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with Halko Weiss
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Mindful Communication: An Interview with Halko Weiss

by Nancy Eichhorn

“You can only do what you want when you know what you are doing.”
Moshe Feldenkrais

Mindfulness in Relationships

A growing number of body psychotherapists focus on the dyadic relationship from a mindful state of being. Their attention is attuned with the client as they feel into the client’s space of being (simultaneously tracking their own); they follow sensations within the client and within their own body, and they ask questions to support internal explorations. The process is designed so that the therapist can intimately connect with the client’s unfolding experience.

However, when supporting their clients’ communications outside of the therapy session between intimate partners, children, friends, or even employees, the process differs. The client is no longer the sole focus. In real relationships—non-therapeutic encounters—one party does not have specific responsibility to the other. There’s no contract for one person to do what is good for the other person. Instead, each partner has a right to take care of their own interests. Relationships get complex when the other person is not mindful to you, not stepping back to help you, not offering a perfect relationship and doing everything good for you as in therapy. In other relationships it’s not all about you; the other person has needs, too.

According to Halko Weiss, PhD, a psychotherapist and founding trainer of the Hakomi Institute, people often end up confused because there’s no one certain recipe to follow. There was a time, culturally, he said, when people had a better idea of what was expected and what was not to be done in terms of roles, but during these postmodern times everything is up for grabs—many positions, preferences, philosophies, or points of view are equally valid.

“**My focus started** when I ended a relationship in my thirties which left me feeling confused. I didn’t know what to do, what to expect from me or my partner, didn’t have skills. I wanted to learn how to be in relationships but not by learning a new set of rules. I wanted to know if there was something deeper, some understanding to guide us to do the right thing so that we can succeed in such a way as to get what we really need,” Halko said. “Something based on right consciousness.”

Offering the example of a corporate executive who is moving up in the ranks, Halko noted that leaders have to be good in relationships and have a sense of, “How can I actually lead other human beings and do it intelligently by taking into consideration what’s going on inside of me and inside of others?”

The answer?

Mindfulness.

Defined as the ability to be present in the moment and witness oneself, via an "Internal Observer", mindfulness allows us to follow the stream of sensation and thought and interject our consciousness rather than living life through automaticity. More specifically, by developing mindfulness techniques people gain the ability for self-perception—they are able to look within themselves and within others. Halko notes that people have a harder time being in relationships when they cannot show what is going on inside of themselves. There's no solid grounding for empathy and compassion without a shared knowing of what is going on deep inside each of the partners in a relationship. This awareness, this fundamental "seeing" allows in turn for a skillful and empathic response to each other.

“The first important skill in relationships is mindful self-observation, to be able to look inside and report about yourself, to notice and name things the other person doesn't know,” Halko said.

The second skill has to do with who is doing the reporting. Again, it is the qualities of the observing Self, known as the Internal Observer, that shape what is said and how it is being expressed. The Internal Observer does not try to change things, instead it is *interested* in what is happening and can therefore speak in an impartial way.

The Internal Observer can also help regulate emotional responses and affective states. Since it is aware and awake it can notice emotions early, understand them, and create little gaps where the automatic impulse to act is delayed and possibly replaced by another, more constructive one. If you are not aware, Halko said, there is no way to regulate your affective states intelligently.

“For decades I was teaching mindfulness as a component of psychodynamic therapy and sometimes noted a sense of a kind of spiritual dissociation. Some practitioners may have been meditating and achieving very high states, but they were not dealing with some of the more basic emotional limitations. They dissociated from what seemed to be lower self aspects.

Their spiritual practices were flourishing; yet, they still fought with their wife in the old ways, in the same old patterns. Through mindfulness, Hakomi Therapy focuses on those basic experiential levels allowing clients to enter deeply into segments of the psyche and linger with certain experiences for extended times; they examine the organizers of their core experiences,” Halko said.

There seems to be an art of Self leadership, Halko explained, that is defined as the long term guidance of oneself into growth. This process includes a number of skills including: (1) cultivating self-perception; (2) speaking from the Internal Observer; (3) self-regulation; and (4) tolerating painful or uncomfortable experiences. **“It is an anthropomorphic fact,** we humans are highly automatic; among some neuroscientists, one discussion involves whether we actually run on automatic 100%. We don't really live in the present moment but are guided by the long-established patterns encoded in our brain architecture. Therefore, when we are in a fight with someone, we are not sitting across from that person saying, ‘Oh this would be a wonderful time to get angry’ and then we get angry. Instead, we just get angry, and if we are awake enough we will notice it a moment later. With the help of mindfulness, we can notice our angry state earlier and take some time to study it. We are not compelled to repress it or act it out. Our consciousness finds a little foothold, a moment of awareness where we find the freedom to not follow our triggered patterns but make choices.”

Ego states or "parts"

According to Richard C. Schwartz, PhD, founder of the Internal Family Systems Model (IFS), different "parts" within us are signaled to come to our rescue when something unpleasant threatens our wellbeing. As a former family therapist and systems thinker, Schwartz suggests that the bodymind is made up of discrete subpersonalities (aka “parts”), each with its own feelings, interests, memories and other qualities. These "parts" supposedly hold their own perspective on reality with positive intentions for the whole person. Schwartz claims that there are three types of parts: “managers”, who handle life for the person in a functional and effective way and help avoid calamities; “exiles”, who

represent wounded and pained elements of the psyche, often walled off and filled with feelings of shame, grief, fear, etc.; and “firefighters”, whose role is to distract and dissociate from painful parts when they threaten to come alive. Other than the managers, these parts are often quite dysfunctional, often showing up in behaviors like rage, confusion, addiction and so forth.

The IFS model also posits a higher Self—a spiritual center—that has similarities with the Internal Observer and that has the power to understand, guide, and integrate the whole "internal family system" with qualities such as curiosity, compassion, and calm.

In relationships, we all experience those parts that are triggered to protect us (or protect other parts of us), which Halko therefore calls “The Protectors” and “The Protected”. During difficult interactions, these protectors are engaging from personal perspectives based on behavioral adaptations to specific life experiences. Words, gestures, nuances read in the body (perceived and interpreted by the brain within fractions of a second) may trigger a sense of threat and a protector is switched on without the involvement of the conscious mind.

They take the person into a state and onto a ride that Dan Goleman (1995) sees as being "highjacked". But parts also build an internal "sensitive ecology" (Schwartz, 1995) where parts cooperate, compete, help, or suppress each other. The model suggests that it is useful to get to know these parts and become familiar with them. In relationship it then helps if a person learns what triggers their parts and what they trigger in others in turn.

“If you are not aware of what is being protected you will act automatically to protect. People can be trained to explore deeply how protector parts try to help them and with understanding they can become compassionate with themselves. If they master the skill of reporting about it from the Internal Observer's perspective, their partners have a chance to become compassionate as well,” Halko said. He added that the Internal Observer is not identified with the parts and responds by describing experiences in a nonpartisan and somewhat distanced

way, such as, “I notice this sadness rise in me” rather than “I am sad” (Weiss, 2002).

“We need to explore the parts behind the protector parts, study our automatic self organization, and understand why it became the way it works, and what it triggers in others. That often includes running into biographical aspects of ourselves and others. Eventually partners can learn to harvest the fruits of mindfulness practice, to start to embrace each others beingness and to tolerate what triggers their own wounded parts,” Halko said.

Citing John Gottman’s research with marital couples, Halko said that he reads from it that partners in long term relationships never really solve their problems, instead they learn to live with them. That means to develop capacities that help them deal with their differences in good ways without getting triggered into protective states. Mindfulness, Halko emphasized, increases your ability to know yourself, to regulate yourself, to speak from the internal observer, and to tolerate unpleasant experiences. Most of all: it also teaches you how to look at yourself and at your partner with interest and curiosity.

“Intuitively, most people expect the other person to do the right thing so they will feel better. The bad news is that that does not happen very often when both are triggered. Both are under duress, and both want the other to soothe and validate them and their experience. This is where difficult situations get stuck. We also teach people how to take that weight off the other person and develop the skills to self-soothe and self-validate, to self-report and contact the other person’s experience. All these skills are based in mindfulness,” Halko said.

“Core personality wounds create layers of habitual protective patterns of feelings, thoughts and behavior that are really quite creative solutions,” Halko continued. “Most often, however, the pain involved is circumvented, pushed away, blocked from coming alive. For them to heal we help bring them to consciousness, and then help create experiences that have the power to show the partners new ways of seeing each other. If we never become aware of the original patterns, we will continue to act them

out in automated ways. Then we are stuck in the ways we are.”

Couples often find themselves stuck and many try marriage counseling when that stuckness gets hardened down to intolerable levels. There are many reasons that couples need help with marriage problems; the most common is an inability to communicate effectively. In fact, statistics suggest that it is one of the largest marriage problems in today’s relationships (retrieved from <http://marriage.laws.com/marriage-counseling/marriage-counseling-statistics>).

Therapies based on mindful communication can enhance the skills necessary to break the cycle of repetitive arguments, to end feelings of isolation, to change pervasive feelings of anger, resentment and/or dissatisfaction, and, in terms of intimate relationships, to resolve issues about affection and even the physical relationship. Mindful communication that results in the greatest gain and long term maintenance tends to affect people’s emotional bonds and help them work together to achieve a greater level of “differentiation” or emotional maturity—the ability to know who you are as a separate and distinct individual so that your sense of self is not undermined. David Schnarch, PhD, (1977), a world-renown sex and marital therapist, places differentiation at center piece of his work. He notes that healthy differentiated people are able to “self-soothe”, “self-validate”, and tolerate another’s states without being drawn into highly uncomfortable states themselves.

“Intuitively, and as we learn implicitly from our culture, we expect to find a partner that makes a perfect fit for us. Then we would find peace and get what we need. However, this is very unlikely to happen. So most everyone tries to change the other, or change themselves, to still find the fit,” Halko said. “Nobody can expect another person to fit their own complicated character, or even their own average person neurotic self. People have to learn to see another person for what they are, and it helps to understand how they became that way, how their own suffering has made their defenders necessary. That takes a lot of tolerating.”

According to Halko couples often lose curiosity and do not attempt to understand each other more deeply. In a recent study conducted by Scheibehenne, Mata, & Todd (2011), thirty-eight young couples (ages 19 to 32) and 20 older couples (ages 62-78) were tested on their accuracy of predicting their partners preferences in food, movies and kitchen-designs. The greatest gap in partner knowledge was in predicting food preferences with younger couples more likely to predict accurately what their partner would choose. It appears that despite spending more time together, older couples know less about one another. Hypotheses ranged from older couples paying less attention to one another, to viewing their relationship as firmly committed, or assuming there’s little left to actually know about one another.

“In long-term relationships people are often no longer noticing, not sensing, not open or curious about this person they are with,” Halko said. “If we follow the advice of Buddhist philosophy we fare better when we find ways to maintain an unrelenting willingness to be curious about life and meet it full on, not go to sleep on it. From that perspective we can learn to be ever more curious, and open to our senses. If we do not, we are in danger of losing novelty, specialness and surprise. In regard to our partners, we are saying in effect: ‘I forgot that you are a miracle, and I don’t care.’”

“Mindfulness is the number one antidote to automaticity,” Halko continued. “It opens the paths to gain freedom and choice, to be aware of yourself and another at any given moment, to notice the automatic patterns that run our daily lives, and to discover that there are other ways. The key is self observation: what am I sensing, feeling and doing? What is my impulse? Can I pause and notice other options? This is the ticket out of automaticity.”

Halko Weiss, Ph.D., is an accredited Clinical Psychologist and Psychotherapy Lecturer who has been a psychotherapist for over 30 years. He has taught psychotherapeutic skills at the Universities of Hamburg and Marburg (in Germany) and the Eastern Institute of Technology in New Zealand. Halko is a founding Senior Trainer of the US, German, Australian and New Zealand Hakomi Institutes, co-creating the curricula used world-wide today. Halko is the author and editor of numerous publications, among them *The Handbook of Body Psychotherapy and Somatic Psychology* and *The Mindfulness Book* (in German). He is currently an International Trainer and Corporate Consultant and Coach, leading training programs on emotional intelligence in the workplace, body psychotherapy, interpersonal effectiveness and couples therapy.



Halko Weiss will be co-teaching the Comprehensive H.E.A.R.T. training together with Maci Daye in Mallorca beginning in November 2015.

For more details about the HEART training or introductory workshops, please contact heartmallorca@gmail.com or go to the website: www.hakomimallorca.com.

Maci Daye, Ed.S, Ed.M., is a Licensed Professional Counselor, Certified Hakomi Trainer, Certified Master Career Counselor and Life Coach who operates *LifeWorks Seminars & Counseling, Inc.* in Atlanta, GA, USA. Maci has graduate degrees in Education and Counseling from Harvard and Georgia State Universities and is a Level II Intermediate Practitioner of Somatic Experiencing, the trauma work developed by Peter Levine. Maci has been practicing Hakomi for 25 years and served on the US Hakomi Institute Board of Directors. She has been on the Hakomi faculty since 2001 and is the Lead Trainer in Minnesota and North Carolina, in the US. Maci has a particular interest in sexual enrichment for couples, and has developed a series of training programs, called *Passion and Presence®*, on the art of Mindful Sexuality.



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