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ORIGINAL PAPER

Intimate Partners' Perspectives on the Relational Effects of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Training: A Qualitative Research Study

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Abstract Using general systems theory, we describe findings from a larger qualitative phenomenological study that examined the relational effects of mindfulness training when one member of a couple completed an 8-week, mindfulness-based stress reduction program (MBSR) in the last 6 months. In this segment of the larger qualitative study, we describe what intimate partners observed and if they experienced any direct benefits from the graduates' individual MBSR training. Eleven primarily White, college-educated couples (nine heterosexual and two same sex couples) participated in the larger study; average relationship length was 13.8 years. The following three major themes and seven subthemes emerged for the 11 intimate partners of MBSR graduates: (1) positive observations (general positive perception, graduate's improved emotional balance); (2) perceived impact (perception of communications, impact on intimate partner and relationship); and (3) meaning making (appreciation, incongruence of meaning, continuing practice). Findings suggest intimate partners observed improved emotional balance in MBSR graduates, but reported that behavioral changes were limited in scale and just emerging. Developing mindfulness-enhanced couple interventions that target dyadic outcomes could improve the relational benefits of mindfulness practice. Future studies should examine emotion regulation as a potential relational pathway of mindfulness and include more diverse samples of couples.

Keywords Couples · Mindfulness · Mindfulness-based stress reduction · Phenomenology · Qualitative research

Introduction

During the past decade, there has been a significant increase in empirical research examining mindfulness in the fields of mental health and medicine (see Brown et al. 2007, for a review). Kabat-Zinn (2003) defines mindfulness as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (p. 145). Mindfulness is an experiential process in which attention is intentionally directed to immediate sensory phenomena, thoughts, and emotions with an attitude of receptivity and curiosity (Shapiro et al. 2006).

In 1979, Kabat-Zinn (2013) developed a secular 8-week program called *mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)* at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center to teach mindfulness practices to chronic pain patients. Kabat-Zinn's counterintuitive method integrated Buddhist meditation practice with stress research to systematically teach patients how to turn toward their pain with compassionate acceptance instead of avoiding their pain. The MBSR training program is a structured group experience that typically includes 8 weekly, 2.5-h classes, along with a 7-h, full-day retreat between weeks 6 and 7 (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). In between each class, participants are encouraged to complete a rigorous, home practice of mindfulness ranging from 30 to 60 min each day using guided audio recordings. A meta-analysis of 20 outcome studies (Grossman et al.

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2004) has validated MBSR as a promising group intervention for a range of physical and mental health problems including chronic pain, anxiety, depression, stress, psoriasis, cancer, and fibromyalgia.

Since its introduction, MBSR has sparked a wave of research focusing on treating diverse problems and a myriad of mindfulness-based clinical adaptations—such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (Segal et al. 2002) to prevent the relapse of major depression. Yet, there are a significant number of research gaps in the empirical study of mindfulness and intimate partner relationships. Prior research on mindfulness has almost exclusively focused on individual outcomes. Few studies have examined how mindfulness affects intimate partner relationships by including the perspectives of *both* members of intimate partner relationships.

We conducted a larger qualitative phenomenological study to examine the relational effects of mindfulness training when one member of a couple completed an 8-week MBSR program within the last 6 months. In the larger qualitative study, we elicited the perspectives of both members of the couple—both the MBSR graduate and her/his partner or spouse. The primary aim of this paper is to summarize one compelling set of data from the larger qualitative study—the experiences of the 11 intimate partners of the MBSR graduates—and examine if these intimate partners reported any direct benefits from the MBSR graduates' individual mindfulness training. Due to space limitations and the complex, multi-unit data analysis, separate papers currently under development will describe the MBSR graduates' individual experiences and the couples' experiences.

Literature Review

In the field of couple and family therapy, interest into the relational impact of mindfulness has recently emerged (Gambrel and Keeling 2010). Neuropsychiatrist Siegel (2007) suggested that the effects of mindfulness practice mirror the benefits of secure attachment between children and their primary caregivers. Applying the theories of interpersonal neurobiology (Siegel 2007) and attachment theory (Bowlby 1969), Siegel argued that both mindfulness practice and secure attachment contribute to similar changes in the structure and functioning of the middle prefrontal cortex—where integration and regulation occurs in the brain. Siegel (2009) suggested that mindfulness is a way of increasing relational capacity because "mindfulness is not only a form of attention training or a form of affect regulation training, but a relational process where you become your own best friend" (p. 145). Siegel's (2007) hypothesis about the association between mindfulness and secure attachment is also informed by recent, promising neuroscientific research (Holzel et al. 2010; Lazar et al. 2005), but its empirical validation is still preliminary.

Empirical Research on Mindfulness and Intimate Partner Relationships

Despite growing interest in understanding how mindfulness improves relationships, a limited number of empirical studies have examined mindfulness in the context of intimate partner relationships and included perspectives of both partners. Several of these studies reference *trait mindfulness* measures, which are a group of recently developed self-report instruments seeking to establish mindfulness as a valid, reliable construct by asking participants to assess their ability to pay attention to present experience (see Baer et al. 2006, for a review).

In the only study to investigate the standard 8-week MBSR intervention with couples, Birnie et al. (2010) reported statistically significant improvements in individual psychological distress for both cancer patients and intimate partners who completed an MBSR training together. No adaptations for couples were made in this standard MBSR intervention, and no relationship outcomes or relationship demographics were reported in this study. Of note, cancer patients' increased levels of trait mindfulness and decreased symptoms of stress were associated with significant decreases in their intimate partners' levels of psychological distress.

Carson et al. (2004) created the *mindfulness-based relationship enhancement* intervention for couples by making the following skillful adaptations to the standard 8-week MBSR program: partner-focused loving-kindness meditations, partner yoga sequences, targeted couple exercises (such as a mindful touch exercise) to increase intimacy, applications of mindfulness to relationship difficulties, and an emphasis on practicing mindfulness in the context of the couple relationship. In their randomized controlled trial with 22 non-distressed couples, the authors reported statistically significant improvements compared to a wait-list control group on a variety of relational and individual measures including relationship satisfaction, closeness, acceptance of the partner, and individual psychological distress.

In another novel mindfulness intervention for couples, Gambrel and Piercy (2015a) recently published findings from a randomized clinical trial for a 4-week *mindful transition to parenthood program* with 16 couples who were expecting their first child. Compared to a wait-list control group, men in the mindfulness couples intervention had statistically significant improvements in relationship satisfaction, trait mindfulness, and decreased negative affect; women in the couple treatment group had no

statistically significant treatment effects. In a qualitative study with 13 couples from their quantitative study, Gambrel and Piercy (2015b) reported how couples in the mindfulness couples intervention described both positive individual changes (increased presence, acceptance, and emotional regulation) and improvements in their couple relationships (increased connection, love and appreciation for their partners, mutuality, and communication).

Several correlational studies (Barnes et al. 2007; Jones et al. 2011; Saavedra et al. 2010; Wachs and Cordova 2007) reported statistically significant associations between trait mindfulness measures and intimate partner relationship satisfaction, but none of these studies included a mindfulness training intervention. Of note in their study with dating, university student couples, Barnes et al. (2007) described how participants with higher levels of trait mindfulness also reported statistically significant lower levels of emotional stress and more positive perceptions of their partners after the couples discussed a conflict in their laboratory. Similarly in their study with married couples, Wachs and Cordova (2007) reported that the positive association between trait mindfulness and increased marital satisfaction was mediated by reduced anger reactivity. The Barnes et al. (2007) and Wachs and Cordova (2007) studies suggest that managing anger effectively and the ability to communicate feelings skillfully to intimate partners may be influential ways that mindfulness positively affects intimate partner relationships.

Pruitt and McCollum (2010) published a unique qualitative study examining the relational effects of individual meditation practice by interviewing experienced meditators with a minimum of 10 years practice about the effects of their long-term meditation practice on close relationships. Respondents described that the relational benefits of their meditation practice were decreased reactivity with their partners, an increased willingness to be vulnerable and authentic, and a feeling of increased connection. This study described the individual meditators' perspectives of the positive benefits of meditation in their relationships, but did not include the perspectives of the meditators' intimate partners.

Primary Aim of Paper

Prior research on mindfulness has almost exclusively focused on *individual* outcomes and has rarely explored the *interpersonal* effects of mindfulness training. Few researchers have examined the association between mindfulness and intimate partner relationships; more research should examine how mindfulness could improve intimate partner relationships.

In order to fill this gap, our larger qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to examine the relational effects of an 8-week MBSR program by interviewing *both* novice meditators and their intimate partners. We focused on the most prevalent clinical scenario—when only one member of a couple learns to meditate. Although there is a wide variety of available meditation techniques and programs, we chose the 8-week MBSR program since it has garnered the most empirical support as an effective, intensive individual meditation training. This study is one of the first to qualitatively investigate the relational effects of an individual MBSR training from the perspectives of both the MBSR graduates and their intimate partners.

The larger study's design included the following three semi-structured interviews with each couple: (1) individual interview with the MBSR graduate; (2) individual interview with the intimate partner; and (3) couple interview with both members of the couple. As a result, a complex, multi-level approach to data analysis was required for the three units of analysis: (1) MBSR graduates; (2) intimate partners; and (3) couples. Due to space limitations, in this paper we focus on experiences of the intimate partners ($n = 11$) when their partners completed an 8-week MBSR program in the past 6 months. Papers describing the individual experiences of MBSR graduates and couples' experiences from the larger study are in development and beyond the scope of this paper.

Methods

General systems theory (GST; von Bertalanffy 1968) informed the design of this qualitative study by considering how individual mindfulness training affects intimate partner relationships. A GST perspective views any behavior as a form of communication; a shift in the behavior of a mindfulness training participant can influence her/his partner's experience of the intimate partner relationship. Also based on the GST theoretical assumption of wholeness and non-summativity, individuals cannot be studied independently because each member of a couple affects and is affected by her/his partner. Shapiro and Schwartz (2000) described the integration of systems theory and mindfulness training, "One's intention to embody the mindfulness qualities within a systems context of interconnectedness should affect not only one's relationship with self, but all interpersonal relationships, bringing greater compassion and insight to family, friends, colleagues, and even casual acquaintances and strangers" (p. 269). Informed by GST, this qualitative study included *second-person perspectives* from intimate partners who witnessed their partners' experiences of individual MBSR training.

Phenomenology (Smith et al. 2009) was used to explore the subjective experiences of MBSR graduates and their intimate partners. Phenomenological analysis develops a composite description of a shared common experience—specifically what participants experience and how they experience it. Completion of an 8-week MBSR program while in a committed intimate partner relationship represented the phenomenon of inquiry. We used the *interpretative phenomenological analysis* (IPA; Smith et al. 2009) approach to elicit rich descriptions of lived experiences and to conduct an interpretative analysis of the meanings of those experiences.

Participants: MBSR Graduates and their Intimate Partners

We used a purposeful, criterion sampling strategy (Patton 2002) with the following inclusion criteria for the larger study: (a) one member of the couple graduated from an 8-week MBSR training within 6 months of being interviewed (we chose this time frame so couples could more easily recall their experiences); (b) the MBSR graduate was in an ongoing, committed intimate partner relationship for at least 2 years; and (c) the recent MBSR graduate and her/his intimate partner both consented to be interviewed. Both heterosexual and same-sex couples were invited to volunteer for the study. Before taking the 8-week MBSR course, MBSR participants were required to have limited or no prior experience with mindfulness training. The intimate partners of the MBSR graduates could have a range of previous mindfulness experience or no mindfulness experience.

MBSR graduates were recruited from the databases of two established and empirically-supported hospital-based MBSR programs in a northeastern urban area. Participants from these MBSR programs represent a heterogeneous group with a variety of stressors such as: anxiety, depression, chronic pain, illness, family issues, and job stress. Although both MBSR programs are located in diverse urban areas, overall MBSR participants were primarily White, middle-aged, female, educated, heterosexual, and socioeconomically privileged.

Eleven couples completed the three-part interview process described below; there were 11 MBSR graduates and 11 intimate partners in the final sample. There were six female MBSR graduates (54.55 %) and five male MBSR graduates (45.45 %). For intimate partners, five were female (45.45 %) and six were male (54.55 %). The age of intimate partners was an average of 41.64 years old and ranged from 25 years old to 57 years old. Ten intimate partners were White (90.91 %), and one intimate partner was Black (9.09 %). Six out of the 11 intimate partners had a graduate degree (54.55 %), while the other five intimate partners (45.45 %) had a bachelor's degree. For household income, couples reported the following ranges of income: one couple $40–$59 K; one couple $60–79 K; three couples $80–99 K; and four couples over $100 K. One couple who were both business professionals reported an income of less than $20,000 because both members of the couple were currently unemployed. Another couple was not comfortable reporting their household income. The average relationship length for couples in the study was 13.82 years; relationship length ranged from 3 to 23 years together. There were nine heterosexual couples (81.82 %) and two same sex couples (18.18 %; one male couple and one female couple). Eight couples were married (72.73 %), and six couples reported having children living in the household (54.55 %). The average number of children in these six couples was 1.83. Three intimate partners in the sample had some previous mindfulness training. Emily from Couple 1 completed the 7-day MBSR professional training 2 years earlier. Sophia from Couple 8 took the 8-week MBSR training 2 years prior to her husband Dan. Lydia from Couple 10 took the 8-week MBSR training about 5 months before her husband Andrew.

Procedure

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at the authors' university, 11 couples were recruited by email and flyers from the two MBSR programs and interviewed for our larger qualitative study. The average length of time between completion of the MBSR program and the interview was 1.5 months; the range was 1 week to 4 months. After couples first provided written informed consent and completed a demographic survey and relationship satisfaction measure (*Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale*; Busby et al. 1995), a semi-structured interview was conducted in the following three-part sequence: (a) the MBSR graduate individually; (b) the MBSR graduate's intimate partner individually; and (c) the couple briefly together for final reflections. The interviews lasted approximately 2.5 h and explored their relationship experience before, during, and after the graduates' participation in the MBSR program.

The focus of this paper is on the 11 intimate partners' interviews, which lasted on average 30 min (see Table 1 for the interview structure), and the intimate partners' reflections during the couple interviews, which lasted approximately 20 min. After completing the three-part interview process, each participant was given a $25 gift card ($50 total per couple) to a national department store and asked if they would like to review a draft of the study's findings in the future. All participants expressed their interest in reviewing the study's findings. All interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim by

Table 1 Intimate partner semi-structured interview guide

How would you describe your level of satisfaction and commitment in the relationship right now? Has it changed over time?
How would you describe your intimate relationship with your partner before she/he took the MBSR program?
What led your partner to take the MBSR program? What was happening in your lives at that time? What do you think were the reasons that your partner took the MBSR course?
What was it like for you when your partner was taking the MBSR program?
What were your expectations?
Can you describe anything you noticed about your partner and/or your relationship during that time that stands out to you?
What did you notice that was happening for your partner?
What did you like? What did you dislike?
What was challenging?
How would you describe the effects of the MBSR experience:
For your partner?
For you? How much did your partner's participation affect you?
For your relationship?
For other important people in your lives?
How would you describe any shifts in your interactions with your intimate partner?
Did you notice any shifts in the acceptance, compassion, and/or empathy that your intimate partner offered? If so, how did these shifts influence your relationship?
How about any observation of shifts with communication patterns? Conflict? Behavioral change?
I'm wondering about how you see your partner after this mindfulness class? How do you think your partner sees you after this class?
What does this mindfulness experience mean to your relationship moving forward?
Do you have any interest in taking the MBSR class as a result of your partner's experience?

professional transcriptionists. The first author closely reviewed and edited each transcript to ensure its accuracy.

Data Analysis

A modified approach to the IPA (Smith et al. 2009) six-step method of phenomenological analysis (see Table 2) was applied to analyze the transcribed interviews; MAXQDA (2010) was used to organize the data analysis. Initially, 27 intimate partner themes and 357 coded intimate partner segments emerged. After reviewing the themes with the research team and reaching consensus, the final data analysis yielded three major themes and seven subthemes, which are described below in the findings.

Trustworthiness

The first author is an MBSR teacher, experienced meditator, couple and family therapist, and married father of a young child. For the qualitative data analysis, he employed

Table 2 Interpretative phenomenological analysis data analysis steps (Smith et al. 2009)

Step #	Name of step	Description
1	Reading and re-reading	Repeated reading to ensure the participant is the focus of analysis and "slowing down our habitual propensity for 'quick and dirty' reduction and synopsis" (p. 82)
2	Initial noting	Most detailed, most time consuming, and most exploratory. Line by line analysis producing a comprehensive and detailed set of themes and comments on the data. Descriptive (content-based), linguistic (process-based), and conceptual (interpretative) comments
3	Developing emergent themes	"Reduce the volume of detail whilst maintaining complexity" and "mapping the interrelationships, connections, and patterns" (p. 90) between Step 2's exploratory notes
4	Searching for connections across emergent themes	Develop a chart of how the themes fit together
5	Moving to the next case	Repeat Steps 1 to 4 with the next interview. Illustrates the idiographic focus of IPA
6	Looking for patterns across cases	What connections are there across cases? How does a theme in one case help illuminate a different case? The outcome is a table of themes with pithy text examples from participants

Gearing's (2004) reflexive/cultural bracketing typology to identify and make transparent his assumptions, values, cultural background, values, and biases during every stage of the study. The second author is a faculty member in a couple and family therapy program, a married mother of a school-age child, and has not participated in mindfulness training. The third author is a partnered, former faculty member in a couple and family therapy program and has some mindfulness experience.

Triangulation (Patton 2002) was incorporated into the study design to ensure that study findings accurately captured the experiences of participants. First, interviewing both intimate partners and the MBSR graduates about their experiences included multiple perspectives. Second, a member check (Creswell 2007) was conducted by sharing findings with all participants via email to check for accuracy and clarification. Seven out of the 11 couples (63.63 %) provided feedback during the member check and agreed with the emergent themes. Third, a rigorous audit trail was kept using memos to track all decision making. Fourth, the second and third authors are experienced qualitative researchers who collaborated during each step of the study.

Findings

The following three major themes (in italics) and seven subthemes (in parentheses) emerged from the 11 intimate partners' interviews: (1) *positive observations* (general positive perception, MBSR graduate's improved emotional balance); (2) *perceived impact* (perception of communications, impact on intimate partner and relationship); and (3) *meaning making* (appreciation, incongruence of meaning, continuing practice). Table 3 summarizes the three major themes and seven subthemes, which are described using illustrative quotes from intimate partners. All identifiers were removed to maintain participants' anonymity.

Positive Observations

The first major theme, positive observations, describes intimate partners' general observations of the MBSR graduates' mindfulness training experiences. The positive observations theme includes the following two subthemes: (1) *general positive perception* and (2) *MBSR graduate's improved emotional balance*.

General Positive Perception

This subtheme describes the intimate partners' views that the MBSR training was generally positive and helpful for the MBSR graduates. As noted in Table 3, this subtheme appeared 44 times and was mentioned by all 11 intimate partners.

For example, Rebecca and Ethan (Couple 2) were navigating a family crisis when Ethan had attempted suicide and then lost his job. Ethan described his observations of how the mindfulness training helped his wife Rebecca, "It was almost like a grounding for her, trying to ground herself. And I think that that she needed that. It was a very positive impact on her."

A subgroup of male intimate partners (Couples 3, 4, and 5) described a positive, but more detached view of the graduates' MBSR training. For example, Ben, the intimate partner in Couple 4, had been very busy with his job and caring for his ill parents. Ben joked about his appreciation for his wife Grace's MBSR participation, "There's a lot of people who don't have any patience for that. . . So, I think it's all a good thing. . . It's good that one of us does it and I'm glad it's her [laughter]." While he felt the mindfulness training was generally positive, he was grateful his wife made this effort so that he did not have to.

MBSR Graduate's Improved Emotional Balance

This second subtheme describes intimate partners' observations of increased calmness and focus in MBSR

Table 3 Intimate partners' (IPs) themes (n = 11)

Theme	Theme frequency
Major theme: Positive observations	89 Total segments: All IPs
General positive perception	44 segments: All IPs
MBSR graduate's improved emotional balance	45 segments: All IPs
Major theme: Perceived impact	155 Total segments: All IPs
Perceptions of communications	78 segments: All IPs
Impact on intimate partner and relationship	77 segments: All IPs
Major theme: Meaning making	72 Total segments: All IPs
Appreciation	27 segments: 9 of 11 IPs
Incongruence of meaning	21 segments: 7 of 11 IPs
Continuing practice	22 segments: 10 of 11 IPs

graduates. This subtheme emerged 45 times in the descriptions of all 11 intimate partners. In the first example, Cameron (Couple 11) described his observations of Lucas, who wanted to work on his anger and volatility toward Cameron during his MBSR training:

> He was much more calm and more settled than he usually was and seemed much happier with himself without having to work as hard as he seemed like he had to at other times…. And so that is something that I saw as a difference. He sort of had tools that he could call on and use…. The way he talked about himself was much more gentle.

Observations of increased calmness similar to Cameron's description consistently appeared in the 11 intimate partner interviews.

Even intimate partners with a more tempered view of the MBSR training's effects noticed some increased emotional balance in MBSR graduates. Jack (Couple 5) said, "There are perhaps moment where, ah, you know, it helps her, you know, to be a little calmer, or maybe a little more accepting, ah, a little more comfortable." Sophia (Couple 8) shared about her husband Dan, "He seemed to calm down a little bit actually—a little bit." In the next major theme, the impact of emotional balance on intimate partners and their relationships is explored.

Perceived Impact

The second major theme, perceived impact, describes intimate partners' perceptions of how the MBSR training affected both the intimate partners and their relationships. The perceived impact theme includes two subthemes: (a) *perception of communications* and (b) *impact on intimate partner and relationship.*

Perceptions of Communications

This subtheme describes intimate partners' perceptions of how the graduates' MBSR training affected the couples' communication patterns. It was identified 78 times and all 11 intimate partners were represented.

For example, Emily (Couple 1) noticed a difference in interactions with her partner Ava. Both members of the couple described how their personal differences sometimes led to conflict. Emily said her "main observation of the shift" from Ava's MBSR training was "there is just more calm in the family right now than there was before." Emily also perceived "a subtle feeling of more acceptance" from Ava and observed that Ava "doesn't get as upset." Despite these improvements, Emily further described the complexity of their relationship:

> I certainly wished for less reactivity and there is still a level of reactivity… It still goes on, but there are more periods of, there are more conversations, even if they are five seconds, where I feel like I'm getting acknowledgement from her or she is stopping to kind of connect or, you know, [say] "I recognize you."

The significant development for Emily was an increase in acknowledgement and connection from Ava during their interactions. Even though there are more periods of calm, Ava's reactivity still occurred. Several intimate partners also described similar improvements in their patterns of interaction as a result of increased emotional balance, yet they emphasized that their couple communication issues were not completely resolved as MBSR graduates' emotional reactivity still negatively affected their relationships.

Impact on Intimate Partner and Relationship

This subtheme describes the personal impact of graduates' MBSR training on intimate partners and their relationships. This subtheme appeared 77 times for all 11 intimate partners and describes a range of very positive to minimal impact on intimate partners. Contradictions in some intimate partners' descriptions also emerged, suggesting feelings of ambivalence and a more complex view of their intimate relationships, despite their overall positive observations of the MBSR graduates.

Eli (Couple 9) described the positive effects of his wife Jennifer's MBSR training on her debilitating struggle with chronic pain and depression. He said, "I have a more active partner. I have somebody who's active in our life. It's not just my life with the girls. I'm not as much of a single parent." Eli felt less isolated and more supported as a parent because Jennifer began helping more with parenting responsibilities during the MBSR training. Eli then provided a refined view of the relational effects of Jennifer's MBSR training:

> You know, it made a difference for me. It was nice. I got a more active partner, but, you know, it didn't make a huge difference for me… And so I'll say this out is that, you know, with all the medical issues going on and all the pain, uh, migraines, uh, getting a little bit of her back helped, but that there's such a long way to go.

His nuanced assessment included the impact of Jennifer's extensive medical issues on their relationship. From Eli's perspective, Jennifer's medical status was the dominant issue in their relationship and defined his overall experience of their relationship. Comparing the effects of mindfulness training with her medical issues, the scale of the MBSR training's effects was not significant enough to

make "a huge difference" for Eli. The attribution of relational change by intimate partners seemed to require a significant shift in their dominant experience of the relationship. Although mindfulness helped, most intimate partners did not feel that it significantly improved their relationships.

Leah (Couple 6) also described how her husband William's MBSR training affected their relationship. During her interview, she reported how his decreased anxiety affected their relationship:

> I think it's taken away some of that stress and the anxiety, and my–the amount that he's depended on me, because it can get to be too much… He has something else to do with it. So not depending on me as much. I don't know that it's affected our relationship, per se; more, like, my mental health in general. Just like, I can– it's a little bit of a weight lifted off. I mean, it's still there.

Later during her interview, Leah summarized the impact of William's mindfulness training: "So it is much better. And it's, but, um, I don't know that it's been as, as strong an effect as I was hoping. That might be because, maybe because the anxiety is very strong." Leah did not feel the scale of the MBSR training's effects was significant enough compared to the ongoing impact of William's anxiety on their relationship. While William's mindfulness training decreased his dependency on her and improved her personal well-being, the effects on their relationship were not significant for her because his anxiety and dependency are "still there." Most intimate partners said they benefitted from the graduates' MBSR training, but pre-existing issues in their relationship tempered its relational impact.

Meaning Making

In the third major theme, meaning making, there was no single, unifying theme capturing what the graduates' MBSR training meant to the 11 intimate partners. Instead, subgroups emerged that describe how intimate partners processed the meaning of the graduates' MBSR experience differently. This divergence suggests a range of meaning was constructed based on the unique complexities and dynamics of each couple's relationship. This major theme included the following three subthemes: (a) *appreciation*, (b) *incongruence of meaning*, and (c) *continuing practice*.

Appreciation

This subtheme includes the subgroup of intimate partners who expressed appreciation for graduates' participation in the MBSR training. Twenty-seven data segments emerged, and nine out of the 11 intimate partners were represented. Several intimate partners expressed their appreciation for the MBSR training improving graduates' self-care. Emily (Couple 1) described her reaction while observing how her partner Ava now took time from her busy work life to meditate: "So just to see her doing that. . . it gave me a sense of hope." Ethan (Couple 2) described what his wife Rebecca's MBSR training meant to him: "She cared about me and she wanted to make sure that she was there for me." He viewed her efforts to practice mindfulness as an expression of caring for him.

Four out of the five intimate partners (Couples 6, 8, 10, and 11) of the male MBSR graduates described an appreciation for the MBSR graduates' willingness to take the class. Lydia (Couple 10) was grateful her husband Andrew took the class because mindfulness training was "a bit more of a leap" for him, while Cameron (Couple 11) said his partner Lucas was "trying something completely out of his norm." Embedded in this appreciation may be the assumption that analytical or masculine individuals would not be interested in the experiential or feminine aspects of the self-reflective practices taught in MBSR training. This particular thread of meaning making seemed to be influenced by traditional gender roles.

Incongruence of Meaning

In this subtheme, another subgroup of intimate partners described specific incidents of incongruence regarding the meaning of the MBSR training. Only 21 data segments and seven out of the 11 intimate partners were included in this subtheme, but the differences in meaning between intimate partners and MBSR graduates were noteworthy.

During her individual interview, Lily, the MBSR graduate from Couple 3, enthusiastically shared how her MBSR training helped her become a better partner. During her husband Noah's individual interview, he agreed with the individual benefits she described, but confided that Lily's MBSR training "didn't mean a lot to me." Lily was so passionate about her MBSR training that she also wanted Noah to join a meditation group with her. He did not want to be pressured to join a meditation group and instead wanted to decide "on my own time." Noah's experience highlights why offering mindfulness training as a couples intervention could be challenging. Like couples therapy, one member of the couple might be more interested in participating compared to the other partner.

The most extreme difference in meaning surprisingly occurred in one of the three couples (Couple 8) in which the intimate partner (Sophia) had already taken the MBSR training. Sophia's husband, Dan, admitted that their conflict had increased during his MBSR training. He recently tried to integrate a mindful pause to interrupt an escalating argument and described the difficulty: "I kind of, like, pull

back and, like, breathe, and, and it really helps. But I know it upsets her." Sophia experienced his pausing as abandonment, "He just kind of left me and made me feel like really angry… I felt he didn't care about how I was feeling in the moment." Dan and Sophia had both learned to practice mindfulness and even practiced together every evening during Dan's MBSR training. Despite their shared experience with mindfulness, each member of the couple interpreted Dan's pausing in different ways. Their example not only powerfully illustrates the incongruence of meaning between MBSR graduates and intimate partners, but it also diminishes the potential effectiveness of the most obvious solution to their difference in meaning making—having both members of the couple learn to practice mindfulness.

Continuing Practice

In this subtheme, intimate partners made associations between the MBSR graduates' continued practice and any observed benefits. This subtheme appeared only 22 times, but 10 out of the 11 intimate partners described it. These intimate partners appreciated the benefits of mindfulness practice in the MBSR graduates and hoped that they would continue to practice. They also understood the challenges of maintaining the discipline of a consistent mindfulness practice. Several intimate partners emphasized that the graduates' MBSR training was just the beginning. Leah (Couple 6) mandated daily practice for her husband William: "It's every day." She noticed a difference between the days he practiced and when he did not practice. Observing William's changes during the MBSR course, she also understood that mindfulness training was a process. She said, "I don't think it's ended, really, because he's still growing, you know, like, he's still learning."

Several intimate partners described the decrease in benefits observed in MBSR graduates when they did not continue their daily mindfulness practice at home. Cameron (Couple 11) shared this description of his partner, Lucas, 4 months after he completed his MBSR training:

> It's been about four months, and I'd say for the first month afterwards it really strongly carried over. Since then it's become more distant as sort of meditation isn't as much of a standard practice for him… I wouldn't say he was going back fully… it's sort of like, uh, stretching a rubber band or a string and the rubber band gets stretched and it never goes completely back to where it was, but it has some of that sort of elasticity that it gained from being stretched sort of to its extreme.

Cameron's rubber band metaphor implies the integration of some level of change. Lucas did not return to baseline, but the scale of his improvement was not sustained 4 months later.

Discussion

Using GST to include a second-person perspective from intimate partners to better understand the effects of individual MBSR training on couples fills a gap in the mindfulness and couple and family therapy literature. Overall, intimate partners were supportive of graduates' MBSR training and reported it was a positive experience. The most consistent finding was intimate partners' observations of graduates' improved emotional balance during their 8-week MBSR training. Intimate partners often described an increased calmness and decreased reactivity in the MBSR graduates. The intimate partners' observations confirmed the importance of emotional expression in the trait mindfulness correlational studies by Wachs and Cordova (2007) and Barnes et al. (2007), who suggested mindfulness could positively affect couple relationships by decreasing emotional reactivity during stressful interactions.

Findings are noteworthy because the MBSR graduates in this study actually participated in mindfulness training, in contrast to prior correlational studies that did not include a mindfulness training intervention. The long-term meditators in the Pruitt and McCollum (2010) qualitative study also described decreased emotional reactivity as a benefit to their close relationships. Similarly, couples expecting a child in Gambrel and Piercy's (2015b) couples intervention described improved individual emotional regulation and noticing increased emotional stability in their partners. The second-person perspective from the intimate partners of MBSR graduates in this study supports the development of emotional balance as a significant relational effect of mindfulness training. The personal benefits that intimate partners themselves experienced were most often associated with MBSR graduates' increased calmness. For example, some intimate partners described how they personally felt less stress because the MBSR graduates were managing their own stress better. This finding supports the Birnie et al. (2010) study in which the intimate partner's level of psychological distress decreased when the cancer patient's stress level decreased as a result of the MBSR training.

Yet, intimate partners reported that behavioral shifts in the MBSR graduates were only emerging and were often limited in scale. Their descriptions suggest individual benefits of mindfulness do not automatically transfer to improved relationship outcomes. Although intimate partners observed some improvements in communication with MBSR graduates, these changes were in the early stages of development. They were supportive of the MBSR

graduates' efforts, but most intimate partners did not feel that the larger patterns of their relationships were significantly affected by the graduates' individual MBSR training. The MBSR intervention had widely different effects on these intimate partner relationships based on complex individual and couple variables such as mental health, type and severity of stressors, level of relationship satisfaction and conflict, couple dynamics, and stage of family lifecycle. The positive relational effects of mindfulness may increase through longer-term, consistent mindfulness practice by one member of the couple or through a couples' conjoint mindfulness training tailored to couples' specific issues and needs.

In addition, the couple's perceptions of the impact of mindfulness training were often not congruent. The meaningful internal shifts that MBSR graduates described did not significantly influence most intimate partners' perceptions of their couple relationships. Based on the findings, the MBSR training experience had not been fully integrated into the couples' relationships, and MBSR graduates were describing an experience of their relationships that looked quite different from the intimate partners' perspective of the same relationships.

Conceptualizing mindfulness practice as strictly an individual activity with only individual results may stem from a Western cultural focus on individual growth. Shifting our cultural emphasis that meditation practice is only confined to individual outcomes, a relational perspective of meditation could expand the reach of how meditation is practiced.

Study Limitations

Because of our smaller, non-representative sample and qualitative approach, findings cannot be generalized. Although a purposeful and criterion-based sampling strategy was used, participants self-selected to be interviewed. This may have led to a sampling bias in which only intimate partners who were more positive about mindfulness training volunteered. Despite efforts to increase diversity by recruiting from multiple MBSR programs, our sample lacked racial and socioeconomic diversity. Additionally, most MBSR graduates in this study were receiving additional interventions such as therapy or medication during their MBSR training, which may have confounded the findings.

Clinical Implications

Even if a couple is not taking mindfulness training together, the engagement and support of intimate partners in the training is an opportunity to instigate and integrate both individual and relational change. Since the most common clinical scenario is that one member of a couple decides to learn to meditate, we recommend adding a relational focus to existing individual mindfulness interventions. For example, the sixth class of the MBSR curriculum typically focuses on communication. This theme of communication could also expand its focus to include practical ways that mindfulness could be practiced and integrated into close relationships. Another idea is to provide an orientation letter at the first session to individual mindfulness training participants to share with family members or friends. The letter could provide an overview of the mindfulness training and suggest a helpful list of ways that family members and friends can support the mindfulness participant. For example, one suggestion could be: "Offer support for your loved ones to make at-home mindfulness practice a priority over the next 8 weeks, and talk about the best times and places to practice at home that fit with your family's daily rhythms." In addition, a family or intimate partner night could be added as an extra class offering, and additional classes focused on intimate partner and family relationships could be offered to graduates of individual meditation trainings like MBSR.

Creating mindfulness-based interventions for couples may offer clinical potential because of the power of the shared couple experience. Yet many intimate partners in this study witnessed the benefits of the MBSR training in their significant others, but they were often not interested in practicing mindfulness themselves. Adapting an intensive mindfulness training like MBSR for couples faces this challenge of differing levels of motivation for beginning mindfulness practice. One member of a couple pushing the other member to practice mindfulness would be contraindicated because of the genuine, personal motivation required to commit to lengthy, daily mindfulness practice.

Developing *mindfulness-enhanced* couple interventions may harness the potential relational benefits of shared mindfulness practice. Mindfulness-enhanced couple interventions would differ from *mindfulness-based* interventions by decreasing the rigorous mindfulness practice requirements of MBSR (30–60 min of daily at-home practice) and instead integrating smaller doses of mindfulness practice into existing couple interventions. Mindfulness-enhanced couple interventions could be offered as part of couple therapy or during important stages of the relationship such as: marriage preparation; childbirth; parenting at various stages of children's development; and partner or child illness.

Gambrel and Piercy's 4-week mindfulness-enhanced intervention (2015a, b) for couples expecting their first child demonstrates the potential relational benefits of adding a mindfulness component to the treatment of couples. Mindfulness-enhanced interventions may sacrifice the depth of intensive, mindfulness-based trainings like MBSR,

but may instead expand the reach of mindfulness interventions for couples. Additionally, mindfulness-enhanced couple interventions could prioritize conjoint participation and emphasize relational outcomes instead of just individual outcomes. For example, Gehart (2012) recently published a guide that describes how therapists can integrate mindfulness into clinical practice with couples and families, and Gale (2009) described specific meditation practices that family members could do together in session. Culturally sensitive adaptations of mindfulness trainings programs (such as Vallejo and Amaro 2009) are also necessary to increase access to diverse populations.

Future Research

Future research should focus both on emotion regulation as a potential relational outcome of mindfulness training and include multiple perspectives from family members and friends of mindfulness participants. A second-person perspective provides an expanded, systemic method to validate the effectiveness of mindfulness training. Observational data of mindfulness practitioners communicating with their intimate partners could also identify the specific processes of mindful and non-mindful interactions. Another area of future research could also explore which types of meditation are most helpful in relationships and how much meditation practice is necessary to benefit particular types of relational issues.

Conclusion

Existing research on mindfulness has primarily focused on individual health outcomes and has rarely explored the relational effects of mindfulness training. One member of a couple deciding to learn to meditate and participating in an individual mindfulness training like the 8-week MBSR program might be the most common scenario for mindfulness to enter an intimate partner relationship. This paper reported findings from a larger qualitative study in which intimate partners reflected on their experiences when their partner/spouse recently completed an 8-week MBSR program. Overall, intimate partners assessed that the MBSR training was a positive experience and also observed improved emotional balance in the MBSR graduates. Yet, most intimate partners described that the MBSR graduates' mindfulness skills were in the beginning stages of development and that MBSR graduates' behavioral changes were smaller in scale compared to the larger, previously existing patterns within their intimate partner relationships. Developing mindfulness-enhanced couple interventions that target dyadic outcomes could improve the relational benefits of mindfulness practice, while including a systemic perspective within individual mindfulness trainings may help to integrate mindfulness into intimate partner relationships.

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