



Introduction

Frequent and/or intense stress caused by couple interaction may weigh on an individual and a relationship over time, creating chronic stress that leads to negative health outcomes (Wanic & Kulik, 2011). It is important that we work to understand predictors of physiological reactivity to marital conflict to find potential mechanisms of reducing the stressfulness of marital conflict and thus improving health and marital stability.

Previous research suggests that greater quality couple relationships (Nealey-Moore et al., 2007) and mindfulness (Laurent, Laurent, Hertz, Egan-Wright, & Granger, 2013) may reduce the stressfulness of marital interactions. However, a novel theoretical perspective is needed to be able to conceptualize and integrate such behavioral and intrapersonal predictors of the stressfulness of marital interaction.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the association between mindful partnering, a novel theoretical construct developed by the author, and physiological reactivity to marital conflict. Mindful partnering includes mindful awareness in attention and action toward one's partner, intentional acceptance and compassion of one's partner, and total mindful partnering. Mindful partnering may enhance relationship safety and security as well as reduce the threat characterized by marital conflict and thus soothe the activity of the stress system in marital conflict.

Methods

Participants

- Participants were seventeen couple pairs ($N= 34$) who were parents of teens aged 12-17 who participated in a larger study involving a mindfulness program for teens (NCCIH-funded project K01AT009592-01, PI: Lucas-Thompson).
- The sample were composed of primarily heterosexual couples, with the exception of one same-sex female couple.
- The sample was primarily made up of Non-Hispanic White participants (Women: 88.2% • Men: 94.1%)

Procedures

- Questionnaires including demographics, The Mindful Awareness and Attention Scale (MAAS, to measure intrapersonal mindfulness), and the Mindful Partnering Measure (MPM, developed by the authors), which included the subscales of mindful awareness and acceptance/compassion
- Couples discussed the 3 most conflict-producing topics in their relationship while their RSA was measured for 10 minutes, after a 5 minute baseline period.
- BIOPAC MP160 systems data acquisition hardware (BIOPAC Systems, Inc., Goleta, CA, USA) was used to measure respiration and electrocardiogram. AcqKnowledge Analysis software was used to analyze respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA). The peak-valley method was used to compute the RSA index (El Sheikh et al., 2009). Then, average RSA values were calculated for baseline and for the marital conflict task.

Results

Results of Regression Analyses Testing Mindful Partnering Variables as Predictors of One's Own RSA During the Marital Discussion Controlling for Baseline RSA, Intrapersonal Mindfulness, and Demographics

	b	SE	p	95% CI [LL,UL]	r ²
1.MPM- Total	-.03	.02	.115	[-.062, .007]	.15
2.MPM- Mindful Awareness	-.01	.03	.613	[-.067, .041]	.01
3.MPM- Acceptance/Compassion	-.04	.04	.295	[-.129, .042]	.09

Results of Regression Analyses Testing Mindful Partnering Variables as Predictors of One's Partner's RSA during the Marital Discussion Controlling for Baseline RSA, Intrapersonal Mindfulness, and Demographics

	b	SE	p	95% CI [LL,UL]	r ²
1.MPM- Total	.01	.01	.32	[-.013, .036]	.03
2.MPM- Mindful Awareness	.04	.02	.03	[.004, .086]	.09
3.MPM- Acceptance/Compassion	-.01	.04	.85	[-.100, .083]	.00

Discussion

- MPM-Mindful Awareness was a significant predictor of one's partner's greater RSA (with a small effect size), suggesting greater relaxation and a less pronounced stress response. These results suggest that when one's partner is fully present and attentive, it may relieve the potential stress of marital disagreement. Being present with full attention in this way may soothe a partner's nervous system by creating a feeling of being fully listened to and understood in the context of conflict.
- Whereas no other results were significant according to traditional significance testing, examinations of effect sizes revealed greater-than-trivial effects for several associations between mindful partnering variables and RSA during the conflict task. There was a small positive association between MPM- Total and one's partner's RSA, a medium negative association between one's own RSA with MPM- Total and a small negative effect for MPM- Acceptance/Compassion.
- These results point to a relaxation effect of one's partner's total mindful partnering. In contrast, effect size results suggested that mindful partnering may actually cause biological stress for the one who practices, possibly due to the increased effort involved in mindfulness and "suffering with" involved in practicing compassion toward one's partner. Although the sample size for this study was small, it provides promise for mindful partnering as a method of sharing the biological load of hard times with one's partner, and thus alleviating stress. Further research should seek to replicate these findings in larger samples, and, if promise continues to be shown for mindful partnering, interventions to improve this component of relationship functioning may be helpful in alleviating stress for partners.