




Differentiation of self and relational mindfulness in the dyadic adaptation model in the face of stressful external factors¹

<https://doi.org/10.34766/fer.v61i1.1344>

Julitta Dębska^a 

^a Julitta Dębska, <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7214-7024>,

University of Lodz Doctoral School of Social Sciences, University of Łódź, Poland

 Corresponding author: julitta.debska@edu.umi.lodz.pl

Abstract: *Introduction:* The functioning of couples in today's world is increasingly associated with experiencing a growing number of external stressors, such as professional responsibilities, family member illnesses, or global crises. These stressors negatively affect the quality of romantic relationships, leading to reduced satisfaction and increased conflict within the relationship. The aim of this article is to present a modified model of dyadic adaptation in the face of external stressors, integrating differentiation of self and relational mindfulness. The model is based on family systems theory, the theory of mindfulness shaping processes in romantic relationships and their outcomes and is framed by the assumptions of the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) Model. *Method:* A systematic literature review of the last five years (since 2020) was conducted, analyzing quantitative and qualitative studies on differentiation of self, relational mindfulness, and their correlations with romantic relationship quality, satisfaction, and couples' coping and adaptation in the face of external stressors. The review utilized databases such as JSTOR, ProQuest, Science Direct, Scopus, Springer Link, Web of Science, and Wiley Online Library. Results: The literature review indicates that a high level of differentiation of self can positively influence the quality of romantic relationships and enhance couples' ability to cope with external stressors. Relational mindfulness may be a better predictor of relationship quality than dispositional mindfulness; however, its connections to couples' coping with stress require further research. A modified theoretical model of dyadic adaptation in the face of external stressors was proposed, which incorporates psychological variables such as differentiation of self and relational mindfulness. The outcomes of adaptation in the model include a high level of romantic relationship quality and stability. *Conclusions:* Empirical verification of the proposed model's assumptions and longitudinal studies could contribute to the development of effective therapeutic programs supporting couples in managing stress, which may translate into building stable and satisfying relationships.

Keywords: differentiation of self, dyadic coping, relational mindfulness, romantic relationship, romantic relationship quality

Introduction

In the face of increasing challenges posed by contemporary life, couples are increasingly encountering external stressors such as demanding professional obligations, family illnesses, life transitions, and even the threat of epidemics or war. Effective adaptation to such challenges is linked not only to individual coping skills but also to the ability to jointly manage the emotions arising from these circumstances (Weitkamp & Bodenmann, 2022). Daily stress affects the quality of romantic relationships, potentially weakening the sense of closeness and increasing conflict within dyads. This phenomenon becomes particularly evident during periods of heightened tension, such

as the COVID-19 pandemic, where stress has been associated with a decline in relationship quality and an increase in emotional difficulties (Kozakiewicz, Izdebski, Białorudzki, & Mazur, 2023; Totenhagen, Randall, Bar-Kalifa, Ciftci, & Gleason, 2022). Marital stress may contribute to divorce decisions, especially when it negatively impacts the quantity and quality of shared time. Studies indicate that couples with lower incomes experience a higher number of stressors, which in turn increases the risk of divorce compared to couples with higher incomes, who are less exposed to external stressors (Williamson & Schouweiler, 2023). Although research on stress

¹ Article in Polish language: https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/61P_Debs.pdf

coping and adaptation in couples has been intensively conducted for the past three decades, the increasing threats affecting dyads necessitate continued research focusing on predictors, trajectories, and specific behaviors that individuals and couples can implement (Weitkamp & Bodenmann, 2022).

The primary aim of this article is to present a modified model of dyadic adaptation in the face of external stressors. This model is based on the theoretical framework of M. Bowen's (1978) family systems theory and the mindfulness-based model of relational processes and outcomes (Karremans, Schellekens, & Kappen, 2015). It applies to romantic relationships, including married, engaged, and non-married couples.

The first theoretical concept applied in describing, explaining, and predicting human behavior is M. Bowen's (1978) family systems theory, which provides a framework for analyzing the mechanisms influencing diverse family responses to stress. The central concept of this theory, differentiation of self, plays a crucial role in stress management and the maintenance of healthy family functioning, as it affects how individuals respond to both internal family dynamics and external sources of stress (Bronner, Archibald, Lindong, & Laymon, 2019). Although initially developed for analyzing and supporting family processes, this theory has also been applied to other systems at risk of dysfunction or heightened anxiety (Noone, 2017). A romantic relationship constitutes one such system within this conceptualization. The application of this theoretical framework to dyads focuses on a subset of processes and systems within the broader model. Family systems theory enables the examination of both child-rearing and child-free couples, married or non-married (Pollard & Rogge, 2022).

The second theoretical framework underpinning the proposed model of dyadic adaptation to external stressors is the mindfulness-based model of relational processes and outcomes (Karremans et al., 2015). This theory considers the role of mindfulness in couples' coping with external stressors such as demanding professional commitments or the illness of a partner or child. An individual aware that external factors contribute to their stress and potential reactions toward their partner can separate these stressors

from the relational experience. Mindful awareness of stress sources enables open communication between partners and the provision of necessary support.

This study integrates research findings from the last five years (2020 – 2024) that relate to the proposed psychological variables: differentiation of self, relational mindfulness, and their associations with relationship quality and satisfaction. Both quantitative and qualitative studies are considered. Differentiation of self may be a universal psychological construct, although its components, such as fusion, are sensitive to cultural context. Notable differences exist between collectivist and individualist cultures (Lampis, Catuadella, Agus, Busonera, & Skowron, 2019). Given this, the literature review focuses on studies from Western cultural contexts.

The systematic review includes articles from high-impact psychology journals such as *PLOS ONE*, *Clinical Psychology Review*, *Frontiers in Psychology*, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, and *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. Data sources include JSTOR, ProQuest, Science Direct, Scopus, Springer Link, Web of Science, and Wiley Online Library. The search terms used were: "differentiation of self," "romantic relationship quality," "stress," "stressful life events," "mindfulness," "relational mindfulness," "romantic relationship," "coping with stress," and "romantic relationship satisfaction." References from selected publications were also reviewed for relevant studies.

This article begins by presenting the proposed model of dyadic adaptation to external stressors. It then discusses research findings on the relationship between differentiation of self and romantic relationship quality and satisfaction. Next, studies examining the role of differentiation of self in couples' coping with stressful events are reviewed. The relationship between relational mindfulness and romantic relationship quality and satisfaction is also explored, followed by studies on the role of relational mindfulness in couples' stress management. The final section presents conclusions.

Throughout the article the terms are used interchangeably: dyad, couple, romantic relationship, as well as mindfulness understood as a trait and dispositional mindfulness.

1. The dyadic adaptation model in the face of external stressors

In the 1980s, researchers acknowledged that external factors could be sources of stress; however, stress and coping were predominantly conceptualized as individual phenomena (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Most scholars at that time did not yet associate stress coping with dyadic or community-based processes. It was not until the 1990s that psychologists began to emphasize the impact of stress experienced by individuals in romantic relationships on the dyad and the fact that coping with stress is a shared experience that affects relationship outcomes, such as relationship quality (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

One of the models addressing couples' stress coping from both an individual and dyadic perspective is the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) Model, developed by B.R. Karney and T.N. Bradbury (1995). Within this model, adaptation is defined as a couple's ability to effectively manage stress, contributing to both high relationship quality and stability. This dynamic process results from interactions among partners' individual vulnerabilities, external stressors, and adaptive processes. Vulnerabilities include various individual characteristics that partners bring into the relationship, such as demographic factors, past romantic experiences, family background, personality traits, or attachment styles. These individual differences shape how partners interpret stressors, events or situations that may be chronic or acute and require adjustment at both individual and relational levels. According to the VSA model, vulnerabilities and external stressors influence adaptive processes, which encompass strategies for managing individual differences, relationship challenges, and life transitions. Adaptive processes, such as conflict resolution strategies, communication quality, and mutual support, play a key role in overcoming difficulties and maintaining relationship stability. A positive adaptation outcome in romantic relationships involves achieving both high relationship quality and stability. In line with the conceptualization proposed by Lewis and Spanier (1979), utilized in the VSA model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), these two dimensions – quality and stability – are treated as independent aspects of relationships.

Drawing on the VSA model and the literature review, the author of this article presents a modified model of dyadic adaptation to external stressors. This model integrates Bowen's (1978) family systems theory and the mindfulness-based model of relational processes and outcomes (Karremans et al., 2015). In the proposed model, vulnerability is represented by differentiation of self, a central concept in the systemic approach. The adaptive process is relational mindfulness. The outcome of successful adaptation is a high level of relationship quality and stability.

Most existing models of dyadic adaptation to stressful events, incorporating either differentiation of self or mindfulness as a trait, have focused on the role of each psychological variable separately (Dębska & Wałęcka-Matyja, 2024; Karremans et al., 2015). The proposed modified dyadic adaptation model is the first to include relational mindfulness, a construct specifically referring to mindfulness in romantic relationships.

Differentiation of self involves balancing autonomy and the need for close connections in relationships, whereas relational mindfulness focuses on being present and nonjudgmental in interactions with others. The author's proposal is the first to integrate differentiation of self and relational mindfulness. This research gap may stem from the lack of studies on the relationship between these psychological variables. Interpersonal mindfulness has been a subject of scientific inquiry since 2009 (Duncan, Coatsworth, & Greenberg, 2009), while relational mindfulness, understood as being mindful in romantic relationships, has only been explored since 2018 (Kimmes, Jaurequi, May, Srivastava, & Fincham, 2018). The relationships between relational mindfulness and other psychological variables remain largely unexplored. However, as demonstrated in empirical studies cited later in this article, both high levels of differentiation of self and relational mindfulness contribute to positive romantic relationship outcomes, even for couples exposed to external stressors. Psychological work focused on differentiation of self and relational mindfulness aims to enhance self-awareness and improve emotional regulation, ultimately fostering more harmonious and conscious relationships both with oneself and others (Aristegui, Campayo, & Barriga, 2021; Lachowska, 2020).

Differentiation of self is a multidimensional construct related to emotional self-regulation. It encompasses intrapersonal abilities, such as distinguishing between cognitive and affective processes, and interpersonal abilities, such as maintaining autonomy while forming intimate bonds with significant others (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Stressful life events play a crucial role in Bowen's (1978) theory, influencing how individuals and couples navigate their relationships. This concept suggests that individuals with higher differentiation of self are better equipped to cope with stress and protect their relationships from its negative effects (Rodríguez-González et al., 2023). Differentiation of self functions as a moderator in the relationship between anxiety and triangulation behaviors, where higher differentiation of self weakens the link between anxiety and triangulation behaviors, reducing the severity of psychological symptoms (Murdock, Flynn, & Bresin, 2022). Given that this key concept in family systems theory influences how individuals manage relational stress, the author deemed it essential to incorporate it into the VSA model.

Mindfulness is a particular state of attention deliberately focused on the present moment without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). Mindfulness training programs, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1982), aim to reduce stress and improve quality of life, with their effects supported by empirical evidence (Querstret, Morison, Dickinson, Copley, & John, 2020).

As research on coping mechanisms expanded beyond individual-level approaches to dyadic and broader community-based contexts, the need arose to apply mindfulness in both individual and relational contexts. Before the emergence of the term relational mindfulness, Duncan et al. (2009) attempted to define interpersonal mindfulness, which consists of four key dimensions: (1) full attention while listening to others, (2) awareness of one's own and others' emotions during interactions, (3) openness, acceptance, and willingness to acknowledge others' thoughts and feelings, (4) self-regulation, including low reactivity and reduced automaticity in responses to others' behaviors, and (5) compassion toward oneself and others. Khoury, Vergara, and Spinelli (2022) developed the Interpersonal Mindfulness Questionnaire (IMQ), which is

based on four dimensions: (1) cognitive distancing, (2) bodily awareness, (3) attention to and awareness of others, and (4) mindful responding.

Relational mindfulness, however, specifically pertains to mindfulness in the context of romantic relationships. Kimmes et al. (2018) proposed a measure to operationalize this concept. As the authors highlight, romantic relationships evoke strong emotions, and mindfulness in solitary or platonic interactions may significantly differ from mindfulness in the presence of a romantic partner. Thus, increasing one's general mindfulness tendencies does not necessarily translate into heightened mindfulness in romantic contexts. Kimmes et al. (2018) identified the need for a mindfulness measure specific to romantic relationships, as the lack of such a tool may limit our understanding of its role in this context. Empirical studies have shown that relational mindfulness is a better predictor of relationship quality than mindfulness as a trait (Morris, McDowell, Tawfiq, Outler, & Kimmes, 2023). This justifies the choice of relational mindfulness, rather than dispositional mindfulness, as a psychological variable in the model proposed in this article. Incorporating a relational variable allows for the consideration of both individual contributions to dyadic adaptation and the processes occurring within the dyad.

The outcome of adaptation in the model proposed by the author is a high level of relationship quality and stability. Relationship quality includes satisfaction, integration, adjustment, happiness, and communication, whereas stability is understood as the durability of the romantic relationship (Ryś, 1994). Given that relationship quality as a psychological variable integrates several dimensions, in the following sections, the study will analyze not only relationship quality but also one of its components: satisfaction.

2. Differentiation of self and its association with relationship quality and romantic satisfaction

Most existing research confirms the association between differentiation of self and relationship outcomes such as quality, satisfaction, commit-

ment, dyadic adjustment, and relationship stability (Price & Allsop, 2020; Stapley & Murdock, 2020). M. Calatrava, M.V. Martins, M. Schweer-Collins, C. Duch-Ceballos, and M. Rodríguez-González (2022) conducted a review study comparing findings from 56 articles testing the hypothesis that higher differentiation of self is linked to higher relationship quality and satisfaction. A significant proportion of studies (39) confirmed this hypothesis, while 12 reported mixed results, and 5 provided findings that contradicted it. Among the three of five studies rejecting the assumed relationship between Bowen's construct (1978) and relationship outcomes, the sample characteristics appeared to be a determining factor. These studies included couples seeking services at a university-based clinic, military couples where one partner may have had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and parents raising children with special needs.

J. Lampis et al. (2019) conducted a study on 137 Italian couples, demonstrating that a high level of differentiation of self is associated with high dyadic adjustment in marriage and serves as a significant predictor of it. The researchers used the self-report measure *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (Spanier, 1976), which consists of four components: consensus, relationship satisfaction, cohesion (degree of relationship commitment), and affectionate expression. Differentiation of self was measured using the *Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised* (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003), composed of four subscales: *I-position*, *emotional reactivity*, *fusion with others*, and *emotional cutoff*. The researchers hypothesized that dyadic adjustment could be shaped both by an individual's differentiation of self (actor effect) and by their partner's differentiation of self (partner effect). Using the *Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM)*, the study found that men's dyadic adjustment was solely associated with their own *I-position* level, whereas in women, dyadic adjustment was influenced by both their *I-position* and emotional cutoff, as well as their partners' levels of these traits. However, the study did not account for reciprocal interactions between the analyzed variables. M. Kerr and M. Bowen (1988) distinguished two levels of differentiation of self: *basic* and *functional*.

Functional differentiation refers to aspects of the self that are susceptible to environmental changes. According to this theoretical model, the relationship between differentiation of self and dyadic adjustment is bidirectional. Lampis et al. (2019) emphasized that future research should focus on verifying causal relationships between these variables and determining the direction of influence.

R. Finzi-Dottan (2023) conducted a study investigating the mediating effect of fear of intimacy on the relationship between differentiation of self and romantic satisfaction. The study included 144 married couples (N = 288) from Israel. For both partners, differentiation of self was linked to relationship satisfaction, with fear of intimacy mediating this relationship. Higher differentiation of self was associated with lower fear of intimacy, which in turn correlated with greater relationship satisfaction. These findings align with Bowen's (1978) theory, which suggests that differentiation of self serves as a foundation for establishing intimate and mutual marital relationships. Fear of intimacy in one partner was also correlated with their spouse's fear of intimacy. Additionally, wives' fear of intimacy affected their husbands' relationship satisfaction, whereas husbands' fear of intimacy did not impact their wives' satisfaction. Analysis of the partner effect showed that higher differentiation of self in wives was associated with lower fear of intimacy, which in turn led to higher relationship satisfaction for their husbands. The study confirmed Bowen's (1978) premise that individuals with high differentiation of self experience greater marital satisfaction due to their ability to form intimate bonds. Finzi-Dottan (2023) emphasized the significant role of wives in shaping satisfying marital relationships. The results provide valuable insights into marital dynamics; however, they should be interpreted with caution, as the study's cross-sectional design does not allow for definitive conclusions regarding causal relationships. Additionally, the sampling method was based on convenience rather than representativeness. The study participants were primarily individuals with high educational attainment and socioeconomic status. Another limitation was that data were collected at a single point in time. A more optimal approach

would involve conducting a longitudinal study to observe the same group of couples at different time points. Such an approach would allow for an examination of whether the interactive effects of fear of intimacy on relationship satisfaction are linked to partners' long-term adaptation to each other.

In a study conducted by M. Mozas-Alonso, J. Olivera, and A. Berástegui (2022), the relationships between differentiation of self, marital satisfaction, and parenting styles were examined in a Spanish sample of parents raising adolescent children. The study also aimed to explore gender differences in these variables. Participants included 140 Spanish adults aged 37 – 62, with 64.3% (n = 90) being women and 35.7% (n = 50) men. The majority had higher education and came from nuclear families. Four measurement tools were used: the *Differentiation of Self Scale (DSS)* for assessing various aspects of differentiation of self; the *satisfaction subscale of Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS)* for measuring marital quality; and the *Warmth Scale-Parents* and the *Rules and Demands Scale-Parents*, which evaluate warmth-communication, criticism-rejection, and other parenting practices. The findings revealed significant correlations between differentiation of self and marital quality. Individuals with higher differentiation of self reported higher marital satisfaction, supporting Bowen's (1978) theoretical framework. Emotional cutoff, a component of low differentiation, was particularly negatively correlated with marital satisfaction, indicating that difficulties in building intimacy and closeness can significantly lower relationship quality. Women exhibited higher emotional reactivity than men, which may influence their conflict resolution and interpersonal dynamics. Marital satisfaction was also a significant mediator between differentiation of self and parenting styles. Higher differentiation of self was associated with more positive parenting practices, such as warmth-communication and inductive discipline, partially due to increased marital satisfaction. However, the study had some limitations. The relatively small sample with an uneven gender distribution restricted generalizability. The use of self-report tools may have introduced response biases. The study's cross-sectional nature prevented the establishment of causal relationships, and the reliance

on the DSS limited comparability with studies using the *Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R)*. The authors suggested future research with larger, more diverse samples that include both partners' perspectives and children's assessments of parenting styles. Additionally, longitudinal studies are recommended to explore causal relationships and cultural aspects of differentiation of self, which would allow verification of Bowen's theory's universality across different sociocultural contexts.

The studies reviewed in this section support Bowen's (1978) assumptions that a high level of differentiation of self positively influences romantic relationship quality and satisfaction.

3. The role of differentiation of self in couples' responses to external stressors

Bowen (1978), the creator of the differentiation of self concept, originally posited that differentiation levels remain stable over time. However, he acknowledged that differentiation could be enhanced through psychotherapy or influenced by significant stressful life events. M. Rodríguez-González et al. (2023) conducted a study on 137 Spanish and 342 American couples, confirming that a high level of differentiation of self is associated with greater relationship satisfaction and stability, even when the dyad is exposed to external stressors such as the death of a loved one, illness in the family, or relocation. However, it is important to note that these samples consisted of non-clinical, presumably more stable relationships, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.

In another study, R. Lev-Ari, Z. Solomon, and D. Horesh (2020) examined whether different components of differentiation of self moderated the relationship between psychological distress and dyadic adjustment among wives of former prisoners of war and combat veterans. The study included 161 Israeli women, measuring differentiation of self through three dimensions related to spousal relationships: *fusion* (excessive involvement with the partner leading to a loss of individual identity),

emotional cutoff (focus on self and autonomy with emotional detachment from others), and *balance* (the ability to acknowledge a partner's experiences without losing personal identity, and maintaining autonomy while sustaining emotional connection). The results indicated that *fusion* played a moderating role in the relationship between psychological distress, secondary post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and dyadic adjustment. A mixed differentiation of self style, characterized by high fusion and high emotional cutoff, was associated with higher levels of distress. However, a key limitation of this study was that it only assessed the wives' perspectives, without measuring their husbands' levels of distress, differentiation of self, or dyadic adjustment.

Given these findings, the author argues that differentiation of self, conceptualized as a vulnerability factor in the modified VSA model, may serve as a moderating variable between stressors and adaptation outcomes.

4. Relational mindfulness and its association with relationship quality and romantic satisfaction

Mindfulness in romantic relationships enhances partners' ability to fully engage in dyadic interactions based on acceptance and non-judgment. Rather than avoiding difficult emotions or withdrawing during conflicts, individuals with higher mindfulness levels tend to recognize, understand, and accept their feelings, enabling them to respond openly and constructively to emerging challenges (Park, Harris, & Fogarty, 2023).

Most studies to date support the hypothesis that mindfulness, understood as a trait, positively correlates with relationship quality and satisfaction. Ch. Quinn-Nilas (2020) conducted a meta-analysis comparing results from 28 studies examining the relationship between mindfulness and romantic satisfaction. The meta-analysis confirmed a positive association between these variables. Similarly, E. Mandal and M. Lip (2022) tested the hypothesis that dispositional mindfulness is positively related to romantic relationship quality. Their study included

153 Polish respondents in romantic relationships (39.2% married, 20.9% engaged, and 39.9% in non-marital romantic relationships). The results indicated that mindfulness was a significant predictor of relationship quality. Positive associations were observed between mindfulness and the overall relationship quality score, as well as its components measured by the *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (Spanier, 1976). However, a limitation of this study was that participants had no prior mindfulness training experience. A more valuable comparison would have included individuals who regularly practice mindfulness techniques alongside those who do not. C. Park et al. (2023) examined whether an individual's mindfulness level predicts romantic relationship quality (H1), whether self-care mediates the relationship between mindfulness and relationship quality (H2), and whether couple engagement in shared activities mediates the relationship between mindfulness and relationship quality (H3). The study, conducted on 1,331 married American participants, confirmed all three hypotheses. However, the authors themselves noted that, in research on romantic relationship quality, relational mindfulness, defined as a tendency to be mindful specifically within romantic relationships, would be a more appropriate measure than general mindfulness.

Existing studies suggest that relational mindfulness is a stronger predictor of relationship quality than dispositional mindfulness. K.L. Morris, C.N. McDowell, D. Tawfiq, C. Outler, and J.G. Kimmes (2024) conducted a study on 116 American couples examining the relationship between relational mindfulness, negative relationship quality, and physical health. The results indicated a negative association between women's relational mindfulness and their negative assessment of relationship quality, supporting prior findings that higher relational mindfulness correlates with improved relationship quality (Kimmes, Jaurequi, Roberts, Harris, & Fincham, 2020). Additionally, a negative correlation was found between women's relational mindfulness and their male partners' negative assessments of relationship quality. Earlier studies indicated that relational mindfulness in women reduces relationship

conflicts (Morris, Kimmes, & Marroquin, 2023). Given that intensified conflicts can lower romantic relationship quality (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019), it can be inferred that an increase in women's relational mindfulness contributes to improved male partner assessments of relationship quality.

In a study by J.G. Kimmes et al. (2024), the researchers investigated relationships between self-reported intrapersonal and interpersonal mindfulness, perceived partner mindfulness (an individual's assessment of their partner's mindfulness level), and relationship outcomes (positive and negative relationship quality, positive communication during conflicts, and intimacy) among 115 married American couples. Perceived partner mindfulness emerged as a stronger predictor of relationship outcomes than self-reported mindfulness. Women's perceptions of their partner's mindfulness were positively correlated with both their own and their partner's relationship outcomes, whereas men's perceptions of their partner's mindfulness were only correlated with their wives' relationship outcomes.

The studies discussed in this section highlight that relational mindfulness may be a better predictor of relationship quality than dispositional mindfulness. Further research is needed to validate these relationships, as relational mindfulness and associated therapeutic practices may effectively support couples in enhancing relationship quality and stability.

5. The role of relational mindfulness in couples' responses to external stressors

Findings on the relationship between individual mindfulness and stress coping remain inconclusive. While most studies indicate that mindfulness serves as a protective factor against daily stress and stressful life events (Hepburn, Carroll, & McCuaig, 2021; Kriakous, Elliott, Lamers, & Owen, 2020), some researchers challenge this assumption. In a study by T.L. Saltsman et al. (2020), mindfulness and its components did not predict more positive experiences during stressor exposure; however,

mindfulness was positively correlated with more favorable retrospective evaluations of those stressors. Similarly, a study by O. Borghi, M. Voracek, and U. Tran (2024) questioned previous claims regarding mindfulness as a stress-buffering factor.

Despite these inconsistencies, the majority of studies support the beneficial role of mindfulness in couples facing stressors (Monin et al., 2020; Winter, Steffan, Warth, Ditzen, & Aguilar-Raab, 2021). These findings align with the theoretical framework proposed by J.C. Karremans et al. (2015), which highlights that dispositional mindfulness, mindfulness-based interventions, and meditation enhance relational mindfulness, leading to greater awareness of underlying processes, improved emotional regulation, executive control, and an increased sense of self-connection. Relational processes, such as behavioral, affective, and cognitive responses specific to romantic relationships, facilitate stress coping by reducing stress spillover effects. This ability to separate external stressors from relational experiences helps couples prevent conflict escalation and improve relationship quality, ultimately leading to higher relationship satisfaction for both partners.

A notable study by M. Vich, M. Lukeš, and J. Burian (2020) examined the impact of an eight-week *Relational Mindfulness Training (RMT)* on self-compassion, perceived stress, happiness, compassion, and mindfulness among 128 management students. It is important to note that in this study, relational mindfulness was conceptualized as interpersonal mindfulness rather than mindfulness specific to romantic relationships. Participants who completed the training reported sustained improvements in mindfulness, perceived stress, and self-compassion. However, improvements in happiness and compassion were only short-term. Long-term effects were minimal for happiness and absent for compassion.

D.L. Kelley and H.M. Nichols (2023) investigated how participants described their experiences in various interpersonal situations, including stress-related contexts, using terms indicative of their partners' relational mindfulness. Three components of relational mindfulness were analyzed in participants' narratives: (1) *being present* with

the partner (presence, emotional expression, and feeling understood), (2) *awareness* (attention, observation, defining and understanding), and (3) *being nonjudgmental* (acceptance, sensitivity, and non-reactivity). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to identify these patterns. One of the examined contexts was grief. Participants reported recognizing their partners' sensitivity during bereavement, particularly through the unintentional display of negative emotions and a deviation from their usual self-image. They highlighted the importance of acceptance and non-judgment in these moments, which facilitated open emotional expression. Additionally, they emphasized the significance of presence and support from loved ones, which allowed them to navigate their emotions more freely. Among participants describing romantic relationship conflicts, the intensity of these interactions, often perceived as *pivotal* or *critical*, was highlighted. These interactions were characterized by immediate reactions, both in terms of physical proximity and emotional expression. Conflict situations required heightened partner awareness, with some participants noting that such experiences deepened their understanding of their partner's emotions. All components of relational mindfulness, except non-reactivity, were identified in participants' descriptions of relationship conflicts.

Given the mixed findings on the role of dispositional mindfulness in stress coping, further scientific exploration is warranted. This is particularly crucial as mindfulness-based techniques are widely used in therapeutic interventions and stress management training. The research reviewed in this section suggests that Relational Mindfulness Training may reduce perceived stress. Further studies are needed to investigate the relationship between relational mindfulness and stress reduction for individuals and couples.

Conclusion

The literature review findings support Bowen's (1978) premise that higher differentiation of self fosters improved relationship quality and satisfaction. The reviewed studies confirm that differentiation of self positively correlates with relationship quality, even in the presence of external stressors. Additionally, the findings highlight the significant role of mindfulness in romantic relationships, while dispositional mindfulness is positively linked to relationship quality, relational mindfulness appears to be a stronger predictor of relationship success. The relationship between dispositional mindfulness and stress coping remains ambiguous. However, relational mindfulness may serve as a protective factor in stress-exposed relationships. Currently, research on the impact of relational mindfulness on dyads' ability to cope with external stressors is limited. Given its predictive advantage over dispositional mindfulness in relationship quality, further studies in this area are recommended. It is also essential to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms through which differentiation of self and relational mindfulness influence dyads' adaptive capacities in stressful situations. Longitudinal studies will be key to observing these changes over time.

The proposed modified model of dyadic adaptation to stress, integrating differentiation of self and relational mindfulness, represents an innovative approach to this topic. Empirical validation of its assumptions, as well as longitudinal research, may contribute to the development of effective therapeutic programs and psychological support interventions for couples facing life challenges. Interventions combining differentiation of self work with relational mindfulness training could support the development of stable and satisfying relationships, particularly in the face of stressors such as prolonged occupational stress, chronic illness of a partner, or loss of loved ones.

Bibliography

- Appel, Z. (1996). *Differentiation of the self: Measurement and contribution to marital adjustment* (doctoral dissertation). Tel-Aviv University; Tel-Aviv, Israel.
- Aristegui, R., Campayo, J.G. & Barriga, P. (2021). *Relational Mindfulness: Fundamentals and Applications*. Cham: Springer Nature. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57733-9>
- Borghini, O., Voracek, M. & Tran, U., (2024). Day-to-day associations between mindfulness and perceived stress: insights from random intercept cross-lagged panel modeling. *Frontiers in Psychology, 15*(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1272720>
- Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York: Aronson.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology, 9*(1), 3-26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qp0000196>
- Bronner, Y., Archibald, P.C., Lindong, I. & Laymon, B. (2019). The Family. *Handbook of Bowen Family Systems Theory and Research Methods*. Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Calatrava, M., Martins, M.V., Schweer-Collins, M., Duch-Ceballos, C., & Rodríguez-González, M. (2022). Differentiation of self: A scoping review of Bowen Family Systems Theory's core construct. *Clinical Psychology Review, 91*(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2021.102101>
- Dębska, J. & Walećka-Matyja, K. (2024), The role of managing information about infidelity and differentiation of self in the adaptation of spouses after infidelity. *Family Forum, 14*(1), 87-105. <https://doi.org/10.25167/FF/5515>
- Duncan, L.G., Coatsworth, J.D. & Greenberg, M.T. (2009). A model of mindful parenting: Implications for parent – child relationships and prevention research. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 12*(3), 255-270. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-009-0046-3>
- Feeney, J. & Fitzgerald, J. (2019). Attachment, conflict and relationship quality: laboratory-based and clinical insights. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 25*(1), 127-131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.04.002>
- Finzi-Dottan, R. (2023). The Role of Fear of Intimacy as Mediator between Self-Differentiation and Marital Relationship Satisfaction: A Dyadic Model. *The Family Journal, 31*(3), 392-398. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807231163254>
- Hepburn, S., Carroll, A. & McCuaig, L. (2021). The Relationship between Mindful Attention Awareness, Perceived Stress and Subjective Wellbeing. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(23), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182312290>
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1982). An outpatient program in behavioral medicine for chronic pain patients based on the practice of mindfulness meditation: theoretical considerations and preliminary results. *General Hospital Psychiatry, 4*(1), 33-47. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0163-8343\(82\)90026-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0163-8343(82)90026-3)
- Karney, B.R. & Bradbury, T.N. (1995). The longitudinal course of marital quality and stability: A review of theory, methods, and research. *Psychological Bulletin, 118*(1), 3-34. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.118.1.3>
- Karremans, J.C., Schellekens, M.P.J. & Kappen, G. (2015). Bridging the Sciences of Mindfulness and Romantic Relationships: A Theoretical Model and Research Agenda. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 21*(1), 29-49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868315615450>
- Kelley, D. & Nichols, H. (2023). Relational mindfulness themes in descriptions of intimate encounters across six interpersonal contexts. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 40*(1), 1495-1519. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075231154286>
- Kerr, M. & Bowen, M. (1988). *Family evaluation: An approach based on Bowen theory*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Khoury, B., Vergara, R.C. & Spinelli, C. (2022). Interpersonal Mindfulness Questionnaire: Scale Development and Validation. *Mindfulness, 13*(1), 1007-1031. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-022-01855-1>
- Kimmes, J., Jaurequi, M., May, R., Srivastava, S. & Fincham, F. (2018). Mindfulness in the Context of Romantic Relationships: Initial Development and Validation of the Relationship Mindfulness Measure. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 44*(4), 575-589. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12296>
- Kimmes, J.G., Jaurequi, M.E., Roberts, K., Harris, V.W. & Fincham, F.D. (2020). An Examination of the Association Between Relationship Mindfulness and Psychological and Relational Well-being in Committed Couples. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 46*(1), 30-41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12388>
- Kimmes, J.G., Zheng, Y., Morris, K.L., Marroquin, C.G., Rudaz, M. & Smedley, D.K. (2024). You are not fully present with me: How own and perceived partner mindfulness shape relationship outcomes. *Journal of Family Psychology, 39*(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0001290>
- Kozakiewicz, A., Izdebski, Z., Białorudzki, M. & Mazur, J. (2023). Pandemic-Related Stress and Other Emotional Difficulties in a Sample of Men and Women Living in Romantic Relationships during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 20*(4), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20042988>
- Kriakous, S., Elliott, K., Lamers, C. & Owen, R. (2020). The Effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction on the Psychological Functioning of Healthcare Professionals: a Systematic Review. *Mindfulness, 12*(1), 1-28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-020-01500-9>
- Lachowska, B. (2020). Differentiation of self and functioning in a close relationship – results of studies conducted in Poland. *Psychological Applications and Trends, 1*(1), 283-185. <https://doi.org/10.36315/2020inpact067.pdf>
- Lampis, J., Cataudella, S., Agus, M., Busonera, A. & Skowron, E.A. (2019). Differentiation of self and dyadic adjustment in couple relationships: A dyadic analysis using the actor-partner interdependence model. *Family Process, 58*(3), 698-715. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12370>
- Lazarus, R.S. & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*. New York: Springer.
- Lev-Ari, R., Solomon, Z. & Horesh, D. (2020). Far away, so close: The role of self-differentiation in psychopathology among spouses of ex-POWs and comparable combatants. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 76*(10), 1904-1922. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22965>
- Lewis, R.A. & Spanier, G.B. (1979). Theorizing about the quality and stability of marriage. (In:) W.R. Burr et. al. (eds.), *Contemporary theories about the family: Research-based theories*, 268-294, New York: Free Press.
- Mandal, E. & Lip, M. (2022). Mindfulness, relationship quality, and conflict resolution strategies used by partners in close relationships. *Current Issues in Personality Psychology, 10*(2), 135-146. (From:) <https://czasopisma.bg.ug.edu.pl/index.php/CliPP/article/view/6969> (access: 8.01.2025).
- Monin, J., Spereduto, C., Manigault, A., Dutton, A., Clark, M. & Jastreboff, A. (2020). Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Older Couples with Metabolic Syndrome: a Pilot Randomized Controlled Trial. *Mindfulness, 11*(4), 917-927. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-019-01301-9>

- Morris, K.L., Kimmes, J.G. & Marroquin, C.G. (2023). Changing the blame game: Associations between relationship mindfulness, loneliness, negative partner attributions, and subsequent conflict. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 40(5), 1354-1367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075221128502>.
- Morris, K.L., McDowell, C.N., Tawfiq, D., Outler, C., & Kimmes, J.G. (2024). Relationship mindfulness, negative relationship quality, and physical health. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 50(1), 136-149. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12677>
- Mozas-Alonso, M., Oliver, J. & Bera´stegui, A. (2022). Differentiation of self and its relationship with marital satisfaction and parenting styles in a Spanish sample of adolescents' parents. *PLoS ONE*, 17(3), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0265436>
- Murdock, N., Flynn, M. & Bresin, R. (2022). Differentiation of self, anxiety, triangling and distress: A test of Bowen theory. *Family Process*, 62(4), 1671-1686. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12845>
- Noone, R.J. (2017). The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family. (In: J. Lebow, A. Chambers, D. Breunlin, (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Couple and Family Therapy*, 1-3, Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-15877-8_597-1
- Park, C., Harris, V. & Fogarty, K., (2023). Mindfulness, awareness, partner caring, and romantic relationship quality: Structural equation modeling. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 50(2), 290-306. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12685>
- Pollard, A.E. & Rogge, R.D. (2022). Love in the Time of COVID-19: A Multi-Wave Study Examining the Saliency of Sexual and Relationship Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 51(1), 247-271. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-021-02208-0>
- Price, A., Leavitt, C. & Allsop, D. (2020). How Gender Differences in Emotional Cutoff and Reactivity Influence Couple's Sexual and Relational Outcomes. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 47(1), 16-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2020.1800541>.
- Querstret, D., Morison, L., Dickinson, S., Cropley, M. & John, M. (2020). Mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for psychological health and well-being in nonclinical samples: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 27(4), 394-411. <https://doi.org/10.1037/str0000165>.
- Quinn-Nilas, C. (2020). Self-Reported Trait Mindfulness and Couples' Relationship Satisfaction: a Meta-Analysis. *Mindfulness*, 11(4), 835-848. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-020-01303-y>
- Rodríguez-González, M., Lampis, J., Murdock, N., Schweer-Collins, M. & Lyons, E. (2020). Couple Adjustment and Differentiation of Self in the United States, Italy, and Spain: A Cross-Cultural Study. *Family Process*, 59(4), 1552-1568. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12522>
- Rodríguez-González, M., Bell, C.A., Pereyra, S.B., Martínez-Díaz, M.P., Schweer-Collins, M. & Bean, R.A. (2023). Differentiation of self and relationship attachment, quality, and stability: A path analysis of dyadic and longitudinal data from Spanish and U.S. couples. *PLoS ONE*, 17(3), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0282482>
- Ryś, M. (1994). Jakość i trwałość małżeństwa. Propozycja skali. *Problemy Rodziny*, 34(4), 19-24.
- Saltsman, T.L., Seery, M.D., Ward, D.E., Radvick, T.M., Panlilio, Z.A., Lamarche, V.M. & Kondrak, C.L. (2020). Facing the Facets: No Association Between Dispositional Mindfulness Facets and Positive Momentary Stress Responses During Active Stressors. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 47(7), 1057 - 1070. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220956898>
- Skowron, E.A. & Friedlander, M.L. (1998). The Differentiation of Self Inventory: Development and initial validation. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 45(3), 235-246. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.45.3.235>
- Skowron, E.A. & Schmitt, T.A. (2003). Assessing interpersonal fusion: Reliability and validity of a new DSI Fusion with Others subscale. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 29(2), 209-222. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2003.tb01201.x>
- Spanier, G.B. (1976). Measuring Dyadic Adjustment: New Scales for Assessing the Quality of Marriage and Similar Dyads. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 38(1), 15-28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/350547>
- Stapley, L.A. & Murdock, N.L. (2020). Leisure in romantic relationships: An avenue for differentiation of self. *Personal Relationships*, 27(1), 76-101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12310>
- Totenhagen, C., Randall, A., Bar-Kalifa, E., Ciftci, O. & Gleason, M. (2022). Daily stress and relationship quality: A two-decade scoping review from an intersectional lens. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 40(3), 773-811. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075221095870>
- Winter, F., Steffan, A., Warth, M., Ditzen, B. & Aguilar-Raab, C. (2021). Mindfulness-Based Couple Interventions: A Systematic Literature Review. *Family Process*, 60(3), 694-711. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12683>
- Vich, M., Lukeš, M. & Burian, J. (2020). Out of sight, out of mind? Exploring the long-term effects of Relational Mindfulness Training (RMT). *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, 16(1), 162-171. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcbs.2020.04.001>.
- Williamson, H., & Schouweiler, M. (2023). Household income differentiates quantity and quality of shared spousal time. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 37(4), 528 - 537. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0001078>
- Weitkamp, K. & Bodenmann, G. (2022). Couples Coping Together: A Scoping Review of the Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence and Conceptual Work Across Three Decades. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.876455>.