

## **Putting the Skill of Mindfulness into Action: The *Mindful Witness Role***

*The Mindful Witness* role describes the skill of mindfulness within the context of role theory. The *Mindful Witness* role can be viewed as part of the inner make-up of the self, which consists of many different roles. From a psychodramatic/role theory perspective, this part of self (role) can be developed, cultivated and strengthened so that it can be accessed and used as a resource during times of stress.

Naming this part of the self as a role and then taking on the role (embodying it) is a way to *concretize* the concept and skill of mindfulness. This makes mindfulness more tangible and real.

### Description of the *Mindful Witness* Role:

- ▶ The Mindful Witness is the part of the self that stands at the center of the storms of experience without being blown away.
- ▶ The Mindful Witness both participates and stands apart from experience, acting as observer as well as coach. The Mindful Witness's attention is focused on "*How is it?*" rather than "*Why is it?*" or "*Do I like it?*"
- ▶ It is the abiding voice that's constantly repeating, "Breathe, relax, feel, watch, allow."
  - Adapted from Stephen Cope, author of *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self*.
- ▶ The part of self that can stand back and observe what one is experiencing without either getting caught up in the experience or becoming dissociated.
- ▶ The Mindful Witness accurately names one's experience without judgement.

- ▶ Is present in body, mind, emotions, and spirit – in the here-and-now.
- ▶ The *Mindful Witness Role* has a mostly neutral feeling tone, although it has been described as “spiced with curiosity” and “warmed with kindness.” (Jan Chozen-Bays)
- ▶ The Mindful Witness is also attuned, discerning and wise, so it can serve as a guide to behavior.
- ▶ The Mindful Witness is grounded and aware, allowing present-moment experience without *aversion* (fighting against experience that is evaluated as negative) or *grasping* (clinging to sensations, emotions, or thoughts that are evaluated as positive).
- ▶ This part of one’s consciousness stays as close as possible to our actual experience that is occurring, rather than moving into an interpretation or “story” about that experience.

The skill of mindfulness and standing in the Mindful Witness Role or some close variant of it has been also termed *dual awareness* (Francine Shapiro, originator of EMDR); *higher self* or *transpersonal self* (Roberto Assagioli, originator of psychosynthesis), *observing ego* (Sigmund Freud, originator of psychoanalysis), and *witness consciousness* (yoga, Zen).

The idea of putting the skill of observing the self into psychodramatic action was developed by J.L. Moreno in what he called *the mirror technique*. In this technique the protagonist stands outside of and observes the scene being enacted from a distance. Someone else plays the protagonist’s role in the scene, so it is as if the protagonist is viewing the scene played out in a mirror, reflecting back the protagonist’s own actions. By providing a way to observe the scene being enacted from a

safe distance, the protagonist can “cool down” his or her emotions and gain perspective on a situation, both literally and figuratively.

Hudgins (2002) further developed the mirror technique with her “prescriptive role” of the *Observing Ego (OE)*. In Hudgins’ Therapeutic Spiral Model of psychodrama, protagonists are educated about the importance of dual awareness and are trained to take the OE role as a pre-requisite to enactment of any trauma material.

Nugent & Ciotola (2009) have further refined the mirror technique and OE role, naming it the *Mindful Witness*. These trainers place the skill the role enacts (of quiet, non-reactive observation) in the long tradition – in yoga and other forms of meditative practice – of quieting the mind and body and facilitating a connection with the “higher” or “transpersonal” self. They emphasize the importance of observation without judgement and with curiosity and compassion as the protagonist watches a scene from the mirror position (now called *The Mindful Witness*).