

# **The Healing Power of Mindful Care-Partnering**

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## **Introduction**

Are you (like us) a caregiver struggling with the responsibilities and stress of caregiving? Have you wondered how on earth do some caregivers find the role of caregiving a blessing? Are you amazed at how some caregivers tend to their responsibilities effortlessly and continue to be cheerful day in and day out? Yes, these remarkable individuals do exist, and, we have had the good fortune to have met them in our professional life (as a psychiatrist [AKD] treating patients from ages 5 and up, and child and adolescent psychologist [FDG]) as well as in our personal life. We have been looking for a path towards becoming better caregivers for some time now.

This paper is aimed at helping caregivers (family [e.g., parents, siblings] and professional [e.g., staff in nursing homes]) of adults having disabilities (henceforth called Persons Having Disabilities [PHD]) (e.g., older adults with dementia, nursing home residents) improve their capacity for compassion, creativity during caregiving, effectiveness of their efforts, and at the same time improve caregiver's own sense of wellbeing. Caregivers work hard to improve quality of life of PHDs but often experience frustration, helplessness, hopelessness, stress, and burnout. We have discovered that an approach that blends mindfulness with the concept of care-partnering can not only improve our skills in improving wellness and positive experiences of PHDs but also prevent burnout and promote our emotional and spiritual growth. For many caregivers, mindful care-partnering comes naturally, without any knowledge or training. For the rest of us, focus and effort in developing skills of mindful care-partnering are necessary.

Mindfulness is bringing one's awareness to the present moment, with intention, to whatever one is experiencing (e.g., feelings, sensations, thoughts) with an attitude of kindness and curiosity. It is a skill and as such, can be developed much more easily than generally recognized. Mindfulness is an excellent way to become familiar with the workings on one's mind and minds of others (especially of PHD).

Intimate familiarity with the workings of one's own mind and that of others opens up doors of healing and wellness that have otherwise remained obstinately closed.

*Mindfulness is paying attention in a particular way – on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.*

- Jon Kabat Zinn

Care-partnering includes all traditional aspects of caring for another person (e.g., helping them with daily activities) but also involves awareness of the PHD's capacity to partner and collaborate with caregivers and the unique gifts caregivers receive from PHDs as well as from the very act of caring. Care-partnering also goes a step further in recognizing that the PHD is the expert in how best to have her/his needs met and thus, it is crucial to be led by the PHD at least as often as leading the PHD towards safety, better ways of adapting to life's challenges and positive experiences.

Henceforth, all caregivers will be called care-partners.

### **Mindful Care-Partnering**

It is easier to understand mindful care-partnering by understanding three common aspects of unmindful care-partnering. These are: autopilot, auto-reaction and premature cognitive commitments.

#### **Autopilot**

As you (the care-partner) embark on mindful care-partnering, you will quickly notice that your mind wanders to many different places/situations as you go through the task at hand (say for example, taking a walk with the PHD). It is typical for our minds to jump from paying attention to the task at hand to having imaginary conversations, plans, worries, replaying memories, and a host of other thoughts. One can say that our mind keeps wandering into the land of thoughts and thinking. You may finish the walk and may not be able to remember what areas of the park you walked and what conversation you have had with the PHD. This happens automatically because it is a natural tendency of our brain to go on autopilot. Autopilot requires much less energy and intentional activity takes up much more energy so given a choice, brain will always switch to autopilot to

conserve energy (a strategy that improved survival of our hunter-gatherer ancestors). Mindful care-partnering involves gently bringing your wandering mind to the present moment, becoming aware that you are walking with the PHD, that you are holding their hand, and becoming aware of the green landscape around you. Mindfulness in such situations involves catching oneself having these thoughts, minimizing or withholding any negative judgment or criticism for being distracted and intentionally bringing our focus back to the present. You can be certain that your mind will wander again, and you can once again bring your mind gently to the present. Being present with the PHD in such a way will improve sense of value the PHD has for herself/himself and improve PHD's sense of connectedness with you. Improved sense of one's value and sense of connectedness are two most basic requirements for any significant and sustained healing and wellness to occur.

*The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character, and will. No one is compos sui if he have it not. An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.*

– William James (*Principles of Psychology* 1950;p.424)

Note: *Compos Sui* meanings *master of oneself*

### Auto-reaction

As you become aware of your emotions during care-partnering, you will notice that you often react automatically from emotion first rather than pause, reflect and then respond. Once again, the brain under strong emotions (especially negative emotions such as fear or anger) will tend to respond immediately based on perceived threat. Brain's initially perception of threat involves a part of the brain called amygdala and amygdala is biased towards over-reacting (guided by the goal of increasing survival). By being mindful of our brain's (specifically amygdala's) tendency to over-react, you can develop skills to inhibit the immediate auto-reaction, pause and reflect taking in any additional information our senses are registering and contrasting the event with any past experience with similar events we may have, attempting to see from the point of view of the PHD, and then responding. Your pre-frontal lobe plays a key role in mediating all these actions (inhibiting auto-reaction, pausing, reflecting, responding).

Depending on the situation, all these actions may take only a few seconds or several minutes or even longer.

### Premature Cognitive Commitments (PCC)

Our brains are programmed to come to quick conclusions based on minimal information (because such function provided survival advantage). Such conclusions are key examples of premature cognitive commitments (PCCs). Judgmental thinking is typically based on PCCs. This tendency of our brain is valuable in emergency situations but can be counter-productive and at times even destructive in day-to-day situations involving caring. As you become more aware of your thoughts and feelings during caring, you will be able to catch yourself in such acts of prematurely committing to an understanding of what is going on (especially challenging behaviors). For example, the PHD is having an anger outburst and you quickly decide that this is “manipulative, attention seeking behavior” or that the PHD is “just being mean”. Many PCCs involve harsh judgment about ourselves (e.g., “I am a terrible caregiver”) or catastrophic predictions (e.g., “this resident with dementia is going to tear down the place”). PCC will push you to react as if this conclusion was absolutely correct and there was no alternative explanation for the behavior or alternative future scenarios (especially positive ones). PCC will further increase intensity of negative emotions that triggered them in the first place. Auto-reaction and PCCs by care-partners often make the behavior of the PHD worse. Mindful care-partnering will slowly but surely help you become aware of how often our PCCs are incorrect. As you learn to pause, take in the context, get to know the narrative of the PHD (how the PHD got to this point), your understanding of challenging behaviors will become more nuanced, what needs to be done to address the challenging situation will become clearer, and your success in addressing the challenging behavior will greatly improve.

### **Benefits of Mindful Care-Partnering**

As you delve into this practice of mindful care-partnering, you will become aware of your fears, expectations, and judgments and how those color how you relate to the PHD. Mindful care-partnering will also help you see the situation from PHD’s point of view. Mindful care-partnering is all about honoring relationships, connectedness, and a sense of belonging. Your relationship with PHD may feel

chaotic or different from the ideal you want. You may find yourself drifting through life on “autopilot,” constantly worrying about the future or feeling upset (guilty, resentful) about the past instead of living in the here and now. This method of caring teaches you to stay “in the present” and stay connected with the PHD as well as yourself in kinder and softer ways.

Regular meditation practice (e.g., 30-minute Breath Awareness Meditation early in the morning before starting one’s day; at least a few minutes of Breath Awareness Meditation when experiencing strong negative emotions [e.g., anger]) and mindfulness practices throughout the day (e.g., mindful eating, mindful walking) has been shown to dramatically improve one’s sense of wellbeing and inner strength in just eight weeks of daily practice. Yoga, Tai Chi and Qi Gong are other mindfulness-based practices (often called mind-body practices) that promote psychological and spiritual wellness and make us more effective care-partners. Meditation and mindfulness practices increase our emotional and spiritual resilience (emotional and spiritual bank-balance 😊) and lower our risk for burnout, depression and persistent anxiety. Every time we engage in meditation and mindfulness practices, we are depositing money in our emotional and spiritual bank! As we build this bank balance, hassles of daily life will seem mere annoyances rather than “terrible” events, and, we will bounce back from traumatic events faster and without becoming demoralized. We will be less likely to dwell in self-pity or resentment and more likely to be aware of many things we can still be grateful for. We will find improved capacity to be patient, to see silver lining in clouds and make lemonade from lemons that life gives us (again and again 😊). We will be able to make ourselves do things we don’t want to do (e.g., regularly exercising, eating healthy foods, having a good sleep routine, taking time to enjoy simple things in life [HYGGGE {Danish art of contentment, comfort and connection}]) and we will also be able to more easily restrain ourselves from doing things we should not (e.g., putting self or others down under the influence of strong negative emotions). Meditation and mindfulness practices will help us laugh at our foibles with light-hearted spontaneity and avoid taking life too seriously. We will be able to let go of materialistic attachments and move towards a simpler and easier life where awareness of being alive and surrounded by love will be enough reason to be happy.

## **From Knowledge to Skills to Practice**

Mindful care-partnering challenges you to examine your expectations. Your fears may motivate you to try and direct the PHD in certain ways and often will blind you to what is truly in their best interests. PHDs have their own trajectories, beliefs, ideas, and opinions, often different from ours, and what we think theirs should be. When you challenge yourself to pay attention to the present moment and see caring as collaboration, an artistic endeavor, you gain opportunities to truly see PHDs, to understand and appreciate them, and solve problems with them rather than for them.

Everyone has times where inner musings (inner chatter, conversation with oneself in our minds) take over, but this means we lose opportunities to connect with the PHD by being blind to the present moment. The key is in paying attention to the small things, like a child, fully embodying every moment, as opposed to life being a movie in our minds or trying to match it to our expectations.

You can think of mindful care-partnering as an opportunity to get to know yourself better and to accelerate your own psychological and spiritual growth. A moment of mindful care-partnering may allow you to catch yourself and realize an opportunity to change direction. When you pay attention to the present you may recognize that some thoughts or fears are not based in reality and liberate yourself to a more productive course of action.

As with most skills, mindful care-partnering takes time and practice. Even small changes are profoundly healing and transformative. Some examples of small steps are being aware of your breath, the feeling of your hands, or your own body language, the feel of PHD's hand in yours. The simplest method of becoming mindful is to get connected with our senses. Bring your awareness to your breathing, for example, in the belly or the nostrils, to focus on one thing at one time. Practicing this at a moment of tranquility, and drawing on this experience when a conflict happens, will help you respond mindfully to the conflict instead of reacting emotionally, and find better ways of dealing with it.

Instead of preparing for situations in the future, or using a cookbook approach, mindful care-partnering asks that you trust yourself to be aware of the next moment and find a solution when that moment comes. The goal is not to eliminate chaos and negative feelings; these are a natural part of life filled with

caring responsibilities. The goal is to be kind and curious when those moments arise.

It is crucial to give yourself credit for the little moments of success, and, accept yourself and others with all the imperfections. Choosing to engage in mindful care-partnering is empowering yourself to be present for the challenges and successes.

### **Resources:**

- 1) Mindfulness. Book by Ellen Langer.
- 2) John Kabat-Zinn and Myla Kabat-Zinn (2004). *The Healing Power of Mindful Parenting*. [DVD]
- 3) Mindfulness. Special Newsweek Edition 2018.
- 4) Living Mindfully: A Primer for the Uninitiated. Book by Abhilash Desai and Faith Galliano Desai (available as PDF: send request to [dr.abhilashdesai@icloud.com](mailto:dr.abhilashdesai@icloud.com) )

