

Anna: Being mindful in your marriage. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 249.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

I'm Anna Riley, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. What is the key to being mindful in your marriage? The idea of mindfulness is to be present to ourselves, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and literally in the moment. Being mindful involves focusing on your breathing and thoughts rather than projecting yourself into the future with worries and anxiety. When life is plagued with disconnection and stress, things can get tough. More and more people are finding themselves running on autopilot essentially. They are not fully and deeply present with themselves and each other. Sadly, a lot of people end up just accepting this as the inevitable.

If couples can learn to develop skills for mindfulness; however, their communication, expression, and intimacy abilities will flourish. Today we're talking with Dr. Kevin Metz, a couple specialist with LePage Associates. He's here to discuss some of the techniques for mindfulness that he teaches and encourages in relationships. While helping people get back to a positive place in their marriages, Kevin supports a level of discipline and mindful awareness. Welcome to the show, Kevin. I'm so glad you could join me today.

Kevin: Hi Anna. Thank you for having me. I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak with you.

Anna: Absolutely. Let's start with maybe a general idea of what it really means to be mindful, if people aren't really totally aware. It's kind of an unusual concept or a different concept, so can you just give us a general idea of what it means to be mindful?

Kevin: The most elegant description I've ever heard comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn, who's the man who brought these techniques from Eastern thought in which they're originally rooted, over to the West in the '70s and '80s with mindfulness based stress reduction. He's the one that pretty much incorporated the term mindfulness and these techniques into Western psychology and Western culture. And so the way that he describes it is paying attention in a particular way in the present moment, on purpose, and non-judgmentally.

He breaks it down into those three factors, and so really it's just a relationship to your experience of being fully present both with yourself and with your environment. There are two main ideas behind mindfulness, and the first is awareness. Just being fully aware and very deeply in the present moment, and then the other is acceptance. So when Kabat-Zinn talks about non-judgmentally, he's talking about just being fully accepting of whatever your experience is and that it's really OK because it's already there and you're already working with it.

It's really just a relationship towards the present moment and towards one experience and being more astute of it, being very keen and discerning what's going on in the moment, and then also just having a very accepting and non-judgmental stance towards whatever you notice.

Anna: In that sense, it's kind of like the first step to that is being aware and then with that acceptance comes after, basically?

Kevin: Exactly. Their thought is that if you don't accept what's true, that's actually how psychopathology comes about, and humans are expected to have some moderate level of sadness in the course of human existence, but it's people that either try to avoid that or try to immediately fix it rather than just accepting what's a natural part of human life, then that's when sadness becomes depression or that's when fear becomes anxiety. The idea is that if you can accept that human existence has a wide range of experiences and not try to have a combative relationship towards yourself and towards these feelings, that's how you lead a mindful and compassionate life.

Anna: The way I'm kind of taking that is to accept the fact that, like you said, there are a lot of different experiences that come with life and emotions, I'm sure, and feelings, and so sometimes you will be sad, and it's just kind of accepting that, in a sense. Is that sort of where you're going with it? Not like, "It's inevitable that your life is going to be miserable," not like that but in a sense just knowing that the human mind and the human state will go through ups and downs.

Kevin: Exactly. If you're not accepting of that, then you end up having a very adversarial relationship to those moments which are inevitable, and then that translates into having a very combative relationship with yourself. That ends up in people having low self-esteem and then results in depression and anxiety.

Anna: That makes sense, totally. Then what about being mindful in a relationship?

Kevin: That expands the conversation. If you think about a relationship, there are really three dynamics at play. They're both individuals, so you and then your partner and then the bond itself. To me, mindfulness in a relationship just really means attending to those three different factors, and not only the three different factors but the interplay between them. If I pull back, what does my partner do? Does she push forward and pursue, or does she withdraw herself? Paying attention to the interplay between those two, and also, what can I do to increase the bond between us? Then, if I do that, how does my partner respond in that way?

To me, it's just really being very, very observant and non-judgmental about those three aspects of human relationships and not only those three aspects but the interconnectedness between the three.

Anna: Say, a couple has been married for a long time, and they kind of start to get this running on autopilot sort of thing. What do you say about that? How do they use mindfulness to kind of deal with maybe such, if they perceive it as dullness or just familiarity?

Kevin: I do a lot of work with couples, and I think that's a very common complaint that couples have, especially if they've been married for years and years and especially if they have multiple children and if they're both working and have very busy schedules that there's not much space for play with each other, and there's not much space for thinking about what's really going on with my partner today. It can just be a very habit forming and, like you said, dull and familiar way of being with each other.

Mindfulness teaches us to kind of transcend that dullness and familiarity and really pay attention in a very deep and profound way towards what's coming up for me in this moment. What's coming up for my partner in this moment? Then by doing so, you can really cultivate a sense of curiosity towards each other and towards the present moment as to where the question becomes what can I learn about myself? What can I learn about my wife in this moment? That really shifts the experience, I think, as to where it's not just going through the motions and people becoming roommates and cohabitants and co-parents but really extending the period of exploration.

I work with a lot of couples that, as we're going through the history of their relationship, they say the happiest times are those moments of exploration and discovery about each other and how that feels to learn something about each other and also to be learned about. A lot of times that period, it only lasts for a short time and then this dullness sets in, but mindfulness really extends that period of discovery and exploration because obviously, humans are very complex and complicated people and then once you add in the interplay between two complex and complicated people, there's endless grist for the mill and endless things to learn about each other. It really extends that period throughout the life span of, "How can I continue to be curious about my partner?"

Anna: Which makes me think of, kind of like the initial phases of a relationship, almost like the dating phases and when you first are getting to know each other, and it's so fresh and new and fun and exciting. Kind of like that?

Kevin: Exactly. This reminds me of one of my friends who's actually getting engaged this weekend, and we were talking about that process and he was saying, he's elated for it and he also said he's kind of, on a certain level, somewhat envious of single people that still get to go through that process of discovery. I think even with people that are very happy in their relationship, there is still that longing for discovery. I guess my point is that even 20 years into a relationship, even though you know the main themes of how a person responds to things, you know their stories and things like that, you can kind of guess how they're going to be with other people, I think there's still a lot to learn about each other.

Anna: Definitely. Which keeps things going, really.

Kevin: Exactly. It really combats that dullness and familiarity that you are speaking of.

Anna: So you think those are the main things about what makes it so important to have that kind of sense of curiosity about your partner and with your partner and in the relationship because it brings you back to those times and those really enriching and happy times?

Kevin: I think that is very critical, and I also think one of the biggest complaints I hear about in couples' work is that partners don't feel understood. They feel like they can talk and they go through incredible machinations to get their partner to really understand what's going on for them, and they just don't feel like, either they're spending the energy or that they're capable of really understanding what's going on with them.

I think if both people have a very mindful and curious approach towards each other, they can understand each other and not only understand each other but find a way to communicate that they understand each other, which is also a big challenge for people, I think. That sense of being misunderstood, I think, diminishes through mindfulness.

Anna: That makes sense. Then if we're talking about using mindfulness as a technique to build your relationship, to strengthen it, to make it better, this and that, and like you're saying, people should be mindful just individually too, not even in, just in relationships but for themselves too. It's something that we're all trying to wrap our minds around it, really. What is your process of teaching people how to be mindful or coaching them through that?

Kevin: Because it really is a vastly different way of relating to the present moment, the initial work is usually done individually. That's the way we start to cultivate this sense of fascination of the present moment and curiosity towards the present moment. There are a lot of different exercises designed to promote that relationship with current experience.

The classic one and it's kind of bizarre, but the classic one is actually to just spend five minutes eating a raisin. This is actually the first technique in mindful experience. You just spend some time holding the raisin, thinking about what associations you have with the raisin. Studying the wrinkles, thinking about how it used to be a grape and just spend some time really contemplating the raisin, contemplating the feeling of the raisin in your fingers and then slowly put it in your mouth and notice how flexibly your arm brings food to your mouth and how you don't even have to think about it and then just let it sit in your mouth for a while and then notice the salivation, notice the taste, notice any associations you have with the flavor. Notice how habitually we usually chew, and in so doing we realize there's a lot to human experience that we're not attending to.

That's just kind of an illustrative technique to illustrate how we are typically on autopilot, and it illustrates how we can be differently. Then after that there are a lot of different techniques to cultivate this very deep and profound relationship with the present moment. A lot of them are meditation oriented, grounded in Eastern thought, and so paying attention to the breath is the most common one. Just sitting in meditation for 10 to 20 minutes and paying attention to whatever arises and then having that non-judgmental stance towards it. You pay attention to the breath and then thoughts, or feelings, or physiological sensations will absolutely emerge. You just label it as such. Don't label or don't judge yourself for having it and then choose to return your focus back to the breath. That's the main one and that also provides a deep sense of relaxation for people. That's the main one.

There are also things like a body scan where people just pay attention to certain aspects of their body and then shift their focus around their body for 15 or 20 minutes. A progressive muscle relaxation in which you do a similar thing but also tense and relax your muscles which has a very relaxing component to it as well. Those are some of the things that we do individually, and the goal behind these is to really cultivate that non-judgmental but very profoundly aware sense of what's happening with you in that moment.

Then at that point, so obviously this work is mostly individual oriented but then applying it to the couple is very interesting work and there are a lot of different exercises. There are a lot of partner yoga exercises that people like to promote as to where people can support each other and pay attention to what it feels like to support or be supported by their partner.

There's this one technique which I really like in which people stand back to back and touching and just stand there for a few minutes, and then they each take one step away from each other. One step forward, so it ends up being one step away from each other and then just stand there for one minute and notice what that feels like to walk away from your partner. Notice, the part of your back that was touching. What does it feel like to not be touching? Really explore that and then take another step back and then after four steps, turn around and face each other and really look deeply in each other's eyes and then slowly take one step back at a time and just notice what comes up for you.

The idea behind this is to put couples in these situations where they're going to have emotional reactions towards each other, and they're also asked to be very observant during these times and that just cultivates this relationship towards the present moment in which they can really be astute in noticing, "What's coming up for me at this time? What am I noticing about her that I might not have noticed in the past if I was running on autopilot?"

Anna: That's very interesting. I think it's deserves all great things to try out for people because, not that it's nowadays are totally different than any other time but I think there are changes, of course, but people are, everything is so go, go, go. This, this, this. That, that, that. Different things to do, and so I think it is really important for people to kind of stop for a little bit and focus on just their individual self and then the couple as a pair. Like you're saying, just in the present moment because that's really the moment that you're living is right then and there. It's not the future. It's not the past. It's the current moment.

Kevin: Right. I think your point about where we are in time as a society evolving is really important also because I think our society's not really promoting a sense of mindfulness. I think people get busier and busier and schedules become tighter and tighter, and we fall into habits and then we fall into roles within a family. They can become very easy to not question and then also, I think a big part of it is also how we communicate with each other.

I spend so much time talking with couples about not having important conversations over text. Things just get misconstrued and you're trying to shorten things to one sentence, and then that can become a habitual way of communicating with each other. And then you're not sending the message that you're intending to send. There's a lot of room for misinterpretation.

Anna: Absolutely. The whole communication process is entirely different than it used to be, I think.

Kevin: Right. I'm reminded of a couple who, one partner was working and one wasn't, and they were trying to determine schedules and something like that. One guy was actually working part-time, so it wasn't a Monday to Friday job. She tried to send a text thing, "I don't have a Monday to Friday job," and so she wrote, "I don't have an MF job." It was completely misinterpreted and

started this huge argument that's kind of comical thinking about from the outside, but it kind of illustrates the challenges that we're confronted with.

Anna: So much can get lost in translation like that, through texts or email or whatever the newest thing is. There's always something new. Instant gratification.

Kevin: Exactly. It's awesome.

Anna: It's the world we live in.

Kevin: And how things become so public on the Facebook, as well. It makes sense.

Anna: Oh my gosh. Yes. Oh, Lord. Everything's out there. Everything.

Kevin: That has severe consequences, I think, on the way that people relate to each other.

Anna: Absolutely. Definitely. Well, Kevin, is there anything else that we should know?

Kevin: Just, as I was thinking about mindfulness, I just want to make kind of a plea for it. Not only in terms of couples but also individuals and just mention that there's been a lot of research done. It's become kind of a buzz word. A lot of people have heard about it in Western psychology and Western culture, and so it's become pretty well studied.

There's been a lot of positive research being done on it to where it's been associated with decreasing depression, decreasing anxiety. There are a lot of positive health benefits that are attained through mindfulness. There are a lot of positive psychology measures that get increased through mindfulness. And so it really is a very powerful technique, and in some ways it's really easy because it's just kind of paying attention to the present moment.

Then in some ways it's very hard because it's also overcoming, in some cases, decades and decades of conditioning and habit. I think it really solves a lot of problems. and so for people that are in relationships or not in relationships, I really think it's something to explore.

Anna: Absolutely. Well, Kevin, thank you so much for talking with me and being on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Kevin: Thank you for having me. It was a pleasure.

Anna: To find out more about Kevin and his practice, LePage Associates, you can visit their website at www.lepageassociates.com or you can call 919-572-0000 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Anna Riley. Until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at StayHappilyMarried.com. We would love to hear your

feedback or comments. Please email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.