

Announcer: Mindfulness in marriage. This is Stay Happily Married episode 267. Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Stephanie: I'm Stephanie Lockwood, and I am your host today. Welcome to the show. Do you have what it takes to be in a relationship when we're unhappy, unsatisfied or unfulfilled in a relationship, it's a never-ending fight.

Like a game of tag, the blame keeps getting thrown back and forth from one spouse to the other. Angry outbursts are sparked by seemingly unrelated events, and the topic of debate is slightly altered with each passing round, but the core issue of the conflict never seems to get resolved. As children we learned how to tie our shoes. As teenagers we learned how to drive a car, but as adults who teaches us how to be in a relationship?

There's no class in school that teaches us how to behave or what to do to make a relationship successful. When it comes to acting on feelings of the heart, how do we know what we're doing is right? If divorce rates are any indicator of our relationship proficiency, it may be fair to say that we can all use a little helpful guidance in the love department.

Taking preventative measures to teach couples how to develop a mindful attitude and lifestyle, Dr. Nina Solanki created the mindful relationship and lifestyle program which is a mindfulness based and relationship enhancement program for couples. Earning her doctoral and master's degree in clinical psychology, Dr. Nina Solanki has an expansive background in the healthcare profession, ranging from private practice all the way to crisis centers and everything in between.

These days Dr. Nina Solanki is a therapist with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina, where she is incorporating her work and knowledge of mindfulness and its benefits and relationships into both individual and couples' therapy. So welcome to the show, Nina. I'm so glad you could join us.

Dr. Nina: Thanks for having me.

Stephanie: I'm not sure if the topic of mindfulness, let alone that term, are very well known. Could you elaborate on what exactly mindfulness is?

Dr. Nina: Yeah. Mindfulness is actually an ancient practice found in Eastern philosophies, such as Buddhism, but it really didn't get introduced into Western psychology until the '70s and '80s by Jon Kabat-Zinn. And so put simply mindfulness is a state of active open attention on the present. When you're mindful you're able to observe thoughts and feelings from a distance without judging them as good or bad.

And so many times often we live life on autopilot kind of because we're mindlessly going about our day. How many times have you driven to work and realize you don't even remember how you got there? So instead of letting your life pass you by, mindfulness means living in the moment and awakening to the experience.

Stephanie: So that's what mindfulness is when you're realizing your 20 miles away from where exactly we started?

Dr. Nina: Yes.

Stephanie: So when you see couples, what problems do you see them experiencing in their relationship that is as a result of them not being mindful?

Dr. Nina: A lot of times I'm seeing that when couples aren't being mindful, they may find it hard to know how they're feeling, how to communicate that to their partners as well as how to regulate their own emotions. So when couples fight emotions are high, people are feeling hurt, angry, defensive, and it's common for partners to blame each other and to avoid taking responsibility. They want to fight for and defend their own perspective and essentially their own feelings.

So when we're not mindful of our emotions, we get caught up in them and feel as if the emotions are controlling us and controlling the things we say as a result. When we are aware of how we feel with no judgment, we're better able to self-regulate those feelings, and we'll be able to express how we feel without speaking negatively from a place of anger and frustration. So not being able to regulate emotions during conflict is one of the biggest problems couples face by not being mindful.

Stephanie: And so left unresolved, what are some of the short as well as the long-term negative effects that this kind of behavior could have on a relationship?

Dr. Nina: So some short-term effects could be general unhappiness with the relationship and increased stress. And the long-term effects could be that couples start to really feel that their relationship is starting to break down because they keep repeating patterns over time and realize that things are not getting better which can ultimately lead to the relationship ending.

Stephanie: And so now as a therapist you're sitting down and you're speaking with couples that have come to you to explore and even perhaps resolve issues that are appearing in their relationship, and at what point in time do you see couples becoming aware that not being mindful of each other is actually hurting their relationship?

Dr. Nina: I think by the time most couples come to therapy they're pretty aware that's what they have been doing on their own is not helping and that they need a third party to help either get some perspective or give feedback and suggestions.

And it's been in my experience by just reflecting back to the couples the issues that they present with and some of my observations of how they interact with each other, that itself starts to build awareness about how each partner has a role in that dynamic. But sometimes some couples also need more direct feedback, and I provide psycho education on how couples need to take responsibility for the role that they play in the relationship.

Stephanie: And so do all couples obviously, like you said, if people are coming in and they're speaking with you, they know that something has happened, but is it something that all couples realize that the core issue of whatever they're experiencing or feeling or any of the arguments that they're having as a result of just not recognizing this issue?

Dr. Nina: I think at some point they will recognize that because that's the point they will realize that they are responsible for how they react and how they contribute to that dynamic. So, yes, I think at some point they all do realize this.

Stephanie: And so do you see any trends among couples having issues that could be resolved from this mindful thought process? Is it something that you see in a typical age group, or does it come with a certain length of being together in a relationship? Do you see any correlation between those factors?

Dr. Nina: I really believe that anyone can practice mindfulness, and so really the only requirement is to have an intention or desire to be more mindful. Everyone is capable of becoming more mindful so there really aren't any exclusionary criteria or types of people that would be better suited for it. So really I haven't seen any trends. It's really as long as people have the desire to be more mindful.

Stephanie: And so relationships, it's pretty well-known they can require a fair amount of delicacy, and it's almost tricky to keep this balance in place, but you've developed a program that does help to teach couples how to be successful in a relationship and it's called, "The Mindful Relationship and Lifestyle Program." So could you tell us a bit about what this program is and what its goal is?

Dr. Nina: "The Mindful Relationship and Lifestyle Program" is a mindfulness-based relationship enhancement program. It's designed for couples who are either thinking about getting married or making a formal commitment or for couples in a long-term relationship who may feel like they've hit a rut in the relationship or were starting to feel distress and maybe noticing things about the relationship they want improved.

And in the program couples are taught not only mindfulness skills, but also how to adopt a mindful lifestyle. It teaches how to eat mindfully, how to walk mindfully, and how to really live life in the present moment. And as I've said before, mindfulness can improve your overall sense of well-being as an individual, and when two people are in a healthy place they're more likely to be successful and contributing to a healthy relationship.

And the program also provides psycho education on things like communication skills, how to identify negative patterns of communicating, how to be mindful of how their partner is feeling, and the program is heavily rooted in the research by Dr. John Gottman, who is one of the leading researchers on marriage.

So the skills that the couples will learn is based on what the research says contributes to successful long-term relationships. And the ultimate goal of the program is to provide couples

with the tools and knowledge for them to go out on their own once the program is over and to be able to work through their own issues.

Stephanie: And so through this program, what specific items are couples working on that would help resolve some of those negative issues then?

Dr. Nina: One major area would be that couples will be working on how to identify their own emotions and how to self-regulate when having a fight or arguing. As I've said before, emotions are high and couples are more likely to say hurtful things out of anger, but if they can learn how to regulate those strong feelings they can still express that anger in a more effective way.

Stephanie: I like that. So they're kind of channeling it differently so there's no blame. It's just this is the issue.

Dr. Nina: Yeah and there's no judgment.

Stephanie: And with couples approaching their relationship from this more mindful viewpoint, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality of their interactions in the relationship?

Dr. Nina: I'm seeing couples becoming more aware of when they put blame on their partner and an increase in taking personal responsibility for their role. I'm also seeing couples having more passion for their partner and being able to better empathize. I'm also seeing couples improving their ability to express their own feelings and being able to better self-regulate their emotions.

And mindfulness has other positive advantages that can be utilized in a non-romantic relationship. Mindfulness has been shown to help with coping with stress. It can improve focus and concentration, and it can help you in general feel more peaceful and connected with yourself and others around you.

Stephanie: I do. I like that. So it's something that it's improving the relationship by improving on yourself individually.

Dr. Nina: Exactly. Exactly.

Stephanie: Oh, okay. So it kind of rolls over into all aspects of your life. That's very promising there. Is there anything else that our listeners should know about mindfulness or your program?

Dr. Nina: I just want to reiterate that there is a lot of research backing up the benefits of mindfulness, and there are some great resources out there for anyone interested in learning more about it. And mindfulness is just a really great mindset and attitude and a lifestyle.

Stephanie: Nina, thank you so much for taking the time and talking with us today and educating all of us about mindfulness as well as the program that Lepage Associates offers.

Dr. Nina: Well, thanks for having me. It was great being here.

Stephanie: To find out more about Dr. Nina Solanki and her program "The Mindful Relationship and Lifestyle Program" you can visit Lepage Associates online at [lepageassociates.com](http://lepageassociates.com), or you can call 919-572-0000 for an appointment.

Thanks for so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this or any of our previous episodes, visit us at [stayhappilymarried.com](http://stayhappilymarried.com). I'm Stephanie Lockwood. Until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us at on the web at [stayhappilymarried.com](http://stayhappilymarried.com). We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please e-mail us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com), or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.

[pause]

Stephanie: Is there anything else that you'd like to leave, any last bits of wisdom with our listeners today?

Patricia: Oh yeah. I'm so glad you asked me that. Read my book.

Stephanie: So wise and profound. I love that.

Patricia: Well, honestly, in each one of these stories, there's either something about the loss of a child, the death of the child that a couple has to deal with; aging parents, parents that have to be cared for or the physical health of one of the partners and how they had to deal with that.

There are in each one of these stories somewhere I think you'll find something relevant to your own situation. I really do. And the book is not written as a therapeutic book, it's written as personal stories which I think we identify with much better than if it's a clinical kind of therapy.

Stephanie: Oh yes, I definitely would have to agree with that then.

Patricia: Yeah. Yeah.

Stephanie: Patricia, thank you so much for taking the time and being with us on the show today.

Patricia: Oh, you know it was my pleasure. I have looked forward to this.