

Scott Blair: Are you being mindful in your relationship? This is stay happily married Episode number 309.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married. Your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Scott Blair: I'm Scott Blair and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Are you being mindful in your relationship? Each and every one of us responds to stress differently. Some of us respond to stress by eating more than we usually do, while other eat less than they are used to when they are stressed. Some of us exercise until they push themselves too far while others may stop their exercise regimes. Some use smoking, drinking and drugs to try to escape the stress in their lives. Sometimes we may choose to withdraw from our friends, families, and activities, while some of us fill up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems which just leads to added stress. So how does our stress response impact the way we respond to others? How can this affect our relationships? What can we do to improve the quality of our relationships?

Earning his masters degree in counseling and licensing in marriage and family therapy, Mr. Jude Johnson practices at Akeen Mind, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Jude specializes in the practice of mindfulness, meditation, and cognitive behavioral therapy. He has attended extensive training on the practice of mindfulness-based stress reduction and has applied these skills into clinical practice. Jude has worked in an array of settings, including inpatient psychiatric substance abuse, home-based family therapy, alternative schools, emergency services, and outpatient clinics; both as a therapist and administrator. Jude utilizes mindfulness and family system's theory as base ingredients to optimize the wellbeing of organizations, professionals, and people from all walks of life. He has experienced the benefits of practicing mindfulness first hand, and is passionate about helping others discover their own inner resources for managing stress, pain, and illness. Welcome to the show, Jude, I'm so glad you could join us today.

Jude Johnson: Thank you for having me, Scott.

Scott Blair: Well, I'm not sure if this topic, let alone the term mindfulness, is very well known. Would you mind starting out today, by taking a couple minute and elaborating on what mindfulness is, exactly?

Jude Johnson: Sure. Mindfulness, as I understand it is present moment awareness. So that just means paying attention to this moment and seeing if we can do so in a manner that is friendly to ourselves and non-judgmental. And so, by our very nature we judge things as good or bad, liking them or disliking them. So we get caught up in our own judgments. So it's a challenge not to judge things as good or bad but that's the intention behind mindfulness. So that when we're doing something and we don't live up to our own expectations sometimes that we can get critical and [condemn] ourselves over this or that we condemn others over their behavior or something that's going on in our lives, and then we get kind of trapped into this smaller type of thinking that doesn't feel very pleasant and we don't like to feel unpleasant. So when we do we attempt to get away, not feel what's going on, and then we get into what's called automatic pilot, which is really the opposite of being mindful. So mindfulness just invites us back to be present in this moment.

Scott Blair: Well, let's tie that into relationships then, for the sake of this interview. What problems do you see that couples experience, actually inside of a relationship, when maybe they're on autopilot, as you said, or not being mindful?

Jude Johnson: I think what's happening when we're not being mindful in our relationships is that we're not really recognizing, perhaps, where the other person is coming from. We lose sight and we lose touch with what really matters in our relationships when we're under stress. And I think in today's culture we're

very stressed because we have access to each other almost 24/7, especially if we have a mobile device. We're available by e-mail, text, social media. And so our attention is drawn in so many different directions. And on top of this our expectations at work, for many people, are greater than they've ever been in terms of the time that we spend at work. And so being pulled in different areas and then attempting to come back together to communicate is a real challenge and so often from different people I hear that they're just not available or they're feeling overwhelmed. And when they're under stress what happens is the sympathetic nervous system is activated. This is our stress response. It's simply where the blood pressure goes up. Blood is diverted away from all the major organs so that we're ready to fight or run away; and many people are having these responses due to text messages, e-mails, bills that come in the mail, traffic. And they're really not necessarily life threatening circumstances. Although traffic may be. But, many of these things are not life threatening. And we're responding as though they are so we're releasing Cortisol into our body. We're not able to properly digest our food. Because if you're going to be eaten by a lion then you don't need any blood toward your digestive track so it's diverted away to fight or run away and we're often trapped in this kind of thing, which creates difficulty in communication in relationship.

Scott Blair: So if it isn't addressed and it's left unresolved and you just keep continuing in this autopilot and getting stressed out over things that we really shouldn't be, what are some of the short and long term negative effects that you're seeing this has on relationships?

Jude Johnson: I think one of the long term effects is that people ignore these problems for so long and then they wake up and think, how in the world did I get here, with these issues and these problems? And they start re-evaluating their life and what they should have done. Which, as I said earlier, is a judgment. I start evaluating things as good or bad. And so then when we get trapped back into this negative evaluation of ourselves, that's also what gets expressed out towards others. That we reflect out, often, how we are treating ourselves. And so mindfulness really connects us back more with ourselves. Getting more familiar with how we're thinking, how we're feeling. And seeing if we can treat ourselves non-judgmentally, as we are paying attention in this way. And then, often, this kind of attention is reflected back out to other. Mindfulness is at the core, but mindfulness is a universal concept that can really be just applied to the way we're living our lives.

So one technique I have is that when you're speaking with somebody and you're under stress, see if you can notice and feel how your body is. Is it tight? Is it tense? Can you allow yourself to loosen a little bit? Perhaps really look at the person's eyes and detect the color. Detect the shape of their face. Really see them as another person because when we're under stress people can become like objects. They can become things that are in our way. Just think about when you're in the hurry in a grocery mart. You know, you want to just go as quickly as you can so you can get on with your own agenda and then if people are in our way or they're loud or they seem to be acting obnoxious we start judging, we start getting irritable, and it starts to become more about us then it is about a relationship. So really seeing the other person. Having the intention to hear what they're saying and listening. This is just called mindful listening. This can really wake up how we're paying attention and see the value in the other person that's right in front of us. We so easily get jaded in these circumstances. And it's important to remind ourselves what really matters. And what really matters, in terms of mindfulness, is called intention. So intention is just naming what is the most important thing. Like maybe it's to be able to show love in our relationships. Or maybe it's to be at peace or to be happy. And when we remind ourselves of these important intentions, it helps us remember how we want to be treating others and ourselves and this improves communication.

Scott Blair: Well I understand a lot of what you're saying, it makes sense to me. I've noticed, I think for most of my life I've been pretty introspective. I've always journaled. I've liked quiet times. But I've noticed over the last several years I have found it a lot harder to quiet my mind, and it probably is due to all the

technology and the internet and the smart phones and all the things that are bombarding me and I'm not sure why I really became aware of that other than finding it to be difficult. So I guess my question next would be at what point do you see that couples are becoming aware that this inability to be mindful, or to be on autopilot, is actually hurting the relationship? Are they discovering it on their own? Is it something that you're pointing out to them in counseling? How do they discover it?

Jude Johnson: I think it is a big combination of both, to be honest. I think some people are introspective enough to realize that their habits and how they are in their relationships are really causing barriers to intimacy. And then other times I meet with people that really don't have any idea that this is going on and even the ones who do have a pretty good idea generally learn more and become more familiar with themselves and their processes by this being pointed out, and by beginning to practice mindfulness and mediation. You know, this makes us more familiar with what our habits are. Our habits of thinking, our habits of feeling. Even our habits of behavior. Because often what's happening with us when I said we're on automatic pilot is that we're caught up in obsessive thinking about the past or the future and really just missing this present moment. And so when we're caught up in that way people are often believing every thought that they have as being fact rather than just recognizing that perhaps it's just a thought. And becoming aware that this kind of thinking is going on and that sometimes we're really believing our thoughts, much like we do when we watch a movie. We connect with the main character and we almost embody their feelings. We can feel like we're the one being chased or we're the one who's falling in love. We can be entranced by our own thoughts in the same way. And mindfulness is a way to stop and recognize, "What am I really feeling? Where is it inside my body? Can I investigate it and allow it to be here long enough to see what's happening."

Scott Blair: Have you observed any trends among the type of couples having issues that could be resolved or benefit from being more mindful?

Jude Johnson: I think the major trends that I see is the pull toward social media technology. We're just consumed with being connected 24/7. We have phones now that just act like super computers to keep us connected to everyone and we can sometimes be in a room with other people and not really even be there. You know? People may be talking to us but we're busy on our phone or we're busy connected to something else. And practicing split attention so that we're not really there. We're not really engaged. And so this, I believe, is one of the primary issues that is wedging intimacy, or wedging couples apart with their intimacy, is being caught up in other things. And it could even be our own thoughts from the day, you know? Things that have gone on in our relationship from the past that we've ignored and that that's kind of playing in the background. We're not facing it so we just move away to what feels comfortable and normal cause, you know, maybe we're not quite sure how that's going to go. That might be scary to actually approach and talk about these issues. So sometimes we need professional help in doing this.

Scott Blair: So what is it that you suggest couples do? Where do they start to alleviate some of the stress and the conflict in life?

Jude Johnson: I think where you really benefit most is starting paying closer attention to yourself and seeing how you may be contributing to poor communication, distance, conflict. And one of the main ways to do that initially is to begin to practice mindfulness, to find a group or even resources online that may teach you these practices of mindfulness and meditation because it familiarizes you with yourself. And we cannot change what you're not aware of. So this is nothing more than a practice of building awareness and when we're aware of our habits and our patterns we might be able to make more intelligent choices for ourselves.

Scott Blair: Well let's drill down on that a little bit. Could you maybe name some specific items that you have couples work on that are going to help resolve some of these negative issues that we're talking about?

Jude Johnson: Yes. One specific intervention that I use is called RAIIN. And this is developed from people who practice mindfulness. One person that I learned this from is Tara Brock. She is a licensed psychologist and mindfulness/meditation teacher and this Rain is about, first, recognizing what is happening in this moment. Really sensing what you're most aware of. Emotion? Sensations? Thoughts? And see if you can notice where you're experiencing it in your body, because our emotions really kind of live here. And then the next step is to just allow it to just be here. This is the most difficult thing for people, because when it's unpleasant we want to push it away but mindfulness says allow it to be here. Say even, "yes" to your situation. Not, "yes I like it," or "yes I want this to be here." But "yes, this is here and here is what's happening." And then the "I" is to investigate.

And it's really a double I; so you're investigating with an intimate attention. And intimate means kind, friendly. And so it really is taking on a non-judgmental approach to asking yourself some very important questions to what you're experiencing. So you could ask yourself, "What am I believing in this moment, when I'm feeling angry, sad, scared?" Whatever it is. And if a belief emerges, which for some people it doesn't at first, but if a belief feels true, and there it is, ask yourself a few more questions. Is this believe really true? What would it be like if I wasn't living with this belief? This comes from Byron Katie's work on how powerful our beliefs are and how they can shape how we're feeling. Many times through this investigation process people understand that, oh, these are just thoughts. Much like clouds are passing in the sky. We can see the clouds and they come and they go. But we are not the clouds. Just like we are not our thoughts. So people can say, "Oh, it was just a thought. Perhaps that's not actually true, or a fact. And what comes out of practicing RAIIN, this recognizing, this allowing, this investigating, is really a natural awareness. That's the N, or a non-identification with our thoughts. Is that making sense?

Scott Blair: Yes, a lot. I really like that. So when you have couples practicing this "RAIIN" or the mindfulness and their relationships are becoming more mindful. What are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality and the interactions of that relationship?

Jude Johnson: I really see people start to become more alive in themselves; and they become more compassionate to one another. They stop judging each other as harshly and are actually able to listen and understand where their spouses and their partners are coming from. Another thing that I see is, I do group work with mindfulness and so I will actually lead guided meditations and talk about these attitudes of mindfulness, about being nonjudgmental, friendly and kind to ourselves. And what comes out of that is just this amazing spirit of connectedness with people. That they began to see each other, because the instructions are simple, you know. Don't judge. It's okay for you to recognize that you want to give somebody feedback but say it from your place. If I was in your situation I imagine I would feel like this and I might do this. So this is another way to communicate with people is that we can begin to genuinely express our authentic truth to others but to do so in a friendly and kind manner so that if I disagree, hey, they don't have to become bad people because of it.

Scott Blair: Well Jude, if someone is listening to this show and they're thinking, "our relationship could really benefit from some mindfulness, I definitely need to become more aware and mindful of what's going on. I'm overwhelmed with all this technology and stress. And this is a new thing for them they're approaching. Is there anything else that you would like to add or you think they should know about it?"

Jude Johnson: I would say to give this a shot with mindfulness. You don't necessarily have to meditate in order to practice mindfulness, but just to be aware of how powerful the research is out there. That I look at mindfulness and meditation almost as a physical exercise for our minds because if we go and we work out in the gym our muscles become stronger. If we use our minds intentionally, to pay attention and to focus that really grows stronger. Neuroscientists tell us what fires together wires together, in terms of

our neurons and these pathways become stronger the more we do things again, and again so we want things like mindfulness to become a habit because it reduces our stress response. It makes us healthier, happier. And it allows us to be able to come back to our normal state of being, where we're supposed to be, in a rest and digest place, much quicker than folks who don't practice this kind of work. So I would say give it a shot, practice, find some good materials that you can read up about it. I studied at the Center for Mindfulness through the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program created by Jon Kabat-Zinn. And this is a non-religious approach to learning mindfulness and mediation which I work with, with my clients and I practice for myself because of the tremendous benefits that I notice.

Scott Blair: Well Jude, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today.

Jude Johnson: Thank you so much for having me, Scott.

Scott Blair: To find out more about Jude Johnson and his practice, Akeen Mind, you can visit their website at www.akeenmind.com or call 843-364-5921 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week for more information about this show and previous episodes, visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Scott Blair. 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 on the web at stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.