
MINDFUL ATTENTION

Relationships require attention. Whether it's a lover, friend, coworker, or merely a carpool companion, maintaining a good relationship depends on noticing the other person's feeling and reactions and then watching the process between you. Using the mindfulness skills you practice in chapters 3 through 5, you can observe facial expression, body language, tone of voice, and choice of words during a conversation to get a fix on the mood and state of the relationship.

Paying attention means staying in the here and now—not thinking about what you want to say next or focusing on some memory. It means remaining present to what you see, hear, and sense emotionally. In the same way that you can breathe, walk, or even do dishes mindfully, you can also relate with full awareness to the present moment. When you pay attention, you notice trouble coming—before it overwhelms you—and also gain time to ask clarifying questions that can help you correct misconceptions.

Not paying attention—focusing away from the moment between you and others—has a heavy price. You'll end up doing one or more of the following:

- Missing vital cues about the other person's needs and reactions
- Projecting, inaccurately, your fears and feelings on the other
- Blowing up or running away when "surprised" by a negative response you could have seen coming

Mindful attention also involves watching your experience in relation to others. Do you need something from other person (for example, more attention or some help)? Do you need to change the process between you (for example, critical comments, demands, intrusive questions)? Do you have feelings that signal something important about what's going on (hurt, sadness, loss, shame, anxiety)? Noticing your feelings can help you figure out what needs to change in a relationship—before you blow up or run away.

In summary, then, the first interpersonal skill you need to cultivate is mindful attention because it helps you read important signals about the state of a relationship.

Exercise: Mindful Attention

In the very next conversation you have, practice being an observer of the moment by attending to the other person's physical and verbal behavior. If you find anything ambiguous or hard to read, ask a clarifying question. Here are some examples:

- How are you feeling? Are you okay?
- How are you doing? Are you okay?
- How are things between us?
- I notice _____ ; is that accurate?
- Is everything okay with you? With us?

Also notice your own needs and feelings in the interaction—do any of these require communication? How could you say it in a way that preserves the relationship?

Bill had noticed his girlfriend Gina looking away from him during dinner. When he asked “How are things between us?” she told him that she'd been hurt not to be invited to his office solstice party. This gave him a chance to explain that he hated company events and only planned to put in an appearance for few minutes.