

How to have a mindful relationship

Developing a stronger connection with your partner could be as simple as learning to live in the present moment. By Angela Barrett



Improving your relationship could be easier than you think. The simple act of being more mindful can reduce conflict,

stress and disconnection between you and your partner and can increase happiness.

But it all starts with you. Dr Richard Chambers is a clinical psychologist and co-author (with Margie Ulbrick) of the new book *Mindful Relationships: Creating Genuine Connection with Ourselves and Others* (Exisle, \$29.99). Here, he explains how to be more mindful and how it can help our relationships.

What is a mindful relationship?

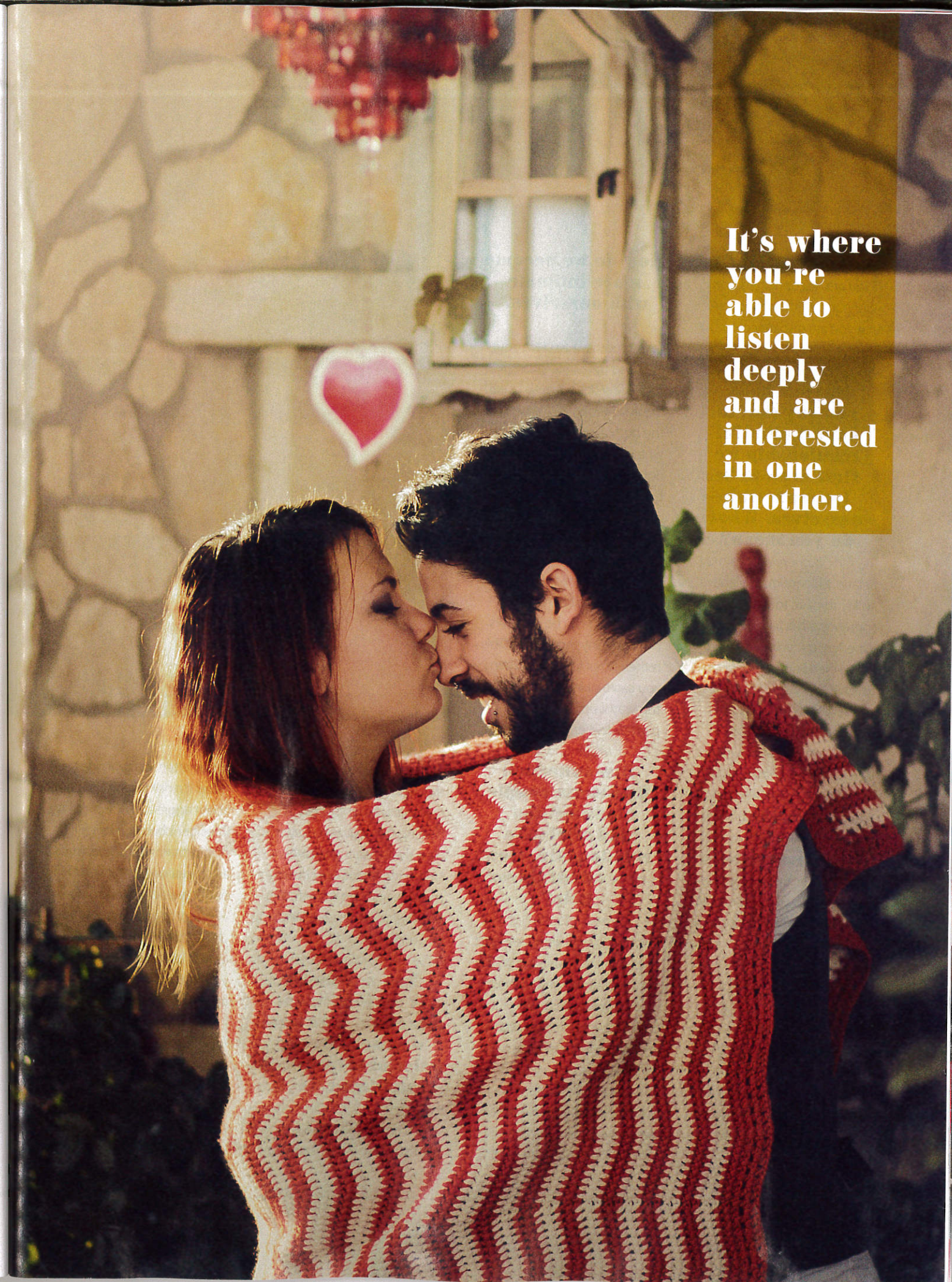
A mindful relationship is one where both of you are living in the present moment in your relationship and acting with awareness. It's where you're able to listen deeply and are interested in one another.

You generally don't overreact to each other and you take responsibility for your own actions and emotions.

What would a mind-'less' relationship look like?

Lots of time looking at a screen when you're in each other's company! Being preoccupied, not paying attention to each other, superficial conversation, jealousy, anger, fighting. This is born from being out of touch with your own internal world – your feelings, needs and desires – and therefore out ►

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of touch with your partner's. If you are disconnected from your partner, it's a reflection that you are disconnected from yourself.

In your book you say that to have a mindful relationship we first need to be intimate with ourselves. What do you mean?

Relationship intimacy – the ability to be in touch with someone else's inner experience – starts with you. Only when you are deeply in touch with yourself can you connect with the inner experience of others.

To be intimate with yourself is to have the ability to tune in to what you're feeling and what your needs are and to be able to hold that in a mindful, loving way where you stay present with yourself without getting caught up in your thoughts or reactions.



How do we become more intimate with ourselves?

Take a moment to close your eyes and tune in to yourself. Take a few deep breaths. Feel the air entering and leaving the body. Simply notice what's happening for you right now. How does your body feel? What emotions are around? What's happening in your mind? With a sense of friendliness, see if you can simply make space for whatever is happening. Say to yourself, 'I can be with this.' Do this many times a day. This is the nub of intimacy. When you can be kind to yourself in this way it ripples out to your partner and others.

Disconnection between a couple can be the downfall of a relationship. How can mindfulness help?

When we avoid an issue or talk about it in the same old way it leads to conflict, resentment and disconnection. With mindful awareness you can recognise your reactions and let them go so you can reorient your attention to what you and your partner are actually feeling and needing. A deeper listening

takes place where you hear the message your partner is really conveying. Instead of hearing the angry accusation, 'You always walk away when I'm talking to you', you hear the message underneath, that he's feeling unheard or like you don't care.

You say anger is an intelligent emotion. How can we use it in our relationships in an intelligent way?

Anger is often written off as something you don't want

to pay attention to. Anger – and I'm not talking about aggression – is intelligent because it is full of information: it points to an unmet need, that your boundaries have been violated, or you have an underlying emotion, such as hurt or sadness, that you're not able to be with in a loving way yet.

Being mindful enables you to notice as an observer that you are angry. Use anger intelligently by firstly making a lot of space for it. Don't try to get rid of it or fix it, just sit with it, then

gently enquire, what's deeper than the anger? What's really going on here? What am I really feeling? Hurt? Unloved? You can then speak to your partner from that place instead of from the anger.

You say 'learning to pause' is an invaluable relationship skill. How do we do this?

In the same way you pause a DVD and come back to it later, you can hit 'pause' at almost any time throughout

the day and have a moment of mindfulness. It snaps you out of your thoughts, the drama, the rush or the torment of your emotions. It gives you the opportunity to reconnect with your senses to see how you're doing, what your mental and emotional state is and what you need, and gives you access to your inner wisdom so you know how to respond.

Many couples use the pause during conflict as it makes them less reactive to each other. It can be a two-hour walk if you're really riled, a five-minute meditation or taking just one deep breath and noticing that

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you are reacting to your partner. This gives you space to see the situation more clearly and choice in that moment to act differently or listen more deeply.

How can being mindful help your sex life?

The ability to be open and present in your body – which is mindfulness – is fundamental to a good sex life. When you're deeply connected to yourself and your partner, it encourages greater levels of physical intimacy. You can do this by choosing to be in your body during lovemaking, instead of tuned out. Slow everything down, extend the foreplay. Pay close attention



to your own sensory experience and your partner's. Notice the emotion, your own and theirs. Open your eyes, look into their eyes. Eyes-open sex is a challenge for a lot of people but it's a great way to increase intimacy.

Can mindfulness solve or improve every issue?

It can't solve every issue but it can definitely help every issue if you use it to develop loving presence with yourself and your partner. It can help resolve some of the conflict, increase understanding or allow you to see that the relationship isn't functioning anymore and perhaps the most loving thing you could do is to leave it in a respectful way.

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