

Conscious Relationships:

Cultivating Connection through Intention, Presence and Accountability

To be conscious means to be **aware**. In our closest relationships, we are frequently caught unawares. Like so many aspects of our busy daily lives, we take our relationships for granted. Much of our behavior is automatic. Our minds are distracted by obligations and responsibilities, and our attention is tugged in every direction. We tend to react to events. While automatic behavior may be helpful in an emergency, it isn't effective for complex problem solving and sustainable decision-making. Since relationships are complicated and we usually want them to be long lasting, it makes sense for us to manage them consciously.

Being conscious in our relationships starts with setting an **intention**. Deepak Chopra said, "Intention is the starting point of every dream." Since intentions are personal and we cannot control others, it makes no sense to set an intention that relies on the other to behave in a certain way. Our power lies in our own thoughts, feelings, and behavior. So our intentions should be for ourselves. An example of such an intention is the promise to "love, honor and cherish". Another intention might be to "keep my heart open, allow myself to be vulnerable, and behave in a manner that supports connection."

Being fully conscious also means **being present**. This requires focusing on one thing at a time – attending only to what is happening here and now. When emotions are high, being present requires us to step back and bear witness. This clears a space in our minds in order to observe with curiosity and openness. We also must suspend the fight or flight response and allow ourselves to be vulnerable. When attention is not divided by the need to defend or protect, resurrect the past, or ruminate about the future, then we are able to be fully present.

One simple way to be present in your relationship is to give your partner your **undivided attention** when speaking to you. Orient your body, join your eyes, and use active listening skills like reflecting, paraphrasing and clarifying. When your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the present moment. Listen to your partner as you would like to be heard. Take the perspective that your be-



When you love someone, the best thing you can offer is your presence. How can you love if you are not there?

— Thich Nhat Hanh

loved is worth your investment and deserves your best effort. If you find that this moment is not a time in which you can give your best effort, say this and set a time to talk in the near future when you can be more present. If you find that your mind often wanders when your loved one is speaking to you, notice and be curious about where your mind goes. Ask yourself whether this thought is more important than the person you love.

Conscious couples focus on ways to **stay connected and foster harmony**. Conflict and divisiveness can be soothed by cultivating compassion and kindness within oneself. One method for achieving this is through loving-kindness meditation (LKM). LKM is the practice of developing feelings of compassion and goodwill toward oneself and others by wishing them happiness, contentment and peace. Meditating on compassion opens our hearts and increase kindness toward ourselves and others — hate and fear dissolve in the presence of love. LKM helps to heal distress

and conflict. Daily practice reduces stress and inflammation, decreases negative emotions, self-criticism, and bias, and increases positive emotions and personal resources, including social connectedness. Benefits are long lasting, even with small doses of LKM.

Conscious couples are accountable. They take **personal responsibility**, looking first to the ways in which they can create positive change. When feeling frustrated, irritated or annoyed with your partner, pause and look inward. Stay with difficult emotions and be curious about them rather than reacting or pushing your feelings away. Often with a little reflection we can develop a more reasonable perspective and respond from a place of wisdom rather than from a place of fear or anger. Think about the good in your partner (or the relationship) and ways you can support this goodness. Work toward seeing and accepting things for what they really are rather than making assumptions or grasping at expectations.

If you would like to be more conscious in your relationship, but you are having a hard time getting started on your own, a therapist or life coach who is skilled in couples counseling or mindfulness techniques may be able to help you realize your intentions.

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