

Anna: Maintaining Mindfulness. This is Stay Happily Married episode number 232.

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

Anna: I'm Anna Riley and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Take a second to stop and think. Are you being mindful today? You might ask, "Well, what does that mean exactly?" The idea of mindfulness is to be present to ourselves, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and literally being in the moment. Being in the moment 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. Oftentimes, the first thing to suffer are relationships and family ties, which is why mindfulness can be so important. If couples and families learn to develop these critical skills, their communication, expression, and intimacy abilities can flourish.

Today, our guest is Dr. Roz Heiko from Pediatric and Family Psychology in Cary, North Carolina, and she's here to discuss some of her healing techniques. In helping people get back to a positive place in their lives and relationships, Roz encourages and teaches a level of discipline and mindful awareness.

Welcome to the show, Roz. I'm so glad you could be with us today.

Roz: And I'm delighted to be here.

Anna: So here is the million dollar question. What does it really mean to be mindful?

Roz: It is a million dollar question, and it is a question that actually we have to slow down in our lives to answer. What it means is that we stay in the present moment and either endure whatever is happening in that moment, or we embrace or encourage whatever is happening in that moment. When people come into my office and they are full of pain and hurt or regret and sometimes shame, a lot of the time they are doing everything they can to push away the present moment because they're back in the past with old hurts, or they're projecting themselves into the future with anxiety and with fear on a lot of different things.

So what I say to people is, "In this moment," and I get them to breathe as deeply and as calmly and comfortably as possible, "In this moment, you are what? Angry, OK, upset, whatever, and so that's just a feeling. Now let's just be in this moment and then let's see what happens." In therapy, the idea is that you kind of let that develop and then as carefully and comfortably and faithfully as you can, you begin to just accept that particular moment.

Anna: Right. So now how can we relate that to what happens in a relationship when . . . What does it mean to be mindful within a relationship or a marriage?

Roz: Well, I speak from the perspective, personally, of being married for 30 years this coming May.

Anna: Congratulations.

Roz: It does seem like we have a longevity to us that is kind of a little frightening when I think about 30 years and what that means. When I first met David, there was this amazing kind of feeling of, "Wow. This person and I really connect, and we fit in a lot of ways." Over 30 years, what's going to happen for us personally and for people who are in relationships for six months, for five years, for ten years, for whatever, whether they're married or partnered in any ways or however that goes, what happens is sometimes you look over at that person and you say things that you wouldn't ordinarily say. Like instead of saying, "Yes, darling, I'd be happy to pick that up for you for the 15 millionth time," we say, "Can't you pick up your own . . ." There's a level of irritation and sometimes a level of really kind of bewilderment and anger that creeps in because we have to compromise in our relationships and in our lives.

So mindfulness really helps because if you're going to try to be mindful, you're going to be mindful, not just try it, like Yoda said in the Jedi motto of "Not try, do". When we are mindful we take some breaths, we get ourselves in present moment, and what I usually say to parents and couples is, "What message are you trying to get across?" When you answer that question, it's, "Well, do I want to get across the fact that I'm really angry right now, or do I want to get across the fact that I really would like you to pick up after yourself, or I'd really like you to say that, husband or wife or partner, in a way that is more respectful."

The same thing goes with kids. If we're screaming at our kids, because we're humans and we get stressed or we're finding ourself doing that with partners, the question in mindfulness practice is, "What do I feel and where am I in this moment and what do I want to be doing?" When we consider that, we drop down into a different space.

Anna: OK. What space is that?

Roz: It's a space, I think, of much more respect for ourselves and for the people we love or the people we're working with. Because this goes on in work place, this goes on at home, this goes on in public. A lot of times when we're stressed and disconnected as more and more kind of life speeds up, we tend to just react, and mindfulness is about centering oneself so that dropping into that space means, "OK, I'm going to breathe and I'm going to remind myself who I am in this moment and what I'm doing." So it's kind of remembering and orienting oneself in a different way.

Anna: Yeah. So if you're not reacting, maybe, to be mindful, you are, like you said, take a deep breath, stay in the moment and kind of just go through whatever it is that that moment takes you through. Is that kind of . . . ?

Roz: Exactly. And it gives us a place that we choose. A lot of times we feel trapped. We feel trapped in a relationship that has been going over the same ground, for instance, either with a child or a partner. We're trapped in a work situation where our boss has been acting out in a particular way or demanding certain things, and we feel like a child in some ways or more put in a position of being more childlike and we begin to feel trapped.

When we do that, when we react to that without being mindful, without thinking and feeling and orienting in that moment, we don't give ourselves more choice. I think a lot of times I feel really badly when I just react. I say things, things come out of my mouth, or we can do things that are not part of our integrity.

Anna: Just two quick, yeah, do the first thing that comes out and it might not be the greatest thing to do.

Roz: Yes, that's exactly right. That's exactly right.

Anna: Especially in a relationship, I can see how that would, for sure, be an issue. If there's something that is happening between you as a couple and your first inclination, your first reaction, is to flip out or go crazy but that maybe, is not the best thing to do.

Roz: No. It doesn't make the relationship stronger. It makes people more irritable and more anxious and more unavailable to each other.

Anna: Absolutely, yeah. We've kind of talked about this but maybe going a little bit further into it, as far as being in a relationship and not practicing mindfulness and if a couple already has issues to begin with, what can be one of the biggest problems if they're not practicing mindfulness and if they don't know how to? Some people might not understand and not fully know what to do with that?

Roz: Or the fact is that people get so stressed. I mean, financially and economically, people just don't have a lot of time. They're working sometimes two jobs, sometimes three jobs or shifts and it's exhausting and add children, pets, relatives, all kinds of demands and people become very pulled in and very stressed and just, "Don't ask me one more thing." And when that happens, people, all of us, because we are higher order mammals but we are mammals, we're going to act in ways that can be very destructive.

Anna: For ourselves, probably.

Roz: For ourselves and to each other. Because those anger levels of irritation and anxiety levels, when they go up, our ability to control our behaviors and impulsivity goes down. So people will turn, very often, to extremes of behavior. People will turn to extremes of any kind of behavior so whether it's drinking or recreational drugs. In positive ways, people might turn to hobbies. People might turn to wanting more intimacy sexually, or they might want to be with friends more. So there's positive and more balanced ways to deal with stress and there's a lot of negative ones.

Anna: Right, definitely. So it seems like mindfulness certainly does require a lot of internal and psychological discipline. How do people attain that? How do you guide people to that place?

Roz: That's a great question. First of all, I want to just talk about the fact that trying to learn techniques of self-discipline can be really excruciating. I'm going to give you an example. I was at a workshop many years ago, and we had just completed a group activity in which we were laughing and joking, and we were having fun making something with our eyes closed and that was fine. I enjoyed that and we enjoyed sharing what we had done.

Then the group leader had asked us to close our eyes and then meditate. He was going to lead us in a meditation and then he was going to become silent, he told us. So we had just gone from one state where there was a lot of camaraderie and we were all kind of in a very comfortable place and then he said that and I closed my eyes and I'm sitting on the floor in a stationary position and I suddenly become claustrophobic, as if I'm trapped inside some place where nobody else is around me.

With my conscious mind and my thinking mind, I know I'm in a room full of the same people that I was with five seconds ago but I could not keep my eyes closed. My anxiety level came up so much, and my

thoughts were racing. My heart starts speeding up. And it just felt so ridiculous. So I opened my eyes and I looked around and I saw other people . . .

Anna: Doing it too, yeah.

Roz: Then closing them. What I have found is that starting a meditation practice, a practice of mindfulness can be done in very, very tiny steps or chunking so that a lot of times what I'll recommend to people is that they do a walking meditation first. So a lot of people do fitness training. A lot of people do walking just outside or just have some access at some point to being able to move, but while they're doing it, I'm suggesting that they just focus their thoughts.

For instance, when you do a walking meditation, you step with one foot and you say to yourself the word, "please". You step with the other foot and you say the words, "thank you". And when your mind brings you into your shopping list or the latest thing your mother-in-law did to you, what you do is you just sweep with a broom that thought out or imagine you're at the ocean and have a wave carry that thought out, or you open a window in your mind and you just have a breeze carry that thought out and you go back to "please" and "thank you" with every step.

So every time your mind wanders, you bring it back and I suggest people do this for 30 seconds the first couple of weeks, maybe, a couple of times a week. Then I'm suggesting another half a minute, then another minute added onto that, maybe another five minutes if somebody's really ambitious. But this could take quite a while for people to become comfortable with. I think once people get the idea and feel that sense of control and comfort, and see what it means in just a few seconds of mindful practice, how they can then use that in other ways in their life, I think it goes very quickly. But I think people really need to understand how that experience of that level of discipline can just take you by the throat and choke you.

Anna: Yeah, oh yeah. The way I'm seeing this, I'm kind of imagining this in my head and do you think that not being mindful is, in a way, it's about control? People, in a sense, need to control the moment. They need to control the outcome. They need to control what's going on and if they don't have control over it, then there's this big, big wave of stress and anxiety when - I mean, I'm not saying this is for everyone, but for some people maybe - there's this need to control it, make sure that everything is fine, make sure that this is that and blah, blah, blah and on and on. And really, to be mindful is almost kind of saying, "I can control certain things and there are certain things I can't control, so I need to just let it go and move through it and let it happen as it's going to happen, this moment."

Roz: I think that's it exactly. I began this year of 2012 with my fist closed in a very tight fist, and my goal was to be able to just open up my fist, open my hand fully and comfortably. You'd think that was an easy thing to do, right? So you take your hand, you fist it up and then you open it, right?

Anna: Right.

Roz: Well, I started thinking about all the things that make me tense, stressed, anxious, and I could only get my hand open to a couple of fingers width and I realized how I hold onto things all the time. I think with my clients, for all of us human beings, we hold on. That's part of what we do. Then we see migraines and jaw problems, and we have stress-related issues and all kinds of physical and emotional holding on. The responses to that are more and more trying to control and run after that. And as you said, letting go is the goal and paradoxically, after a practice of this mindfulness practice that I've been

really paying attention to in the last ten years, I am not where I want to be but I'm getting closer and also allowing myself to make mistakes, to be human, but to do better.

Part of this letting go is being able to accept loss and able to accept the full, as Jon Kabat-Zinn says after the - I forgot the name of the Greek - it's called "The Full Catastrophe of Life". There's this wonderful movie about the way of embracing this catastrophe that sometimes befalls us in life that we have no control over, and sometimes our children, our partner, they behave in ways that are bewildering and uncomfortable to us. But if we continue to be mindful of what we are, what we need and to practice that breath, giving us a few moment before we just react so that we can then make choices. This is a way, I think, that we can live, paradoxically, with more control while we let go.

Anna: Right. Definitely, definitely. It makes so much sense. It really does, all this stuff. Of course, you hear and you talk about it and it's just like, "Oh, yeah, that's great." Obviously, it's easier said than done though. It takes work. It takes discipline and a level of peace within yourself, I think, to be able to get to that place.

Roz: Peace and acceptance. This is not something where, in therapy, there's sometimes a lot that goes on with being able to accept people just as they are. So if somebody comes in and says, "I have made a commitment to my spouse, and our commitment means that we have an open marriage," or, "I have made a commitment to my partner, and that means we are with each other exclusively," and if people follow through with that commitment, things are really fine, basically, if people keep talking and working that out and they're able to be honest.

Well, being honest and clear is some of the hardest things that we have to do as human beings with each other in relationships. It sounds easy, "Oh, I'm going to be honest with you. I'm going to tell you." But how much do I be honest and how am I honest with myself? So part of this is if we, as therapists, for me, with clients, I also want to hold people to their own personal code of integrity or ethics, and I also want to hold them to a standard of, "Is that the best you can do?" because I hold myself to that. So it means that I want people to be proud of themselves. I want them to be self-confident, I totally do, but I also want them to be respectful to themselves and other people. This mindfulness practice gets us to where that is.

Anna: Absolutely. Well, Roz, is there anything else you think that we should know about this?

Roz: Well, I just have some references for people that they might want to think about. For children, the books, "Mindful Movements" and "Planting Seeds" by Thich Nhat Hanh, who is a Buddhist and an amazing, amazing man and Dan Siegel's work, Jon Kabat-Zinn's work or Jack Kornfield's work on mindfulness and meditation, also. So I want to suggest some reading and just possible nice, deep, open breaths. People can focus also at church or temple. There is a verse or a phrase, people can hold that in their mind and just breathe.

Anna: Just breathe. Wonderful. Roz, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Roz: It was a pleasure and a pleasure to be able to talk that through about something that, to me, is just such an important and vital part of my life.

Anna: For sure. To find out more about Roz and her practice, Pediatric & Family Psychology, you can visit her website at [www.drheiko.com](http://www.drheiko.com), and I'll put a link for that in the show notes. Or you can call 919-858-9692 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](http://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](http://StayHappilyMarried.com). We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com) or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.