

The Impact of Mindfulness on Intimate Relationships

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Abstract

Mindfulness in intimate relationships refers to individuals' conscious attention to feelings or thoughts that may affect the relationship. Due to its effectiveness in enhancing relationship satisfaction and alleviating relationship conflict, it has gradually garnered attention in both theoretical and applied domains. Dyadic Interaction Process Theory facilitates understanding the processes and outcomes of mindfulness' s influence on intimate relationships within a dyadic framework; researchers typically employ measurement methods, experimental induction techniques, and mindfulness interventions to investigate the effects of mindfulness on intimate relationships. Given that mindfulness interventions serve protective and remedial functions for intimate relationships, they are applied to various relationship states, including relatively happy, challenged, and crisis-ridden conditions. Future research may construct theories based on relationship stage characteristics and potential reverse effects; define concepts from a multidimensional, dynamic developmental perspective according to the dyadic interaction and stage features of intimate relationships, and conduct measurement through mutual-report and observational coding methods; employ more rigorous designs to clarify intervention effects; and attend to potential negative influences.

Full Text

The Influence of Mindfulness on Intimate Relationships: Theory and Application

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Abstract: Mindfulness in intimate relationships refers to individuals' conscious attention to feelings or thoughts that may affect the relationship. It has gradually attracted theoretical and applied attention due to its beneficial effects

on enhancing relationship satisfaction and buffering relationship conflicts. The dyadic interaction process theory facilitates understanding of how mindfulness influences intimate relationships within a dyadic framework. Researchers typically employ measurement methods, experimental induction, and mindfulness interventions to explore these effects. Given that mindfulness interventions serve both protective and remedial functions for intimate relationships, they have been applied to various relationship states, including relatively happy relationships, those facing challenges, and those in crisis. Future research should construct theories based on the staged characteristics of relationships and potential reverse effects; conceptualize mindfulness from multidimensional and dynamic developmental perspectives according to the dyadic interaction patterns and stage-specific features of intimate relationships, and measure it through mutual evaluation and observational coding methods; adopt more rigorous designs to clarify intervention effects; and attend to potential negative impacts.

Keywords: intimate relationships; mindfulness; meditation; theory; intervention

Classification Code: B849: C91

1 Introduction

Intimate relationships, broadly defined, encompass important emotional bonds between individuals, such as parent-child, friendship, and romantic partnerships. In its narrow sense, the term refers specifically to marital and romantic relationships, which is the focus of this paper. Fulfilling intimate relationships benefit both physical and mental health, yet inevitably involve conflicts. Traditional interventions have primarily focused on training communication skills. In recent years, scholars have gradually recognized the benefits of mindfulness for intimate relationships. Related applications can be traced back to 2004, when researchers found that systematic mindfulness interventions could enhance partners' relationship satisfaction and increase acceptance and intimacy (Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004). As research has progressed, accumulating evidence demonstrates that mindfulness not only strengthens relationship satisfaction (Harvey, Crowley, & Woszidlo, 2019; Jones, Welton, Oliver, & Thoburn, 2011; Kappen, Karremans, Burk, & Buyukcan-Tetik, 2018; Khaddouma, Coop Gordon, & Strand, 2017; Khaddouma, Gordon, & Bolden, 2015; Krafft, Haeger, & Levin, 2017; Lenger, Gordon, & Nguyen, 2017) but also helps partners constructively cope with relationship conflicts (Brem et al., 2018; Dixon & Overall, 2016; Hertz, Laurent, & Laurent, 2015; Iida & Shapiro, 2017; Karremans et al., 2020; Kimmes, Durtschi, & Fincham, 2017; Laurent, Hertz, Nelson, & Laurent, 2016; Laurent, Laurent, Hertz, Egan-Wright, & Granger, 2013). Relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution constitute primary indicators of intimate relationship quality (Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007). Meanwhile, theoretical and methodological advances have emerged in mindfulness research on intimate relationships. For example, Karremans, Schellekens, and Kappen (2017) proposed a dyadic interaction process theory of how mindfulness influ-

ences intimate relationships, and Kimmes, Jaurequi, May, Srivastava, and Fincham (2018) developed a mindfulness measure specifically for intimate relationships. Given the strong theoretical and applied value of mindfulness research in intimate relationships and the current lack of attention to this topic in China, this paper attempts to review the theories, research methods, functions, and intervention programs of mindfulness in intimate relationships, aiming to provide references for future research.

2.1 Mindfulness and Its Theoretical Interpretation for Intimate Relationships

Mindfulness originates from Buddhist philosophy, grounded in the Buddhist canon *Abhidhamma* and its commentaries (Chiesa & Malinowski, 2011). Zen Buddhism compares mindfulness to a bright mirror that simply reflects what appears before it without distortion (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). Numerous conceptualizations of mindfulness exist without consensus. In psychology, Kabat-Zinn's (2003) definition is widely accepted: mindfulness is the awareness that arises from paying attention to present-moment experience intentionally, with openness, acceptance, and non-judgment. Kabat-Zinn first developed mindfulness into a systematic clinical intervention, creating Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) to alleviate stress and emotional distress in patients with chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Subsequently, mindfulness interventions have been applied to additional clinical domains, including preventing depression relapse, alleviating anxiety and other emotional problems (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013; Ren, Zhang, & Jiang, 2018), and addressing behavioral issues such as obesity-related eating problems (Liu, Wang, Yang, & Zhou, 2019), addiction treatment (Xu, Li, Deng, Shi, & Liu, 2016), and improving attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children (Li, Chen, & Xiao, 2019). As research has progressed, scholars have expanded mindfulness to non-clinical domains such as parenting, school management, and organizational management (Chen, Zhou, & Wang, 2017; Duan & Feng, 2018; He, Lian, & Quan, 2019; Shen, Yang, Hu, He, & Li, 2020; Zhu, Chen, & Xu, 2020), while also extending research from the individual to the interpersonal level (Pratscher, Wood, King, & Bettencourt, 2019). As a core component of interpersonal relationships, intimate relationships have gradually attracted scholarly attention in recent years (Karremans et al., 2017).

Mindfulness comprises two core components: awareness and acceptance. Awareness involves continuously monitoring and focusing on present-moment internal and external experiences, while acceptance entails a non-judgmental, open, and receptive attitude (Bishop, 2004; Lindsay & Creswell, 2017). Additionally, mindfulness can be understood at three levels: trait, state, and intervention. Trait mindfulness refers to individual differences in the capacity and tendency to experience mindful states; state mindfulness denotes intraindividual awareness states that vary across situations and time (Brown & Ryan, 2003); and mindfulness interventions are training methods that help people achieve mindful states,

which can enhance trait mindfulness through long-term practice (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015). In theoretical research, scholars often treat mindfulness as an umbrella term encompassing trait, state, and intervention; however, in empirical research, these three levels are typically distinguished due to different methodological approaches.

Studying mindfulness in the domain of intimate relationships represents a specification of mindfulness research, thus general mindfulness theories also apply. For instance, the Mindfulness-to-Meaning Theory (MMT) posits that life events are inherently ambiguous, potentially positive or negative, and mindfulness prompts individuals to search for ultimate meaning in life, thereby fostering constructive responses to negative events (Garland, Farb, Goldin, & Fredrickson, 2015). Accordingly, when relationship conflicts arise, individuals' automatic reactions may be defensively dismissive, disparaging, or avoidant, whereas the search for ultimate meaning may facilitate constructive cognitions and insight into the hidden significance beneath conflicts. Existing research partially supports this inference, showing that individuals with higher trait mindfulness are more likely to view intimate relationships from a growth perspective, which further predicts greater relationship satisfaction (Don, 2019), and are also more inclined to adopt constructive coping strategies when facing relationship conflicts (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007).

General mindfulness theories possess cross-situational universality but typically remain at the individual level, lacking specificity for intimate relationships. In response, Carson, Carson, Gil, and Baucom (2006) provided early theoretical elaboration.

2.2 Four Processes Through Which Mindfulness Activates Intimate Relationships

Carson et al. (2006) proposed that mindfulness influences intimate relationships primarily through the activation of four processes: (1) **Awareness**: Mindfulness involves attending to all experiences in a non-judgmental manner, regardless of whether they are pleasant or unpleasant, which enhances individuals' awareness of interpersonal interactions—the emergence of thought, emotion, and behavior patterns and their impact on oneself and one's partner; (2) **Acceptance**: Mindfulness emphasizes an accepting attitude, and accepting things as they are can increase self-compassion and empathy for one's partner; (3) **Relaxation**: Mindfulness helps alleviate feelings of stress, enabling individuals to respond more calmly to relationship difficulties; and (4) **Self-expansion**: The sense of self-expansion fostered by mindfulness enhances trust and connection between self and partner. While Carson et al.'s (2006) analysis facilitates understanding of mindfulness' role in intimate relationships, it explains these processes solely from the individual's perspective, neglecting the interdependent and mutually influential nature of intimate relationships.

2.3 Dyadic Interaction Process Theory

Karremans et al. (2017) proposed a theoretical model of how mindfulness influences the processes and outcomes of intimate relationships from a dyadic interaction perspective (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]). The researchers first defined mindfulness in intimate relationships as individuals' conscious attention to feelings or thoughts that may directly or indirectly affect the relationship. Building on previous theoretical and empirical research, Karremans et al. suggested that mindfulness can influence interpersonal relationships through four mechanisms: awareness of internal experience, emotion regulation, executive control, and self-other connection. Specifically, mindfulness emphasizes focusing on all experiences—including external bodily sensations and internal emotional thoughts—with a non-judgmental attitude, rather than distorting or ignoring them. When individuals observe their experiences as they are, they can treat sensations merely as sensations and thoughts merely as thoughts, thereby avoiding excessive interpretation, evaluation, or reaction. This enhances self-regulation and executive control capabilities, helping individuals more effectively manage maladaptive emotions and thoughts while inhibiting automatic, impulsive responses. Simultaneously, mindfulness improves empathy, enabling individuals to understand others' behaviors from their perspective, which strengthens feelings of connection and intimacy.

These four mechanisms similarly influence individuals' cognition, emotion, and behavior regarding intimate relationships. Karremans et al. further elaborated on these effects from two broad perspectives: enhancing positive influences and reducing negative influences. First, when individuals' interests conflict with their partner's, self-protective impulses are automatic and potentially destructive to the relationship. Mindfulness increases awareness of these impulsive behaviors, focuses attention on long-term relationship development, and constructively addresses conflicts through self-regulation, thereby preventing relationship deterioration. In this process, mindfulness reduces automatic reactions while increasing relationship-beneficial response tendencies, such as sacrificing self-interest, restraining retaliatory motives, and resisting attraction to alternative partners. Second, mindfulness helps individuals detect potential stressors and enhances stress-coping abilities, which helps prevent stress spillover—that is, reducing threats to intimate relationships from external stressors. Additionally, secure attachment facilitates relationship establishment and maintenance, and substantial empirical research has confirmed the positive predictive effect of mindfulness on secure attachment (Hertz et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2011; Pepping, O' Donovan, & Davis, 2013). Finally, gaps often exist between reality and ideals; individuals may idealize their partners excessively and even attempt to change them to approximate ideal standards, and perceptions of intimate relationships are not static, fluctuating between satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Acceptance in mindfulness can enhance individuals' non-judgmental attitudes toward imperfect partners and relationships, thereby reducing idealization and preventing relationship deterioration.

Karremans et al.'s (2017) theory attends to the dyadic interaction characteristics of intimate relationships. The model assumes that an individual's mindfulness can influence their partner's responses through affecting their own cognition, emotion, or behavior, thereby extending mindfulness theory from the individual to the relational level and providing theoretical support for understanding mindfulness within a dyadic framework. Subsequent research has partially supported this hypothesis, demonstrating that individuals' trait mindfulness can predict their partners' positive perceptions of the relationship (Adair, Boulton, & Algoe, 2018; Harvey et al., 2019; Iida & Shapiro, 2019; Khaddouma & Gordon, 2018; Kimmes, Jaurequi, et al., 2019).

3 Research Methods for Mindfulness in Intimate Relationships

Research methods for mindfulness in intimate relationships can be summarized into three categories: measurement, experimental induction, and mindfulness intervention (the latter is presented in Section 5 for content completeness).

3.1 Measurement Methods

Measurement represents the most common research method in current studies (Kappen, Karremans, & Burk, 2019). Previous research typically employed general trait mindfulness scales that, being non-specific to intimate relationships, fail to capture mindfulness' s unique connotations in this domain. In response, Kimmes et al. (2018) adopted Karremans et al.' s (2017) definition, conceptualizing mindfulness in intimate relationships as conscious attention to feelings or thoughts that may affect the relationship, and developed the Relationship Mindfulness Measure (RMM). Based on the trait subscale of the Mindfulness Attention and Awareness Scale (MAAS), the RMM assesses individuals' attentiveness within intimate relationships. This unidimensional scale comprises five items, such as "When I am with my partner, I find myself doing things without paying attention" and "When discussing or solving problems with my partner, my behavior is automatic, without attention to what I say or do." Research with adults in intimate relationships demonstrated that the RMM possesses good reliability and validity and predicts relationship quality and adult attachment better than the MAAS (Kimmes, Jaurequi, et al., 2018; Kimmes et al., 2019). However, the RMM has not been widely used and requires further validation. Moreover, while it emphasizes attention and awareness in the context of intimate relationships, it remains centered on one' s own thoughts and feelings, neglecting the dyadic nature of intimate relationships. In real life, interaction partners often adjust their responses based on each other' s words and actions, whether consciously or unconsciously; thus, focusing solely on one' s own feelings may be insufficient to capture mindfulness' s full meaning in intimate relationships.

In contrast, Pratscher et al. (2019) argued that mindfulness in interactive relationships encompasses not only self-awareness but also awareness of the interac-

tion partner. Based on this, they proposed the concept of interpersonal mindfulness, defined as maintaining receptive awareness of each moment of interaction—being aware of one’s own thoughts, emotions, sensations, and intentions while also attending to the partner’s words and actions through their emotions, tone, and posture. Accordingly, they developed the Interpersonal Mindfulness Scale (IMS), a 27-item measure with four dimensions: (1) **Present-moment focus**: concentrating on the present interaction rather than being distracted (e.g., “I find it easy to focus on the present moment with this person rather than being distracted”); (2) **Awareness of self and other**: attending to one’s own emotions while also noticing the partner’s emotional and nonverbal cues during interaction (e.g., “When I am with this person, I am aware of my own emotional feelings” and “When listening, I pay attention to the other person’s emotions and tone of voice”); (3) **Nonjudgmental acceptance**: listening without judgment and accepting interaction experiences as they are (e.g., “Even when I disagree with the other person’s point of view, I listen carefully”); and (4) **Nonreactivity**: responding consciously rather than reacting automatically (e.g., “Before speaking, I consider how my words might affect the other person”). Although the IMS was developed in the context of interpersonal relationships, it is equally applicable to intimate relationships, with evidence indicating that it predicts intimate relationship satisfaction more significantly than the MAAS (Pratscher et al., 2019). As a newly developed scale, the IMS has not been widely used and its psychometric properties require further examination.

3.2 Experimental Induction Methods

Experimental induction involves brief training procedures used in laboratory settings to induce a mindful state, typically adapted from mindfulness intervention programs. As a new research trend, such studies remain scarce in the intimate relationship domain (Heppner & Shirk, 2018), and some have not specified the induction content (e.g., Laurent et al., 2016). Therefore, we focus on three studies for illustration and analysis. First, Pepping, Davis, and O’ Donovan (2015) employed four different induction methods—breath awareness, body scan, mindful awareness of thoughts, and mindful awareness of emotions—to ensure that induced state mindfulness was not dependent on a specific technique. Participants in the experimental group received one of these four methods, while the control group completed an unrelated task, with a 15-minute experimental duration. Results showed increased state mindfulness in the experimental group but no significant improvement in state attachment levels. Second, in Papies, Pronk, Keesman, and Barsalou’s (2015) study, the experimental group observed photos of attractive strangers from a mindful perspective, treating internal thoughts and feelings during viewing as transient mental events, while the control group immersed themselves in their inner experiences, with a 12-minute duration. Results indicated that the experimental group rated the attractiveness of strangers significantly lower than the control group. Third, in Karremans et al.’s (2020) study, the experimental group focused mindfully on experiences of being hurt, adopting a decentered perspective and imagining the mind as a blank screen on

which feelings, thoughts, and emotions appeared and disappeared. Meanwhile, the control group recalled hurtful experiences repeatedly and vividly from a non-decentered perspective, with a 7-minute duration. Results showed that after recalling hurtful experiences, the experimental group exhibited significantly higher state forgiveness levels than the control group.

Synthesizing existing theoretical and empirical research yields two inferences. First, different induction methods may result in varying weights of mindfulness components. Research indicates that mindfulness inductions focusing on breath awareness and body scan only enhance state mindfulness at the bodily level without affecting psychological state mindfulness (Bravo, Pearson, Wilson, & Witkiewitz, 2018). Among the three studies described above, the latter two emphasized awareness of internal experiences, while the first included both bodily sensations and internal experiences as objects of awareness. This suggests that the non-significant results in Pepping et al.'s (2015) study may be because state attachment more closely resembles an internal experience, and thus mindfulness of bodily sensations alone is insufficient to influence it. Typically, internal experiences are more abstract than bodily sensations, and mindful awareness of internal experiences (particularly negative ones) requires greater acceptance than awareness of bodily sensations. In practice, practitioners are usually guided to attend to bodily sensations first before shifting attention to internal experiences once concentration stabilizes. Thus, differences in awareness objects may lead to varying proportions of awareness and acceptance components in state mindfulness, consequently affecting experimental outcomes. Second, acceptance may be a necessary component for mindfulness to influence intimate relationships. Research shows an interactive effect between awareness and acceptance components: when acceptance is low, stronger awareness predicts lower relationship satisfaction (Krafft et al., 2017). This finding can be explained by the Monitor and Acceptance Theory (MAT), which posits that monitoring (i.e., awareness) and acceptance constitute core mindfulness components. Awareness enhances cognitive functioning but intensifies positive or negative experiences, whereas acceptance can alter the relationship between the self and the content of awareness, enhancing emotion regulation and reducing negative reactions (Lindsay & Creswell, 2017). Moreover, evidence indicates that acceptance is central to mindfulness interventions' enhancement of positive emotions (Lindsay et al., 2018), and partner acceptance mediates the positive association between trait mindfulness and relationship satisfaction (Kappen et al., 2018). These findings suggest that acceptance may be essential for mindfulness' s positive effects on intimate relationships, and short-term inductions focusing on breath awareness and body scanning may be insufficient to influence relationship-relevant internal experiences. Future research could test these inferences by deconstructing mindfulness components in induction procedures (e.g., Lindsay et al., 2018).

4 The Role of Mindfulness in Intimate Relationships

As noted above, few studies have used experimental induction to manipulate state mindfulness in intimate relationships. Most research has concentrated on two aspects: first, using measurement methods to examine trait mindfulness' s predictive effects on relationship outcomes; and second, using regular mindfulness interventions to evaluate applied value. What specific roles do trait mindfulness and mindfulness interventions play?

4.1 Trait Mindfulness Research

First, individuals' trait mindfulness relates to their own relationship perceptions and conflict coping. Regarding relationship perceptions, research demonstrates that trait mindfulness positively predicts relationship satisfaction (Jones et al., 2011; Khaddouma & Gordon, 2018; Khaddouma et al., 2015; Lenger et al., 2017; Wachs & Cordova, 2007), sexual satisfaction (Khaddouma et al., 2015; Pepping, Cronin, Lyons, & Caldwell, 2018), relationship stability (Khaddouma & Gordon, 2018), spousal attachment (Jones et al., 2011; Pepping et al., 2013), partner acceptance (Kappen et al., 2018), and perceived partner responsiveness (Adair et al., 2018). Regarding conflict coping, trait mindfulness predicts physiological and psychological responses. Physiologically, trait mindfulness negatively predicts cardiovascular (Kimmes, May, et al., 2018) and cortisol responses (Hertz et al., 2015; Laurent et al., 2013) during conflict discussions with partners. Psychologically, individuals with higher trait mindfulness experience less subjective stress (Hertz et al., 2015), fear of rejection (Dixon & Overall, 2016), and negative emotions (Hertz et al., 2015; Iida & Shapiro, 2017) compared to those with lower trait mindfulness. Cognitively and behaviorally, trait mindfulness positively predicts forgiveness tendencies toward partners (Karremans et al., 2020) and benign attributions for partner transgressions (Kimmes et al., 2017). When facing conflicts, individuals with higher trait mindfulness are more likely to adopt constructive coping strategies (Barnes et al., 2007; Harvey et al., 2019) and less likely to exhibit destructive behaviors (Brem et al., 2018; Dixon & Overall, 2016).

Second, individuals' trait mindfulness also relates to their partners' relationship perceptions and conflict coping. Regarding relationship perceptions, trait mindfulness positively predicts partners' relationship satisfaction (Adair et al., 2018; Harvey et al., 2019; Kappen et al., 2018; Khaddouma & Gordon, 2018; Lenger et al., 2017). Additionally, in daily life, partners of individuals with higher trait mindfulness are more likely to feel accepted and responded to (Adair et al., 2018; Karremans et al., 2020) and experience more stable emotions (Iida & Shapiro, 2019). Regarding conflict coping, trait mindfulness negatively predicts partners' cardiovascular responses during conflict discussions (Kimmes, May, et al., 2018), and partners are also less likely to choose destructive coping strategies (Harvey et al., 2019).

In summary, compared to individuals with lower trait mindfulness, those with

higher trait mindfulness and their partners hold more positive relationship perceptions and exhibit more constructive psychophysiological responses during relationship conflicts.

4.2 Effects of Mindfulness Interventions

Mindfulness interventions function primarily in two ways. First, they serve a **protective function**. On one hand, mindfulness interventions strengthen relatively harmonious intimate relationships by enhancing relationship satisfaction (Carson et al., 2004; Khaddouma et al., 2017) and improving emotion regulation abilities (Gillespie, Davey, & Flemke, 2015; C. J. May, Ostafin, & Snippe, 2020). On the other hand, they help prevent potential threats. For example, evidence indicates that mindfulness interventions assist expectant parents in role transitions (Gambrel & Piercy, 2015a, 2015b; Warriner, Crane, Dymond, & Krusche, 2018), serve as adjunctive treatments for sexual physiological or psychological disorders by reducing sexual avoidance and aversion and enhancing bodily awareness (Kimmes, Mallory, Cameron, & Köse, 2015; Kocsis & Newbury-Helps, 2016), and benefit cancer and depression patients and their partners in facing disease challenges while reducing psychological distress (Smith, Jones, Holttum, & Griffiths, 2014; van den Hurk, Schellekens, Molema, Speckens, & van der Drift, 2015). Second, mindfulness interventions serve a **remedial function**. On one hand, they help couples in crisis improve their relationships together, such as alleviating psychological distress caused by conflicts and changing maladaptive interaction patterns (Finney & Tadros, 2018; Nasr Isfahani, Bahrami, Etemadi, & Mohamadi, 2018; Peterson, Eifert, Feingold, & Davidson, 2009). On the other hand, mindfulness interventions have been applied to special populations with domestic violence histories. For instance, for domestic violence perpetrators, mindfulness interventions help reduce recidivism and improve emotional dysregulation and interpersonal difficulties (Passarelli, Cavuoto, & Rathus, 2006; Tollefson & Phillips, 2015; Zarling, Bannon, & Berta, 2019). For women experiencing intimate partner violence and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, mindfulness interventions improve interpersonal problems and enhance self-compassion and emotion regulation abilities (Bermudez et al., 2013; Dutton, Bermudez, Matás, Majid, & Myers, 2013). In summary, mindfulness intervention effects are manifested primarily through protective and remedial functions for intimate relationships.

5.1 Basic Forms of Mindfulness Interventions for Intimate Relationships

In terms of specific intervention formats, mindfulness interventions for intimate relationships can be categorized into three types: traditional mindfulness interventions, integrated mindfulness and couple therapy, and relationship-specific mindfulness interventions.

First, some researchers have directly adopted traditional mindfulness interven-

tion programs (Gillespie et al., 2015; Khaddouma et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2014; van den Hurk et al., 2015) or moderately simplified them by removing group activities, reducing intervention duration, or using online formats (Kappen et al., 2019; C. J. May et al., 2020). Such intervention protocols are not adapted to the characteristics of intimate relationships and thus essentially remain traditional mindfulness interventions.

Second, some researchers have integrated mindfulness interventions with traditional couple therapies (Atkinson, 2013; Beckerman & Sarracco, 2011; Finney & Tadros, 2018). For example, Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) and Structural Family Therapy (SFT) are commonly used to address emotional distancing or relationship conflicts between partners. When applying these methods to highly conflictual couples, researchers found that partners' communication easily projects negative emotions onto each other, triggering intense emotional reactions that hinder intervention progress. Therefore, researchers integrated mindfulness into traditional couple therapies to enhance partners' abilities to identify, communicate, and express emotions, helping them more objectively observe inappropriate interaction patterns and constructively face relationship crises together (Beckerman & Sarracco, 2011; Finney & Tadros, 2018). Such interventions typically target couples in distress whose conflicts involve multiple precipitating factors (Finney & Tadros, 2018). Consequently, integrated intervention programs are relatively flexible, requiring counselors to develop targeted plans based on couples' specific situations.

Third, **relationship-specific mindfulness interventions** are adapted from traditional mindfulness interventions based on issues relevant to intimate relationships (e.g., Carson et al., 2004, 2006; Gehart, 2012; Kocsis & Newbury-Helps, 2016; Nasr Isfahani et al., 2018; Passarelli et al., 2006; Tollefson & Phillips, 2015; Warriner et al., 2018; Zarling et al., 2019). In these programs, some studies target individuals to improve physical or psychological symptoms that may threaten current or future intimate relationships, such as sexual disorders or domestic violence (Kocsis & Newbury-Helps, 2016; Tollefson & Phillips, 2015). Other studies target couples to enhance relationship quality (Carson et al., 2004, 2006; Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2007; Gambrel & Piercy, 2015a, 2015b; Gehart, 2012). Strictly speaking, the latter approach constitutes a more direct intervention for intimate relationships. Therefore, this paper focuses on the latter, detailing mindfulness applications for three relationship states (see Table 1).

5.2.1 Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement (MBRE)

For relatively happy and non-crisis couples, Carson et al. (2004) developed Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement (MBRE), which emphasizes partners' interactions and individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors within intimate relationships. MBRE aims to help couples strengthen emotional bonds and improve stress-coping abilities.

Based on the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction model, MBRE lasts eight weeks, with daily practice of 30–45 minutes for six days per week. Groups of 6–8 couples meet for 2.5-hour weekly sessions, with a full-day retreat during the sixth week. In addition to conventional practices such as body scan, sitting meditation, and yoga, MBRE includes adaptations specific to intimate relationships: (1) greater emphasis on loving-kindness meditations, particularly those directed toward one's partner; (2) partner yoga, where couples jointly practice yoga using each other's bodies for support; (3) mindful touching, involving gentle back massage and discussion of bodily sensations; (4) mindful gazing, to understand and welcome each other's deeper goodwill; (5) applying mindfulness to relationship difficulties, practicing non-judgmental, accepting responses to conflicts that may cause arguments or distancing; and (6) encouraging couples to consciously attend to their interaction processes and record their understanding of these processes (for detailed implementation, see Carson et al., 2004, 2006).

To validate MBRE's effectiveness, Carson et al. (2004) randomly assigned 44 non-conflictual couples to experimental and control groups. Results showed that compared to the waitlist control group, MBRE significantly enhanced the experimental group's intimate relationships, including relationship satisfaction, autonomy, connectedness, intimacy, and partner acceptance, with effects maintained at three-month follow-up. However, MBRE's effectiveness for couples in crisis remains unclear, and future research should examine more diverse samples to test its applicability.

5.2.2 Mindful Transition to Parenthood Program (MTPP)

For couples expecting their first child, Gambrel and Piercy designed the Mindful Transition to Parenthood Program (MTPP) (Gambrel & Piercy, 2015a, 2015b). This program combines mindfulness intervention with psychoeducation, emphasizing dyadic interaction and group support. Centered on relationship mindfulness, MTPP highlights intrapersonal and interpersonal attunement, aiming to develop capacities for coordination, present-moment focus, empathy, and self-regulation to help couples jointly face role transitions and potential stressors associated with their child's arrival, thereby preventing relationship deterioration.

MTPP consists of 2-hour weekly group sessions for four weeks, with groups of 3–5 couples. Homework includes daily 15-minute formal practices (body scan, mindful breathing, open awareness, sitting meditation, and loving-kindness meditation) and joint exercises between partners. Weekly group activities and home practices are as follows: (1) **Mindfulness of self**: Group activities resemble conventional mindfulness interventions, helping participants understand mindfulness and techniques such as mindful eating and emotion awareness; couples practice mindful appreciation and the five love languages at home. (2) **Mindfulness of partner**: Group activities include acceptance versus reaction, discussing emotion flooding, and mindful gazing; couples practice mindful hugging and developing pause strategies at home. (3) **Mindfulness of relationship**:

Group activities include mindful versus mindless communication, exploring and understanding communication skills, and discussing and practicing each other's needs and dreams; couples practice reflecting on life's origins and sharing needs and dreams at home. (4) **Mindfulness of family**: Group activities include loving-kindness meditation, discussing common difficulties and parenthood, and mindful parenting; couples practice loving-kindness meditation and understanding infant cues at home (for detailed implementation, see Gambrel & Piercy, 2015a, 2015b).

Gambrel and Piercy (2015a) used a mixed-methods design to evaluate MTPP's effectiveness. Quantitative findings revealed that compared to the waitlist control group, male participants significantly improved in relationship satisfaction, trait mindfulness, and emotion regulation, whereas females showed no significant improvements. Subsequent qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews identified four themes: (1) positive self-changes such as self-acceptance, self-awareness, and self-compassion; (2) relationship improvements such as deeper partner communication; (3) preparation for parenthood such as actively facing potential challenges; and (4) male involvement such as greater participation in household chores. However, these findings may be influenced by confounding variables, such as males receiving less social support pre-intervention and pregnant females being more sensitive to bodily changes. Future research should investigate how factors like social support and pregnancy affect intervention outcomes.

5.2.3 Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a common mindfulness intervention originally developed to increase psychological flexibility and help individuals engage in valued, meaningful lives. Researchers later adapted ACT for couples or families in crisis to reduce conflict and improve relationship quality (Gehart, 2012; Peterson et al., 2009). ACT particularly emphasizes acceptance, encouraging partners to mindfully experience and accept their thoughts and feelings to avoid cognitive fusion—that is, becoming overly controlled by thoughts and emotions. According to ACT's intervention philosophy, cognitive defusion and acceptance can help couples view negative emotions and behaviors from new perspectives, while clarifying values and committing to value-consistent actions can reduce relationship biases and improve relationships (Peterson et al., 2009).

As previously noted, highly conflictual couples typically face multiple conflicts, requiring more targeted and flexible intervention protocols. Accordingly, Gehart (2012) detailed in *Mindfulness and Acceptance in Couple and Family Therapy* how to flexibly apply ACT to couples or families, including case conceptualization, goal setting and planning, and designing and implementing interventions. For example, during intervention, counselors develop realistic and feasible plans based on couples' motivations for practicing mindfulness and adjust these plans according to actual practice. Practice duration is also progressive: 2–5 minutes daily in week one, 5 minutes daily in week two, 5–10 minutes daily in week three,

and discussing which practices are more suitable and exploring other possibilities in week four. In addition to conventional practices, intervention techniques include relationship-specific methods such as mindful communication, mindful pausing and reflection, listening for implicit meanings, loving-kindness meditation, mindful sex and intimacy, and nonviolent communication.

In an empirical study, Peterson et al. (2009) used ACT as the core technique to intervene with two couples in crisis. Throughout the intervention, researchers consistently emphasized accepting relationship conflicts and associated automatic reactions with an open attitude. Session topics included: (1) Sessions 1-2: assessing individuals and the intimate relationship; (2) Sessions 3-4: making new relationship patterns possible through mindfulness and acceptance; (3) Sessions 5-6: defusing from conflict-generating thoughts and reactions; (4) Sessions 7-9: clarifying values; and (5) Sessions 10-12: committing to values. Results demonstrated that ACT improved couples' relationship satisfaction and alleviated stress and distress caused by relationship conflicts, with effects maintained at six-month follow-up.

5.2.4 Summary

The three intervention programs described above correspond to three relationship states: relatively happy, facing upcoming challenges, and already in crisis. Despite differences in target populations, topic settings, flexibility, and standardization, they share common features. First, all three attend to interaction processes and patterns in intimate relationships. For example, in addition to conventional practices, they include relationship-specific mindful communication and mindful listening to help couples observe their interaction patterns. Researchers generally agree that helping couples observe their interaction patterns is key to relationship improvement (Gehart, 2012), a notion supported by empirical research showing that feeling understood, cared for, and validated by one's partner mediates the positive association between trait mindfulness and relationship satisfaction (Adair et al., 2018). Second, all three emphasize acceptance in relationships, such as practicing acceptance toward potential conflicts and experiencing and expressing compassion and acceptance for each other. As discussed earlier regarding experimental induction, acceptance appears essential for mindfulness' s positive effects on intimate relationships, a view somewhat corroborated by these intervention programs.

6.1 Developing Theories of Mindfulness in Intimate Relationships

In theoretical research on mindfulness' s influence on intimate relationships, previous studies have emphasized dyadic interaction but neglected relationship stages. Real-life intimate relationships are dynamic developmental processes rather than absolutely static states. From relationship formation and maintenance to (for some) dissolution and reconstruction, intimate relationships ex-

hibit stage-specific characteristics. Factors influencing intimate relationships may differ across stages, and the same factors may produce different effects and effect sizes at different stages, resulting in 不等 effects of mindfulness across developmental stages. For example, being attracted to a stranger may serve as an important driving force during relationship formation. As noted, individuals in a mindful state are less susceptible to attraction from strangers (Papies et al., 2015), suggesting that state mindfulness may somewhat hinder relationship formation. However, during relationship maintenance, attraction to strangers may harm the established relationship, and reduced susceptibility may be beneficial. Based on this, future theoretical construction should discuss mindfulness from the perspective of relationship stage characteristics.

Additionally, since individuals' mindfulness can influence outcome variables for both partners, can intimate relationships reciprocally affect partners' mindfulness levels? Evidence suggests that individual differences in trait mindfulness may originate from childhood experiences and attachment styles (Pepping & Duvénage, 2016), indicating that trait mindfulness is influenced by life experiences. Given that most people spend considerable time in intimate relationships, can fulfilling relationships enhance individuals' trait mindfulness? Conversely, can crisis-ridden relationships reduce trait mindfulness? Based on these questions, future theoretical construction could explore the bidirectional causal relationships between mindfulness and intimate relationships.

6.2 Exploring the Construct and Measurement of Mindfulness in Intimate Relationships

The specific meaning and relative weight of mindfulness components vary across contexts (Guo & Li, 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to define the mindfulness construct specifically for intimate relationships and develop corresponding measurement tools. As previously noted, only a few scholars have defined mindfulness in intimate relationships ("relationship mindfulness") as conscious attention to feelings or thoughts that may directly or indirectly affect the relationship (Karremans et al., 2017; Kimmes, Jaurequi, et al., 2018). This conceptualization and its corresponding RMM scale focus on individuals' own experiences as objects of awareness, emphasizing the awareness component while neglecting acceptance, potentially narrowing the construct' s meaning in intimate relationships.

In contrast, the interpersonal mindfulness construct and its corresponding IMS scale define and measure mindfulness across four dimensions (present-moment focus, awareness of self and other, nonjudgmental acceptance, nonreactivity). Although applicable to intimate relationships, interpersonal relationships differ from intimate ones. Intimate relationships involve more frequent interactions, greater emotional investment, higher self-involvement and exclusivity, and are more likely to activate individuals' deep-seated attachment issues, which are less common in general interpersonal interactions (Kimmes, Jaurequi, et al., 2018). In summary, while the RMM and IMS are more suitable for intimate

relationships than general trait mindfulness scales, they may not be optimal measurement tools. Therefore, this paper offers preliminary discussion on the meaning of relationship mindfulness and measurement tool development.

In terms of meaning, integrating relationship mindfulness and interpersonal mindfulness concepts with current theoretical and empirical research reveals that relationship mindfulness is both connected to and distinct from general mindfulness. Relationship mindfulness represents an extension and deepening of mindfulness in the intimate relationship domain, with unique characteristics reflected in three aspects: (1) Relationship mindfulness entails making one's partner and the relationship itself objects of awareness and acceptance, transcending general mindfulness's focus on the individual self. (2) Relationship mindfulness possesses dyadic interactive properties. Evidence shows that individuals' trait mindfulness can be detected by significant others (L. M. May & Reinhardt, 2018), and partners of high trait mindfulness individuals are more likely to feel accepted (Kappen et al., 2018) and responded to (Adair et al., 2018). This suggests that partners in intimate relationships can, to some extent, detect each other's mindfulness, thereby influencing their perceptions of the relationship. (3) Regarding relationship stage characteristics, relationship mindfulness is dynamically developmental. The components and their relative weights may vary across different relationship stages. Therefore, future research should conceptualize relationship mindfulness from multidimensional and dynamic developmental perspectives based on the dyadic interaction patterns and stage-specific features of intimate relationships.

Regarding measurement tool development, previous studies have exclusively used self-report methods, which limit result objectivity. As noted, individuals' trait mindfulness can be detected by significant others (L. M. May & Reinhardt, 2018), providing an empirical foundation for developing mutual evaluation scales for relationship mindfulness. Furthermore, future research could employ observational coding from researchers' perspectives to measure relationship mindfulness. For example, videotaping, observing, and coding couples' communication processes using external indicators such as facial expressions, postures, and vocal tones could assess relationship mindfulness. Compared to self-report and mutual evaluation methods, observational coding can more objectively capture information that couples may overlook in daily interactions. Meanwhile, combining self-report, mutual evaluation, and observational coding methods would enable multi-perspective measurement and enrich empirical research on mindfulness in intimate relationships.

6.3.1 Adopting More Rigorous Control Group Designs

Despite substantial research supporting mindfulness interventions' beneficial effects on intimate relationships, improvements are needed, particularly regarding control group designs. Most previous studies have only examined mindfulness intervention effects without including traditional couple therapy for comparison, and control groups have primarily been no-intervention waitlists or absent

altogether (Carson et al., 2004; Khaddouma et al., 2017; C. J. May et al., 2020; Nasr Isfahani et al., 2018). This creates two problems: first, researchers cannot determine which intervention approach is more effective when comparing different protocols; second, it may weaken the reliability of conclusions regarding mindfulness intervention effects. For example, Kappen et al. (2019) conducted a two-week mindfulness intervention with individuals in intimate relationships, using psychoeducation as the control condition. Results showed that relationship satisfaction improved in both groups without significant differences. Does this mean mindfulness intervention effects are confounded by placebo effects or group support? Based on these questions, future research should incorporate more rigorous control group designs.

6.3.2 Examining Moderating Factors of Mindfulness Interventions

Investigating moderating factors of mindfulness interventions helps clarify when and for which relationships mindfulness interventions are most effective. However, current knowledge remains limited. Regarding individual factors, research shows that pre-intervention trait mindfulness levels moderate the positive effect of mindfulness interventions on relationship satisfaction, with significant effects for low trait mindfulness individuals but not for high trait mindfulness individuals (Kappen et al., 2019). Does this suggest a ceiling effect for mindfulness interventions on intimate relationships? Regarding relationship characteristics, commitment constitutes one indicator of relationship quality. When relationships are in crisis, perhaps committed partners are more motivated to seek help and more cooperative during intervention, yet no research has examined this. Therefore, future research should identify moderating variables affecting intervention outcomes to develop more targeted intervention protocols.

6.4 Attending to Potential Negative Effects

Most current research focuses on mindfulness' s positive effects on intimate relationships while rarely considering potential negative impacts. Do mindfulness interventions have potential downsides? Previous studies have reported side effects in other domains, such as autonomic hyperarousal, difficulty controlling negative emotions, and re-experiencing traumatic events (Van Dam et al., 2018). As noted, acceptance may be a necessary component for mindfulness to influence intimate relationships, and awareness and acceptance interact (Krafft et al., 2017). This raises the question: if interventions overemphasize awareness while neglecting acceptance, might they have negative effects, such as increasing the likelihood of practitioners becoming trapped in negative emotions and thoughts? Conversely, if acceptance is overemphasized while awareness is neglected, might this harm practitioners? For example, in domestic violence, victims submitting to abuse while ignoring their own feelings may suffer more severe physical and psychological harm. These questions suggest that awareness and acceptance components need to be maintained at appropriate levels; otherwise, effects may

backfire. What constitutes appropriate levels of awareness and acceptance for practitioners? What are the respective roles and degrees of awareness and acceptance? Future research could combine experimental induction methods with component decomposition to explore these questions more deeply.

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