one of the major concepts that distinguishes RET from the more traditional forms of therapy is that we ask partners to change behavior first. Feelings and attitude shift will then follow. In so doing, RET is very much a behavioral treatment as opposed to a psychodynamic one. We ask partners in RET to work their side of the court, to step back and access a new pathway, to disengage from “stance-stance-dance” or “the more, the more.” This is done by appealing or utilizing secondary consciousness and being “mindful” of what is happening in the moment.

Mindfulness is a capacity or skill that allows us to be less reactive emotionally to what is happening in the moment. It is a way of relating to all experience - positive, negative, neutral – with a certain centeredness or equanimity such that our overall suffering is reduced. Our sense of well-being can then be expected to improve. To be mindful is to recognize what is happening in the present moment; it is the choice to pay attention to intention.

“**Mindlessness**” or **primary consciousness** is what happens when:

1. A partner’s core negative image of the other reigns and action patterns follow.
2. There is an internal boundary failure, rage, advice, telling some adult what to do.
3. Grandiose behavior is unchecked by the receiver; passive-aggressive behavior is the response.
4. The partner and relationship is weighed down and drowning in past traumas, such as an extramarital affair, and forward motion is prevented.

5. Emotions from hurt skyrocket so quickly that functional adult behavior cannot exert control and behavior becomes boundaryless.

### **Mindfulness: Defining Characteristics:**

Mindfulness as a psychological process has been defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Clinic at U. Mass Medical Center as: “The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment-to-moment.” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Baer defines mindfulness as “the non-judgmental observation of the ongoing stream of internal and external stimuli as they arise” (2003, p. 125). When we mindfully choose to suspend judgment to what is in our consciousness, we can let go of and not grasp onto negative thoughts or affect states. We note the thought or idea, and like a molecule in a river flowing down to the sea, let it flow by our awareness. It does not become our reality nor do we have to react to it. We can just let it be.

**Acceptance**, along with **non-judgment** is another fundamental aspect of mindfulness practice. “Acceptance” adds a measure of kindness. It is a willingness to let things be just as they are the moment we become aware of them – accepting pleasurable and painful experiences as they arise. In RET this would be akin to accepting your partner’s subjective reality even when it conflicts with your own. In mindfulness practice and RET the concept that there would be one reality or “the” reality would be foreign. No thought would be more “real” than any other thought.

Operationally defined by Baer et al. (2006), there are five aspects of mindfulness: 1. non-reactivity to inner experience; 2. observing/noticing/attending to sensation; 3. acting with awareness and not on automatic pilot; 4. describing and labeling with words; 5. non-judgment of experience. It is clear that this is the mental set or state of mind we wish to facilitate in our work with clients so they can best take in what we have to teach them.

### **Mindful Practice:**

Mindfulness as an attitude about life, and relationship is cultivated through mindful awareness practices such as meditation, yoga, T'ai Chi, etc. What these practices have in common is that through the repetitive exercise of focusing attention, they enable the individual to exercise and develop an increased capacity to regulate attention, focus on the present moment, be open and curious to experience, and take a perspective that is non-judgmental and accepting. Most of these MAPs use a focus on breath as the focal point for listening to the mind’s activities. In daily meditation, for instance, the meditator focuses attention on breath, mantra or visual image, and when he becomes aware that thoughts are intruding, he notes, accepts, and then gently focuses back again on breath or the mantra..

It is not easy to describe how meditation works. It is better to try it and see for oneself. Dan Siegel in *The Mindful Brain* proposes a useful metaphor. He compares consciousness to a bicycle wheel with an inner hub. The “hub” is attention and

awareness; the “rim” is anything that can enter our focus of attention. The hub of the wheel of the mind is cultivated through meditative practice to be open and spacious. It allows any element of the rim to enter our consciousness but not take it over. These elements can be our five senses. A sixth sense includes body sensations; a seventh includes mind-thoughts, feelings, intentions, concepts, attitudes, and beliefs (“mindsight”). An eighth sense proposed by Siegel is our relational sense; e.g. our sense of being connected and our resonating sense of feeling “felt” by another.

The spokes of the wheel represent the intentional focus of attention on some aspect of the rim. In meditation, we focus (“throw a spoke”) on breath, sound, body part, picture, or movement. When our attention wanders, we return to what the focus is (called the “aim and sustain” function of concentration). We thereby strengthen the hub’s capacity to send a spoke to an intended target on the rim. We combine the concept of “non-judgment” and “acceptance,” directing “loving kindness” to the self.

As we practice mindful awareness with effort and regularity, we purposely train the mind by again and again returning attention to our target. This practice forms a foundation for creating a mindful state of awareness (“spacious hub”). Repeated states of mindful hub activation over time can induce neuroplastic changes that transform the hub’s executive and integrative circuitry (see *The Mindful Brain*). Meditative or other mindful awareness practice (strengthening the hub) enables in Siegel’s words, “effortful states of practice to become effortless traits of living.”

My thesis is that just as meditation has helped me to shift attention away from negative thoughts and sad feelings regarding lost shoulder function, partners entering RET can be taught to buttress or strengthen secondary consciousness for the difficult road ahead. What if there was an orienting session that taught mindful awareness practice? If the “hub” is strengthened, attention could be shifted more easily from adaptive child behavior to functional adult. There would be more awareness developed so that behavior could be observed without emotional reactivity. Progress in moving through this treatment might then be expedited.

### **Intra and Inter Attunement:**

Dan Siegel summarizes mindfulness in the acronym **COAL**. We approach the here-and-now experience with **curiosity, openness, acceptance, and love**. Through meditative practice, our awareness of awareness is cultivated such that we are able to notice when self-defeating and negative thought processes get in the way of living mindfully and prevent us from being able to cherish ourselves. In doing so we are cultivating a loving relationship with our self (cherishing). This is a form of *intrapersonal* attunement and positive self-relationship. This capacity to attune to the self (COAL) through MAP creates a state of health not unlike that created from functional and healthy interpersonal relationships. COAL is exactly what parents who provide secure attachment to their children have as a mental state towards them.

We can propose that the *interpersonal* attunement of secure attachment between parent and child is a parallel process of the *intrapersonal* form of attunement in MAP. Both forms of attunement promote the capacity for intimate relationships. In fact, studies that have looked at developmental markers in kids benefiting from secure attachment are markedly similar to outcomes in studies of practitioners of mindful awareness practice.

Siegel (2006) found that many of the basic functions that emerged in these two seemingly different entities (outcome from MAP and secure attachment) were associated with the middle prefrontal cortex. These functions include regulation of bodily systems, balancing emotions, attuning to others, modulating fear, responding flexibly and exhibiting insight and empathy. Siegel proposes that the relationship of secure attachment between parent and child and the effective therapeutic relationship between clinician and patient both promote the growth of fibers in the prefrontal area. Resilience, capacity for self-regulation, and engagement with others follow from the brain's development in the prefrontal cortex. So in the intra-attunement of the meditator, inter-attunement of parent to child, and in the secure attachment of therapist to patient - all promote the growth of the prefrontal cortex.

### **Mindful Awareness Practice: Helpful Benefits for the Therapist:**

An important tenet in RET is that the work starts with the therapist's own self-care and psychotherapeutic work. We are taught to speak from our own experience, not one-up or one-down. Sharing of our own path in recovery is encouraged as long as it does not burden the client. In this regard, the practice of mindfulness meditation is a way for the therapist to take care of him/herself and be a model for the client - "walking the walk" so to speak.

I have noticed subtle though palpable changes in the months since I began my meditative practice. I am more aware when I am drifting from the moment-to-moment interaction in the session. I try not to judge myself for non-attention but simply note it and then focus back to the room and what is happening. I am sustaining more concentrated time in the moment. I am finding it easier to discover interesting issues to explore as my mind becomes a bit more nimble. This would be an expected outcome for the therapist who practices meditation; cultivating the "hub's" "spacious awareness" increases the mind's capacity for attentiveness.

Another benefit I have noticed is that I seem to accept a couple's negative emotional energy with more equanimity. My internal boundary has become more effective at non-absorption of the intensity in the room. As tensions rise, I breathe more slowly and deeply and focus on what needs to be done. My "edge" seems to have softened. A certain type of grandiose man has always evoked my edge. I have enhanced by awareness of this and find it easier to have "loving kindness" for the personal history that has empowered this negative behavior. I then move to meet it with skill and moderation.

Finally, I am aware when I am on "automatic pilot" and moving three steps ahead of where I am. This "catastrophic living" is not reserved only for my office but is present in

my life in general. I am aware when I am not present in my relationship, my work with clients, or wherever I am. At these times I try to gently take a breath, become aware of what is happening in the moment, and slow down and appreciate it. My life has become more colorful and joyful.

**Summary:**

Mindful awareness practice can help participants in RET develop or “get” what Terry Real calls secondary consciousness. By giving partners a metaphor to understand the mind’s functioning and by teaching meditative exercises, it is possible to expedite the learning curve of the skills that are being taught. Since awareness and present focus is the goal of mindful practice, enhancing this mental capacity could help couples refrain from their typical self and couple negative dynamic and employ the “new deal.” Meditation helps the user become non-reactive, non-judgmental and able to use words to label experience. All these capacities will leave the RET participant in good stead for the work ahead.