

# Putting Mindfulness in Motion to Help Clients Develop Healthier Relationships

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*Those who can answer  
the essential question  
inside become more  
able to handle the  
uncertainties around  
them. –Michael Meade*

As coaches, we often encounter vestiges of long-held patterns that continue to echo across our client's stories and live in ways that limit their potential. These patterns can be seen in the choices they keep making when they are stressed, the postures they instinctively adopt when feeling vulnerable, the stories they tell themselves when they look at their email inbox (e.g., "If I just work harder then . . ."). These patterns seem more easily triggered and more problematic in a time when change is the constant state of play, and we are working near the limits of our human capacities in trying to "keep up." How can we help leaders and others we coach to remain resilient and resourceful?

Many of the suboptimal mindset and behavior patterns we encounter in coaching reflect our client's well-worn attachment strategies. For example, do they tend to move away from us or toward us when they are feeling anxious in a session? We can see these patterns in the stories our clients tell us, particularly in how they relate to and talk about the characters in them. Coaching can provide a safe yet provocative space where people can work with the material in their stories to experiment with new regulatory strategies (and the narratives that go with them) and create new options for themselves. Our greatest gift to our clients is often the opportunity to experience a new way of relating, which they can then bring into their own life. In the process, they can become more aware of their current attachment strategies and develop new ones that reflect and reinforce a greater sense of attachment security.

According to research, when people feel more attachment security, they are more able to:

1. Self-soothe and mutually regulate, so they can learn and grow

2. Sustain positive yet mature beliefs about themselves and the world
3. Constructively (re)appraise situations to maintain self-efficacy
4. Distinguish between their experience and that of others
5. Sense and articulate their feelings and empathize with others
6. Address existential concerns rather than be perpetually on guard
7. Break up their stories and reconfigure them in order to grow
8. Be tolerant of ambiguity and less dogmatic in their thinking and communicating
9. Notice and repair ruptures in their rapport and communication with others

In coaching, we invite people to live in a less defended, more secure way so that more of their potential is available to them. This requires them to re-allocate the precious life energy they currently expend defending aspects of themselves around which they feel less secure. The more secure they feel, the more open they are to use this energy in more generative ways. We need to do the work ourselves so we can be more radically present with our clients and show up in what are called “moments of meeting” in the attachment literature, where transformation becomes possible. This requires a level of mindfulness that is more systemic than the popular view of it as regulating ourselves cognitively. While important, the attachment research makes the case for the importance of mindfulness for *mutual* regulation and the development of conditions that are less disruptive and draining of regulatory capabilities. It doesn't help in the end if we just send *changed* people back into *unchanged* environments.

As a result, I developed a series of practices called “putting mindfulness in motion” as outlined below. I find it creates a more sustained impact because it replicates the entire attachment process to help our clients mature and feel more secure. It can be used in developing coaches— as we do in our programs—and in coaching with clients. It involves providing them with:

- A sense of *safe haven* (i.e., through offering resonance and rapport), which increases their ability to *cope* on their own
- A sense of *secure base* (i.e., through offering new experiences and experiments), which increases their ability to *connect* with others
- An opportunity to upgrade their *working model* (i.e., through working with their underlying narrative patterns), which increases their ability to create new options

- An opportunity to re-shape the “family” system(s) in which they operate (i.e., through practicing new relational strategies), which increases their ability to contribute to better outcomes

Uncertainties are here to stay. What is needed now is to work more deeply with the essential questions before us. This is true whether we are coaching an individual, a team or an organization.

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David earned his doctoral degree in human and organizational development from Fielding Graduate University. He is the author of over 50 publications on narratives and coaching, and he serves on the senior advisory board for *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*. He was lead editor of *The Philosophy and Practice of Coaching* (Jossey-Bass, 2008), author of *Narrative Coaching: Bringing New Stories to Life* (CNC Press, 2015) and co-editor of *SAGE Handbook of Coaching* (Sage, 2016). He is a thought leader for the Institute of Coaching affiliated with Harvard Medical School.

David will be presenting the session “Using Attachment Theory to Deepen Coaching Capabilities” at ICF Converge on Friday, August 25.