

CHAPTER 9

When things go wrong

So far in *Mindful Learning* we have explored how mindfulness can help us cultivate the intimacy we desire to create strong, healthy relationships. Along the way, we have looked at how to deal with different challenges as they arise, including major developmental tasks such as differentiation. In this chapter we provide some tools for managing difficulties and we look at how mindfulness can help us stay on track and repair breaches in the connection in our relationships.

Taking responsibility and awareness of our own power

As we have seen in previous chapters, when the amygdala takes over and we get caught in fight/flight reactivity, people under stress are inclined to look outwards and to blame the other person or the situation — or even the cat or dog!

Blame is a coping strategy commonly employed when we are

unwilling (or unable) to sit with vulnerability. It seems to work because we get to discharge energy, which gives us a sense of release. However, it is corrosive in relationships. A much better strategy is to stay present with what is actually happening. When we sense into what we are feeling about a situation we take back our power. We start to experience things as they actually are, rather than through a fog of reactions and judgements. We become able to sense inwards and our responses become guided by clear seeing, intuition and wisdom. We might not be able to control or choose the outcome of situations but when we are mindful we *can* choose our response. As we sense into our vulnerability, we also become able to directly express our needs rather than speaking or acting reactively. Vulnerability researcher Brene Brown points out that being able to do this means we can hold people accountable for their actions that hurt us. We can then have a conversation with them about it rather than getting bogged down in blame.

With mindful presence and awareness comes a sense of choice, as we recognize that in each moment of awareness there is also opportunity for growth. In her book *Practicing Peace*, Pema Chödrön says the following about choice:

If you have embarked on this journey of self-reflection, you may be at a place that everyone, sooner or later, experiences on the spiritual path. After a while it seems like almost every moment of your life you're there, where you realize you have a choice. You have a choice whether to open or close, whether to hold on or let go, whether to harden or soften, whether to hold your seat or strike out. That choice is presented to you again and again and again.

By staying present in difficult situations we become able to sense our wisdom and intuition about what is the best course of action.

This allows us to respond appropriately to what is happening, drawing on our values and integrity.

Repair

Do you need to be right, to always win the argument? If so, have you noticed how much you sacrifice connection and intimacy because of it? By holding rigidly to our position we miss out on our own happiness. If we focus on being right we miss the opportunity for empathy and for connecting to the vulnerability beneath the surface, which is the place where we can really connect. And knowing how to repair ruptures in intimacy with others is crucial. Research shows that the absence of repair leads to increased levels of resentment and ultimately contempt in relationships. And marriage expert John Gottman has found contempt to be a factor in predicting divorce.¹

The first step in rectifying a loss of connection is recognizing and acknowledging that things have gone wrong. We need to give ourselves permission to go into fight/flight mode. This is a survival response conditioned over tens of thousands of years that is naturally triggered when we sense threat. Giving oneself this permission takes the pressure off and we can then use mindfulness to help re-engage the tend-and-befriend circuits.

When we are aroused and triggered our medial prefrontal cortex — the part of the brain responsible for introspection — goes offline. The amygdala takes over and we start scanning for problems. As we give our attention to this task, this feeds our anxiety and we inevitably start finding problems, either within or outside of ourselves. This leads to self-criticism and blame, respectively. Trauma expert Janine Fischer says simply being mindful enough to recognize and say 'I'm being triggered' can head off a lot of this reactive behaviour and prevent things spiralling in a negative direction.

When we stay present and open and search for ways to resolve the situation we notice our capacity to stay simultaneously aware of both our own reactions as well as what is happening around us. When we acknowledge what we are feeling and make room for it, we are also more able to make room for what the other person is feeling. Then we are able to see if there is something we have done to contribute to the problem. And we can then bring an attitude of friendliness and compassion to the conflict, which serves to calm things down. As the dust settles a bit, we become able to more accurately discern the response that is likely to resolve the conflict. This discernment, which comes from seeing the situation clearly rather than through a fog of default mode reactivity, is very different from ego-based judgements. It is a very useful side effect of being mindful.

All this may sound like a lot of work. However, as we systematically develop our mindfulness we automatically develop the capacity to stay present and clear, even in situations of conflict and stress. We can then gradually become more aware of our beliefs and less unconsciously driven by them. We know that by taking responsibility for our part and because we care for the other person, we can immediately take steps to bring healing as soon as we know there is a need for it. We cannot make the other person respond in ways we would like but we can acknowledge our own part.

As we said previously this does not mean we are passive or accommodate bad behaviour. This is a very important point. Sometimes people hear the word ‘acceptance’ and think this means resignation or allowing others to cause us harm. On the contrary, mindfulness gives us the power to speak up or at least to discern when to speak or when not to. When things go wrong we are better off being able to realistically assess the situation so that we

can see and consider options. We do not have to go into the trance of our stories and when we do we simply notice that (without judgement), then bring ourselves back to the present moment again and again. Making amends and choosing not to hold a grudge are all options available to us. We create and generate new options from an attitude of willingness to turn towards each other rather than away and to say sorry for our part in conflict. Repair means that we take responsibility for maintaining the bond in relationship, we can initiate this and respond to it in loving and friendly ways.

Asking for and taking space

One way to think about mindfulness practice is that it gives us space from our fight/flight reactivity. This is a metaphor obviously, but speaks to the way mindfulness helps us move from automatically believing — and acting on — our thoughts and emotions to experiencing them as mental events and patterns of physical sensations. When we do this we stay present and activate our prefrontal cortex and tend-and-befriend circuits. With practice we become able to do this even in high-stake situations and moments of conflict.

However, at times we might be unable to hold onto ourselves. In these moments we may need to take *physical* space so we can calm down again and reconnect with loving presence. This might require five minutes while we go and make a cup of tea, or a few hours while we go for a walk and calm down. Sometimes we even need to sleep on it or take a few days to process it.

However long we need, what is important is that we negotiate taking space beforehand. If we just bail in the middle of an argument, our partner can experience this as abandonment or withdrawal used

as punishment. But if we have a prior agreement that we will each take responsibility for our emotions — and take space when we can't use mindfulness to stop ourselves from reacting — our partner is more likely to experience our leaving as a genuine attempt to resolve the conflict in an adult way. Equally important is that we have an agreement that we will *return* once we have calmed down. If we don't return, this becomes a pattern of avoidance where the issue is just ignored or swept under the rug. So many couples fall into this trap, with the result that resentment builds and leaks out in other areas of the relationship or causes major blow-ups. Agreeing with our partner that we will take space to calm down when we sense an imminent amygdala hijack and then return once we have reengaged our prefrontal cortex and tend-and-befriend circuits makes for much more conscious fighting and conflict resolution. This needs to be established as a rule for fair fighting.

Carol and Jack were clients who presented for couple's therapy. They had been married for eleven years and had three children. Both had been deeply unhappy in the marriage for some time. They invariably dealt with conflict by pretending it had not happened and sweeping it under the rug. They felt powerless to do anything about the cycle of rejection, withdrawal, blame and attack they were caught in. They did not want to continue down this unhappy road nor did they want to end the relationship. Both believed the other was at fault. 'Saying sorry,' said Carol, 'when I haven't done anything wrong just means Jack can do it all again and believe me, I know Jack and he will.' Jack in turn responded, 'Yes, that's just how you always are, blaming and critical. I feel as if no matter what I do I will never please you.'

Letting go of believing we are right can bring up a lot of fear for people in situations like this but refusing to do so keeps us stuck in a cycle of conflict, just like Carol and Jack. When we bring mindfulness to the pattern and inquire into what is going on, we can start to see how we have held onto ways of being that contribute to hurting others in relationship. An opening and softening can occur. It came as a surprise to Carol and Jack that underneath their stories they were both feeling unlovable and fearful of being left alone. They missed the good things that each offered because they were caught in their habitual story of unworthiness and a deep down sense of not being good enough. In effect, their brains had become conditioned to expect the worst and they were constantly on high alert around each other. In the rare moments they managed to be friendly and loving to each other, neither was able to trust this or to take it in. For instance, when Carol requested Jack cuddle her, he refused if he did not *feel* their closeness was genuine. He was stuck in a self-perpetuating cycle and then missed the opportunity to rebuild that closeness, which of course then made Carol feel even more vulnerable and rejected. Nor did Jack make bids of his own to reconnect. Neither was able to soothe each other's hijacked amygdalae or their own and they stayed stuck in patterns of rejection, anger and withdrawal. They missed each other's bids for increased intimacy and for repair.

Mindfulness allows us to be with whatever is happening with a sense of friendly compassion. We simply breathe into patterns of fear and blame. A simple acknowledgement of our part in the dance can create a ripple effect that brings change in unexpected ways. By bringing an attitude of friendliness and compassion we start to calm down and see things more clearly. We may see why we or our partner might have acted in hurtful ways. This defuses the hostility

and our brains and bodies can settle, allowing for even clearer seeing. The sense of threat subsides and it becomes easier to simply offer an apology or other gestures of kindness and connection.

As they progressed in therapy and began communicating more effectively, Carol and Jack learnt that they needed to take care of this third entity called ‘The Relationship’. They came to see that working out who was at fault was much less important than developing a sense of awareness of their own contributions to the dance they found themselves in. Carol saw that her pattern was to feel unheard and then become critical in a misguided attempt to get Jack to take her more seriously. This was a pattern she had learnt in childhood from parents whose only interactions with her tended to involve direct or implicit criticism of her behaviour. She then internalized this attitude and related to her own vulnerabilities with self-criticism. And the more she criticized Jack, the more he felt attacked and withdrew. Carol’s critical stance was preventing Jack from being present and available in the ways she wanted, and his tendency to withdraw exacerbated the issue. They had in effect adopted a pursuer–distancer pattern, which is common in intimate relationships.

As they became clearer about their communication patterns, both became aware that apologizing somehow felt akin to a loss. In order to resolve things, this reaction needed to be traced to its origins. This is how good therapy tends to work — as we deal with what is presenting itself on the surface, deeper issues start to arise. Most of us carry wounds from our childhood that show up in our relationships and keep us stuck. Learning to recognize these wounds and how they influence our behaviour can help us work more skilfully with them. It can also be affirming and healing to see that dysfunctional patterns we have are just ways we developed to

survive difficulties earlier in life, when we didn’t have the resources to deal with it any other way. This makes it easier to let go of these defences in the present and to develop more mature, adaptive ways of getting our needs met.

While we tend to enter into relationships at the same general level of differentiation as our partner, at any one time one person is usually more able to grow and change the relationship than the other. This tends to go back and forth over time. That is the dance of relationships. However, in some relationships one partner might be more inclined overall to seek deeper intimacy or resolve issues. ‘Why should I be the one?’ is a common enough response to which the answer may well be ‘Why not?’ Sometimes it takes a unilateral effort or stand by one partner to force change in the system. The other partner can then engage in the change process, or resist it. It then becomes necessary for the partner desiring change to continue to hold onto themselves and push for what they need.

However, in the case of Carol and Jack they both recognized that the first step was for each to take responsibility for their own part in the dance. They didn’t always manage to do this, nor was progress linear. Like all change it was often two steps back and one forward. They did feel impatient at times and they did keep hurting each other — *at first*. However, by recognizing that they could rectify matters and take steps to mend a lack of connection as soon as they noticed it, they developed much more harmony in their relationship. They became quicker at recognizing when things were going pear-shaped and more effective at doing something about it.

By committing to change just ourselves and by being open to contact our deepest awareness of ourselves, we can allow ourselves to be vulnerable and human. When Carol shared with Jack her fear of not being heard and her sense that she wasn’t important to him,

Jack in turn was able to share his own vulnerability — his sense of failure and the many ways in which he was blaming himself for disappointments in their lives and how things had turned out. He was able to see that he was shutting down because he felt criticized and judged by Carol, and because of his own self-judgements. He was able to speak from this vulnerable place rather than getting defensive and attacking. He became able to experience her requests for physical affection as a desire to connect with him rather than a judgement about his unavailability and started responding more generously. By sharing their vulnerability they were able to see each other through a compassionate lens. They developed the capacity to listen to each other and to be empathic.

Although a sincere apology can go a long way in bringing healing in a relationship, saying sorry is not the only way to repair ruptures. There are many ways to communicate love, affection and friendship both to ourselves and our partner. By turning inwards and finding the capacity within to offer kindness in whatever form is needed, we shift the focus. By simply holding an intention to be kind, and then taking whatever action we need to, we become bigger than the behaviours that might otherwise define us. And as we become aware of our pain, whether because of the judgements of others or of our own harshness with ourselves, we can offer a gesture of compassion. We might put a hand on our heart to soothe ourselves or we might offer a hand or gesture of touch to our partner when they are in distress.

By taking responsibility for our own part in the dance, the dance itself changes. We stop stepping on our partner's toes and tripping over our own feet. We realize that by focusing on how we aspire to be in the relationship, rather than what our partner is doing (or not doing), we paradoxically often affect the change we desire.

We become agents of change in the relationship rather than passive victims. We become empowered by a capacity to stay grounded, present and loving, and reclaim our own power.

Fighting fair

John Gottman has shown that conflict is inevitable in relationships, and it is how we manage it that determines the health of the relationship. Practising mindfulness is a crucial first step as it helps us prevent fights from escalating and to see clearly. Where there are continual cycles of negativity and fights that go nowhere we need to develop rules and agreements around fighting and set out what is acceptable. And it can be helpful to look deeply at what the fighting is really about as usually it is representative of a deeper concern than what seems to be the issue at hand.

The first step in fighting effectively is learning to pause. Whenever we detect reactivity in ourselves or our partner, we should stop what we are saying or doing and reconnect with our senses. As we repeatedly pause in the middle of patterns of reactivity, we can start making better choices. We can also ask ourselves 'How can I use mindfulness to pay attention to my partner in a way that might resolve the conflict?' Doing this helps us drop any agenda other than staying present, seeing what is true, and resolving things in a way that both people are happy with. We can then connect with the loving presence in our partner and focus on resolving the conflict rather than winning the argument. Gottman's research also shows that *accepting* that some conflict in relationships is unsolvable fosters better relationships. When we know that not everything can be worked out, mindfulness helps us accept this and still stay connected to our partner.

When we drop assumptions and have an open mind set about what's possible, our relationships unfold and evolve in new and fresh ways. A good intention to have is that the relationship is a no-negativity zone and that each person has permission to remind the other when this is forgotten! This sets up a foundation and then further to this we can create rules such as no name-calling or attacking with nasty or vitriolic comments, no yelling etc. The idea here is to develop boundaries around what is acceptable and tolerable for you. Finally, looking at each other while fighting helps keep the prefrontal cortex engaged and reduces amygdala hijack. This is why it is far better to have arguments face to face than via the phone, text or email.

To return to Carol and Jack, they made an agreement to come back to each other within a short time if there had been a fight so as their pattern of sweeping conflict under the carpet was no longer an issue. This created a sense of safety and protected their bond. They resolved to each take the time to listen to how the other was feeling without interrupting. They started to look at each other with compassion as they began to share more of their vulnerability. Simply by committing to this one step of coming back to each other to resolve or at least dialogue about conflict, they stopped fearing that either one would leave. This sense that they would each listen to and respect each other had a ripple effect. It didn't mean that conflict disappeared from their relationship, but both felt more secure with each other. As they in turn began to care for each other better they also started caring for the relationship itself.

You might experiment with your own rules and see what you need to feel safe so that you can repair the ruptures more quickly when they happen. If you are looking at yourself and your partner through the eyes of mindfulness you will be kinder and more

compassionate. Making a commitment to reduce negativity and be prepared to see each other's perspective could be a good start.

EXERCISE: LEARNING HOW TO FIGHT FAIR

First, recognize that disagreements and fights are inevitable in any relationship. The trick is to learn to do it effectively.

Pick a calm time when you are not fighting to discuss what the fights might mean and look underneath to see what they represent.

For example, do you fight about money? Maybe you are worried about your future security or about losing a sense of control. Do you each have different attitudes to spending and saving and if so where do these come from?

Do you fight about children? If so, discuss how were you raised and what your values are around childrearing.

If you fight about how each person spends their time, what are your expectations and hopes for connection and intimacy?

Spend time listening deeply to each person's point of view and make some rules about the discussions. You might like to decide ahead of time that neither will interrupt the other. You might agree not to be negative, blaming or critical but to listen with a sense of curiosity as you really try to understand where each other is coming from.

Experiment with establishing your own ground rules for fairness, particularly around loaded issues.
