

Relational Meditation: Moving from conflict to attunement

by Francine Beauvoir, PhD and Bruce Crapuchettes, PhD
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In 2009, we found ourselves at "The Wise Heart and the Mindful Brain" conference, which featured neuroscience expert Dan Siegel, M.D. from UCLA and noted Buddhist teacher and psychologist Jack Kornfield, Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley. As longtime couples' therapists, we were attending because we were interested in the insights that neurobiology was bringing to the practice of psychotherapy. We weren't sure about the "meditation" part. We knew that various forms of meditation had become wildly popular as adjuncts to psychotherapy over the past decade or so, but we'd never practiced meditation ourselves. Like many on-the-go practitioners, we'd concluded that we just didn't have time for a meditative practice. Besides, we weren't sure that meditation was relevant to our own work with couples. So we were prepared to wait out the meditation part of the program in order to gather the golden nuggets of neurobiological insights.

Most of the first day had focused on the well-known benefits of meditation: it helps people become calmer, less reactive and defensive, more open, receptive, and compassionate to themselves and others. But the real revelations for us came when Siegel launched into his explanation of the evolutionary and neurobiological implications of mindfulness practice. We learned, for example, that the mechanism by which one of the most common of all mindfulness exercises - focusing on the breath - calms and soothes people.

As Siegel explained it, the human brain evolved as an "anticipation machine," constantly scanning the environment for threats in order to increase the probability of survival - essential to feeling safe. Early humans were able to relax only when the environment looked and felt extremely safe. The challenge for many of us in our twenty-first-century lifestyles is that we've forgotten - or never learned - how to turn off this danger-scanning process. Mindfulness practice can provide a way of doing just that. When you focus on the breath coming in, you can safely anticipate that the next breath will go out, which will be followed by "in" and then "out." Breathing is predictable, so life at that moment becomes safe.

During meditation, when random thoughts enter your awareness, you name them (e.g., "What am I doing for dinner tonight?" and "I wonder why my boss doesn't like me.") and let them go, without judgment. Then you return your focused attention to the predictable pattern of breath after breath after breath. You follow this procedure over and over again. Turning away from the "outside" world and focusing "in close" on breathing, calms the limbic system - the brain's alarm system - thus creating a sense of sanctuary from the storm.

We also learned that focusing on a sensory motor action - like breathing - predicts what Siegel calls the "immediate-next-of-now", activates the middle prefrontal cortex which is the executive part of the brain. This area, he said, is critical to the kind of emotional states and behaviors that all therapists strive to evoke with their clients: attuned communication, emotional balance, fear modulation, response flexibility, insight, empathy, body regulation, moral judgment, and intuition. Siegel referred to these integrative states of mind as "The Magic Nine." One brain mechanism that appears central to experiencing the Magic Nine is the firing of the much-celebrated mirror neurons, which can make us "intuit" what other people are about to do or say. When we become calmly attuned to another person, that person will likely become calmly attuned to us.

OUR EUREKA MOMENT!

Halfway through the second day of the conference, Francine leaned over to Bruce and whispered, “Oh my God, what we’ve been doing with couples over the past twenty years is a form of mindful meditation!” Almost simultaneously, a similar lightbulb went off in Bruce’s head as well. On that day, hearing mindfulness practice discussed in a way we’d never heard before, we began to see a connection between what mindful meditation practice is trying to achieve and what we hope to accomplish with the couples we see in our practice. During times of high tension - like your average marital fight - as emotions escalate, partners typically react in anger and fear, doing damage to each other, themselves, and the relationship. But the key to helping partners prevent escalation is to teach them a slow and measured form of dialogue. It takes lots of coaching and practice, but we’ve observed over the years that couples who follow the Formal Dialogue protocol (see Appendix 2) consistently feel safer and less reactive together, even during moments of conflict and mutual antagonism.

The more we thought about it, the more it seemed to us that this dialogical practice conferred on couples all the same benefits as meditation - Siegel’s Magic Nine, in fact. The big difference, of course, is that two people are engaging with each other in doing this protocol. When most people meditate, they’re essentially meditating alone, even if they do it with other people in an ashram or a group and benefit from the communal energy. What seems distinctive about the Formal Dialogue is that it brings mindful meditation directly into what we call “reciprocal relational practice”. Each partner is, in effect, focusing on the other’s words in a nonjudgmental manner, rather than on the breath or on a mantra. This relational meditative process can develop such a sense of safety for both partners that they can allow themselves to be more fully vulnerable in each other’s presence, thus increasing their connection with one another.

At this conference, we recognized that without realizing it, we’d been teaching couples to replicate the “immediate-next-of-now” experience. Instead of focusing on the in-and-out of their own breath, however, they concentrate on each other’s words during the Formal Dialogue, engaging in a formalized process of mutually mirroring each other. They create safety by engaging in the four predictable behaviors of Mirroring, Validation, Empathy, and Response.

THE FORMAL DIALOGUE AS RELATIONAL MEDITATION

The goal of the Formal Dialogue process is to shift a couple from an angry, mutually reactive stance to a calm, accepting, listening one. Being the receiver, learning to Mirror word for word what the other is saying in a neutral and accepting manner without judgment, and learning to Validate, Empathize, and Respond non-defensively activates the prefrontal cortex just as mindful meditation does. Learning to stay grounded and focused on your partner’s words – even when every fiber of your being wants to shout, “Stop! I don’t want to hear that! That’s not true. That’s not how it was. You’ve got it all wrong!” – constitutes a powerful meditative practice.

AN EXAMPLE OF A FORMAL DIALOGUE

Here’s a Formal Dialogue we had a while back as we were walking hand in hand along the River Seine in Paris. Francine said, “I’d like to have a Formal Dialogue. Is this a good time for you?” Making an appointment is very important to formalize the process. Making an appointment is consciousness raising.

“This is a good time for me,” Bruce said.

This set Francine up as the sender and allowed Bruce to take a moment to center himself and move into a listening mode as the receiver. Having the sender begin by setting up an appointment for the Dialogue is important so that both parties in the Dialogue can prepare themselves to stay in the Formal structure.

Francine began with describing her concern about a specific event and Bruce Mirrored. "I'd like to talk about your taking 'a day off' from me last week."

Bruce Mirrored what she said, "You'd like to talk about my taking a day off from you last week." Bruce repeated what Francine said word for word, only reversing the pronouns so that she could remain calm in the knowledge of what the "immediate-next-of-now" will be. This structure is what keeps the sender feeling safe. It's often tempting for the receiver to change what he or she has heard, subtly reinterpreting what the sender has said or using "better" words. But this only makes the immediate-next-of-now unpredictable and unsafe.

"I really felt awful. I felt punished," Francine continued. Bruce squeezed her hand to signal a pause so he could Mirror (one can also use hand signals for this when sitting and facing each other). "You really felt awful. You felt punished," Bruce repeated.

From there on, we continued the Dialogue in which Francine made her points, punctuated by Bruce's hand squeezes to slow the process down enough to enable him to genuinely hear and Mirror word for word everything she said. The gist of her upset was that by going off by himself for a day, he'd made her feel that he was always choosing the agenda and on that particular day, he was punishing her for not wanting to do exactly what he wanted to do while in Paris.

Born and raised in France, Francine added at this point, "You aren't the king of France, you know. We got rid of kings long ago." A little later, she started crying and added, "I felt chastised, like a child." The feeling brought back memories of her unhappy childhood with a highly punitive, blaming mother. "Several times, Mom said she was going to kill me and kill herself, and we'd both go to Hell, and it'd be my fault!" Francine explained. Then she said she felt it was hard for her to trust Bruce - she didn't know what he'd done all that day. He squeezed her hand after each remark and Mirrored back exactly what she had said.

Later, after Francine had been silent for a moment, Bruce asked, "Is there anything more you'd like to say about this?" When she answered, "No, not for now," he proceeded to the next step: Validation, in which he as the receiver summarized what she as the sender had told him, and he asked whether his summary was a good summary. When Francine said it was, he continued, "I listened carefully to what you said. Your perspective is important and valuable to me, and you make sense."

During the next step, Empathy, Bruce said, "I imagine you might have felt angry, abandoned, and betrayed by me. Is that what you were feeling?"

Francine said, "Yes, I was feeling angry, abandoned, and betrayed. Right now, I'm feeling heard and calmer." Bruce Mirrored these words once again. He concluded by saying, "Those feelings make sense to me. I can see how you feel that way."

Then it was time for the Response stage, in which the roles become reversed and Bruce becomes the sender and Francine becomes the receiver. Since it's important that each stage of the Dialogue be clearly structured, Bruce began by saying, "I'd like to Respond now," and Francine answered, "OK."

Bruce, the new sender, said, "I'm really glad you asked for a Dialogue. I've been feeling you've been more distant recently."

After a hand squeeze, Francine Mirrored by repeating what Bruce said with the pronouns reversed. "You're really glad I asked for a Dialogue. You've felt that I've been more distant

recently.”

Two good ways to start a Response are to own what you can own and/or say something like “One thing that touched me in what you said is...” So during this phase of the Dialogue, Bruce told Francine—with each statement punctuated by her hand squeezes to allow what he was saying to come out in manageable, repeatable segments—that he was touched by her tears and passion and that he could really see how hurt she was and how much she wanted to feel connected. He then explained—with Francine Mirroring, word for word—that he’d spent his day alone working on our joint article for the Networker, “messing a bit” with the stock market, and seeing the new Woody Allen movie, *Midnight in Paris*. He added that he had loved the movie and wished so much she could have been there with him. “It included places and museums we’d just visited the day before,” he said, and after squeezing his hand, Francine repeated, “It included places and museums we’d just visited the day before.” Then she squeezed his hand again and said, “Pause a minute, I need to calm myself.”

After her pause to center herself, Bruce said that the day off was helpful to him, that he’d been together with Francine day and night for the previous three weeks on the workshop training tour of Europe, and that he was beginning to feel an uncomfortable sense of being joined at the hip with her. “I think I was too abrupt, and I regret that,” he said. “But having more space felt really good!” he added, and Francine Mirrored.

Francine then Validated what he had said by first summarizing it, asking him whether she’d given a good summary – and (when he said yes) telling him, “I listened carefully. Your perspective is important and valuable to me, and you make sense.” Following this, Francine Empathized by saying “I imagine that you felt and now feel relieved. Is that what you felt and feel?” Bruce concurred, and said, “Yes I was feeling relieved and still am.” When asked if he had any more feelings to express, he said he felt grateful and connected—which Francine Mirrored, “You also feel grateful and connected.”

A STRUCTURED DIALOGUE CREATES A SAFE SPACE TO TALK ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP

This Formal Dialogue can sound stilted and artificial at first. How can anything good come out of repeating back what each partner says? But paradoxically, the slowness and repetition is part of the strength of the process. Once the Dialogue begins, it flows along, predictably, from moment to moment. The structure of the Dialogue basically ensures that there’ll be no nasty surprises, no sudden attacks, and no comments out of left field. Structure equals safety (see Appendix 2 to learn more about the Formal Dialogue – especially the step-by-step chart).

In addition, the tone of voice used in the Formal Dialogue counts enormously. Ideally, it is calm and neutral, conveying nonjudgmental listening without impatient or snarky undertones. The Dialogue essentially holds the couple’s interaction in a state of controlled mindfulness, which not only prevents blowups, but also keeps each partner purposefully focused on the other and what he or she has to communicate. Since the process is predictable and the Mirroring is exact (word for word), each partner knows what’s coming next, the limbic system - the primitive part of the brain - is calmed, and the executive functions - the prefrontal cortex - is activated and strengthened. The couple feels less defensive, more relaxed, more attuned, and more empathic toward each other. Each partner is therefore better able to hear what the other has to say.

Clearly, we need more research to learn what the impact of the Formal Dialogue is on the brain; however, we know through experience that learning and practicing relational meditation

via the Formal Dialogue can have a transformative impact on individuals and couples. Just as it usually takes years of consistent, regular meditation practice to bring about deep, lasting neurobiological changes, practicing the Formal Dialogue won't transform a relationship overnight. We encourage couples to enter dialogical practice with the long haul in mind, just as they would if they were serious students of yoga or meditation. The life-transforming skills that will heal and change couples take months and years of practice to bear fruit.

As for us – Bruce and Francine – even with many years of using the Formal Dialogue under our belts, we haven't become a pair of saints. We still have disagreements and experience times when we aren't attuned to one another. We've discovered that even when we feel at our best with each other—safe, connected, and close—we can still move into painful disconnection quite suddenly.

It's clear that Eastern meditative practices are particularly helpful in calming the nervous system and enhancing a sense of relaxed wellbeing. As we've discovered, alternative forms of structured mindfulness such as the Formal Dialogue can be helpful for couples hoping to explore the heart of their relationship.

For further reading, we recommend the book by Buddhist master Gregory Kramer, *Insight Dialogue: The Interpersonal Path to Freedom* (Shambhala, 2007).