



# A Metasynthesis of Qualitative Studies on Mindfulness, Sexuality, and Relationality

Éliane Dussault<sup>1</sup> · Mylène Fernet<sup>1</sup> · Natacha Godbout<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

**Objectives** A substantive body of quantitative literature found links between mindfulness interventions or dispositional mindfulness and increased relationality and/or sexuality. However, there needs to be a better understanding of the contexts in which the links between mindfulness and relationality/sexuality may occur, which qualitative studies may provide.

**Method** A metasynthesis of qualitative studies aims to reinterpret the results of qualitative studies in one field of research. Therefore, we produced a metasynthesis of 8 peer-reviewed, published articles exploring the impacts of mindfulness practices and interventions on relationality/sexuality to produce new insights on this burgeoning field of research.

**Results** The increase of mindfulness is experienced through the development of two main traits that are related to sexuality and relationality, namely, accepting oneself and others as they are, as well as paying attention in the present moment, which leads to awareness and a new approach on life. Then, practicing mindfulness allows benefits marked by a surging connectedness with others and contentment with one's life and self. Finally, limits of mindfulness practices and interventions marked by restraining conditions of life are found, such as the hardships of pursuing the practice of mindfulness, initial sexual/relational difficulties that require patience, and an insufficient connectedness with significant others that hinders progress.

**Conclusion** Mindfulness-based practices and interventions are a helpful technique to reduce sexual/relational difficulties and enhance one's quality of life in these realms but should not be considered and approached as a panacea to such difficulties.

**Keywords** Mindfulness · Relationality · Sexuality · Metasynthesis · Qualitative

Mindfulness is defined as the awareness that unfolds internally and externally when one pays attention in the present moment, in an accepting way (Kabat-Zinn et al. 1984; Thompson et al. 2011). It can be cultivated via mindfulness practices, such as meditation, yoga, or qigong (Christopher et al. 2006). This concept being increasingly known as a key mechanism in the betterment of relational and sexual well-being in adulthood (e.g., Dekeyser et al. 2008; Dosch et al. 2015), it is with no surprise that the number of publications on mindfulness has grown exponentially within the last years (Brown et al. 2014; Khoury et al. 2019), including in the field of sex studies (Vilarinho 2017). Furthermore, mindfulness-based

interventions and therapies had substantiated promising results to improve sexual and relational spheres of one's life (e.g., Brotto et al. 2008, 2013; Brotto and Basson 2014; Carson et al. 2004; Vilarinho 2017). However, other studies also highlighted that mindfulness research should be critical of the potential pitfalls of mindfulness-based practices and studies. Such pitfalls are frequent in mindfulness studies in general and are also encountered in studies on mindfulness and relationality/sexuality, including difficulties in defining mindfulness, methodological issues in interpreting results from investigations of mindfulness, limited samples (e.g., happy and satisfied couples), and the use of self-report quantitative measures (Kozlowski 2013; Van Dam et al. 2018). Therefore, more research is necessary to better understand the connection between mindfulness and sexuality/relationality. Because of those difficulties, using interview data from the participants' own perspectives may offer a path to better understand the connection between mindfulness and sexuality/relationality (Kozlowski 2013). Producing a metasynthesis of qualitative data regarding the practice of mindfulness, sexuality, and

✉ Éliane Dussault  
dussault.eliane@uqam.ca

<sup>1</sup> Département de sexologie, Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), C. P. 8888 Succursale Centre-Ville, Montréal, Québec H3C 3P8, Canada

relationality may provide important insights on the links between these concepts, while offering an alternative way to define and discuss them from the participants' perspective.

On another matter, a substantive body of quantitative literature has found links between mindfulness interventions or dispositional mindfulness and increased relationality and/or sexuality. Some of these studies explored underlying mechanisms in the link between mindfulness and sexuality/relationality. For example, Dekeyser et al. (2008) found that mindfulness traits were associated to self-expression in various social situations: observation was linked to more empathy, whereas description and acting with awareness traits were associated to better identification and description of one's feelings. Mindfulness was also linked to partner acceptance and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Kappen et al. 2018; Kozłowski 2013), high dyadic sexual desire and activity (Dosch et al. 2015), fewer sexual insecurities (Dunkley et al. 2015), female sexual functioning (e.g., Adam et al. 2015; Dascalu and Brotto 2018), and sexual satisfaction (e.g., Dunkley et al. 2015; Godbout et al. 2020). Mindfulness-based interventions demonstrated improvements in situational erectile dysfunction in men (Bossio et al. 2018), sexual desire in women (Brotto and Basson 2014), as well as female emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, and communication (Hucker and McCabe 2014). However, although the benefits of mindfulness-based programs were well supported by literature, research has less focused on potential harm in mindfulness-based programs studies (Baer et al. 2019). Prevention of harm should be among the primary ethical concerns of researchers and practitioners, and identifying such harm could lead to betterment in treatment (Baer et al. 2019).

As many quantitative studies examining the link between mindfulness and sexuality/relationality have been published, there needs to be a better understanding of the contexts in which the links between mindfulness and relationality/sexuality occur, which qualitative studies may provide. The main objective of a metasynthesis being to reinterpret the results of qualitative studies in one field of research (Beaucher and Jutras 2007), doing so could bring new insights for researchers and practitioners. By doing this analysis, we aim to better understand the contexts in which mindfulness and sexuality/relationality seem related. This type of analysis could allow the identification of common features in the outcomes of mindfulness on both relational and sexual spheres of one's life. Furthermore, most of the studies linking mindfulness to sexuality and relationality have only addressed either the relational or the sexual sphere (e.g., Bossio et al. 2018; Brotto et al. 2013; Dekeyser et al. 2008; Gillespie et al. 2015; Pruitt and McCollum 2010), despite them being highly intertwined. On another level, qualitative studies conducted among mindfulness practitioners or participants in mindfulness-based interventions may reflect individual qualities that may be related, but not necessarily specific to

mindfulness (e.g., attention to visual or cognitive stimuli, acts of kindness) (Grossman 2019), which might pose an additional challenge in the way in which authors define and interpret mindfulness. Therefore, it seems appropriate to produce a metasynthesis of the qualitative studies linking mindfulness to both these dimensions, especially since mindfulness-based couple and/or sexuality interventions seem burgeoning and promising, and since their potential harm has not been thoroughly discussed in previous studies.

## Method

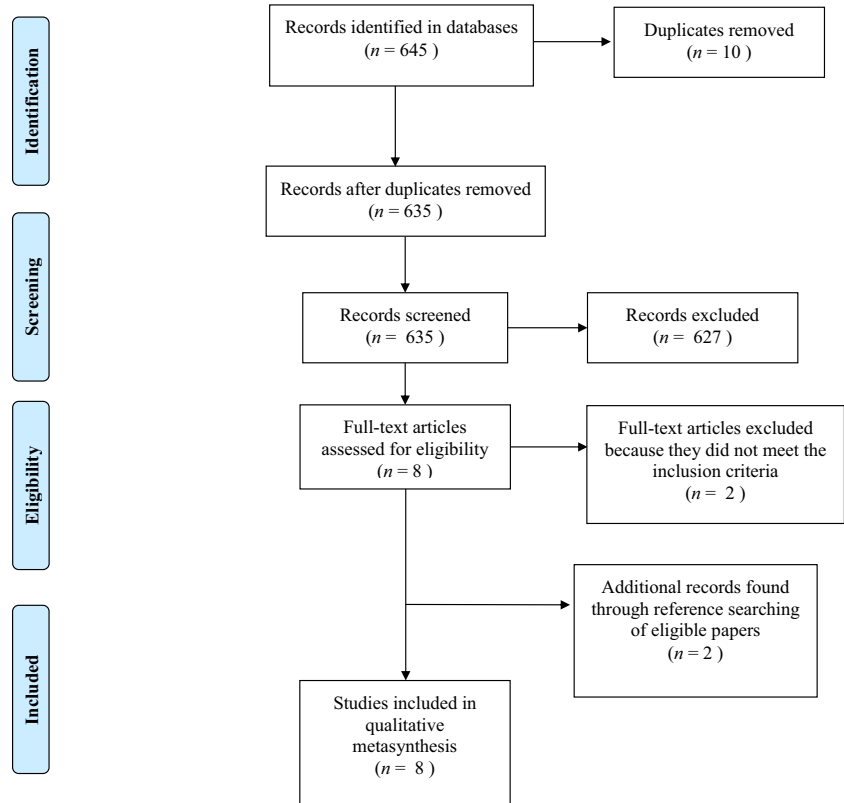
### Sample

We conducted a systematic review on peer-reviewed, published articles in different databases (Scopus, Google Scholar, Taylor and Francis Online, Science Direct, Project Muse) and used the following keywords to identify relevant articles: mindfulness AND qualitative, or phenomenological or thematic or discursive AND sexuality or relationship or romantic or intimate. Given the fact that mindfulness is a new research topic and that it is a complex concept to define (Chiesa 2013), we only included articles that specifically used the term “mindfulness” as a keyword to help capture the phenomenon under study. This was decided given that searching for different features of mindfulness (e.g., nonreactivity, acting with awareness) could have led to a lack of uniformity in the data, as well as an oversight of some dimensions. Plus, defining mindfulness in a specific unidimensional sub-dimension way was previously criticized by some authors (e.g., “acting with awareness”; Dimidjian and Linehan 2003; Masuda and Tully 2012), so we aimed to capture the intricacy of mindfulness in the qualitative data, as it is increasingly conceptualized.

After a first wave of search in different databases, we also searched within specific qualitative journals (i.e., International journal of qualitative studies on health and well-being, Qualitative Health Research, Qualitative Inquiry, Qualitative research in Psychology and Qualitative psychology) to ensure we did not miss any of the studies. Finally, we examined the references in each article previously found to identify additional potential articles. We searched qualitative papers published in English before March 2019. We did not apply any restriction to the year of publication due to the fact that mindfulness is a relatively new research topic, especially when studied in relation to sexual and relational dimensions. Despite one article that was published in 2007, all the other articles were published within the last decade.

Figure 1 presents a PRISMA diagram of the systematic review that was conducted. In total, 645 articles were identified using the keywords. After removing the duplicates, the screening of the abstracts led to the exclusion of 627 articles

**Fig. 1** PRISMA diagram of the systematic review



because they did not correspond to the topic of research or because they did not present qualitative data. The full-text screening of the remaining 8 articles identified two articles to be excluded. Among those, one article did not specifically address romantic relationships and/or partnered sexuality (i.e., it focused on interpersonal relationships at large). The other article comprised mindfulness intervention elements among a broader cognitive–behavioral therapy intervention, precluding its inclusion into this metasynthesis of the contexts in which mindfulness and sexuality/relationality seem related (i.e., the study used a mixed-methods design and the only qualitative analyses that were reported concerned the perceived levels of satisfaction and efficacy of the intervention). Two additional studies were found through the other studies’ references. The resulting sample consisted of eight studies. All the researchers consulted the eight identified studies to establish their eligibility. No disagreement was found between the three researchers, and therefore, interrater reliability was found concerning the eligibility of the eight articles.

## Procedure

Table 1 presents a summary of the participants’ and methodological characteristics of the studies included in the analysis. Overall, two articles reported mixed-method designs, whereas the remaining six articles reported a

qualitative method. Four studies included female participants, one of them included male participants, and the remaining three did not have any gender inclusion criteria. The samples of participants included between 7 and 30 individuals. Most of the studies ( $n = 5$ ) reported semi-structured interviews as data collection procedure. We attributed a quality score (Q.S.) to each of these studies following the method suggested by Kmet et al. (2004). The scores attributed to each of the studies varied between 35 and 80%. The attribution of the scores of the studies is also presented in Table 1.

Given that mindfulness-based interventions and practices can vary greatly, Table 2 presents an overview of the types of mindfulness practices that were engaged in by participants, the duration of the intervention or of the personal practice, and dropout rates in experimental trials. This table also identifies which mental states, processes, and functions were taught, practiced, and investigated as per Van Dam et al.’s (2018) recommendations.

## Data Analysis

We applied Noblit and Hare’s (1988) seven phase framework to conduct the analyses. First, the authors identify the phenomenon they wish to study, and define it accordingly. For the purpose of this article, we explored the practice of

**Table 1** Studies included in metasynthesis

No. Study	Research design	Sampling strategy	Qualitative sample	Approach to data analysis	Q.S.
1 Bossio et al. (2018)	Mixed methods: Questionnaires Qualitative exit interviews	Criterion sampling: Men seeking treatment for situational erectile dysfunction	<i>N</i> = 10 66% married or in common-law relationships; 50% college/undergraduate studies; 80% employed full-time; 70% Caucasian; 90% Opposite-sex attracted	Team coding method Phenomenological Grounded theory	80%
2 Brotto and Heiman (2007)	Qualitative: 4 interviews with a clinician, each spaced 1 month apart	Criterion sampling: Women with sexual difficulties following gynecologic cancer	<i>N</i> = 22 100% in a relationship; 100% heterosexual	Content analysis	35%
3 Brotto et al. (2013)	Qualitative: Semi-structured telephone and in person interviews	Criterion sampling: Women with provoked vestibulodynia attending a mindfulness and cognitive behavioral therapy intervention	<i>N</i> = 14 Mean age 39,6 years; 9 in a relationship Mean relationship duration 7.2 years; 9 Caucasian; All with postsecondary education	Content analysis Typical analytic framework for qualitative studies by Marshall and Rossman (1999)	75%
4 Gillespie et al. (2015)	Qualitative: Semi-structured individual and partnered interviews	Criterion sampling: Partners of graduate students who attended a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) intervention; Databases of 2 hospital MBSR programs	<i>N</i> = 11 55% men; Mean age 41,64 years; 10 Caucasians; 9 heterosexual relationships; 72,73% married; Mean relationship duration 13,8 years	Phenomenological (Interpretive Analysis) Phenomenological Analysis General systems theory	75%
5 Kocis and Newbury-Helps (2016)	Qualitative: Semi-structured, open-ended and non-directive interviews	Criterion sampling: 30 patients referred from a sexual dysfunction clinic for a mindfulness-based sex and intimate relationship program	<i>N</i> = 30 19 men; mean age 42 years	Grounded theory	75%
6 McCreary and Alderson (2013)	Semi-structured interviews	Criterion sampling: Women between 20 and 45 years old, in a romantic relationship and engaging in a regular meditation practice for at least 6 weeks	<i>N</i> = 10 Mean age 34,8 years; 10 postsecondary education; 10 in heterosexual relationships 7 Caucasian; 4 married, 4 dating	Hermeneutic phenomenological research	65%
7 Mize and Iantaffi (2013)	Mixed methods: 2 case studies Self-report questionnaires Focus groups	Criterion sampling: (1) Women's sexual health groups in sexuality clinics with (2) interested group therapists, (3) participants presenting a range of personal characteristics, and (4) in clinics open to body-based approaches to therapy	<i>Group 1</i> <i>N</i> = 8 Mean age 42,6 years; 4 heterosexual; 100% Caucasian <i>Group 2</i> <i>N</i> = 4 Mean age 41,5 years; 100% heterosexual; 100% Caucasian	Social constructivism Content analysis	65%
8 Pruitt and McCollum (2010)	Qualitative: Semi-structured telephone or in person interviews	Criterion sampling: Long-term meditators (min. 10 years), who identified meditation as an important part of their life	<i>N</i> = 7 5 female; 7 Caucasian; Between 10 to 33 years of meditation practice; 7 master's degree or higher	Open coding method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) Team cross-coding method	60%

**Table 2** Overview of the mindfulness definitions, practices and dropout rates presented in the studies

Study	Definition of mindfulness	Mindfulness practice	Dropout rate
Bossio et al. (2018)	Non-judgmental, present-moment awareness; the non-judgmental stance being integral to reducing a man's reactivity to the situational loss of erectile function.	Founded on the mindfulness-based cognitive therapy program; 4 sessions of intervention: raisin exercise, body scan, breath and movement, breath, body, sounds, and thoughts And home practice of 50 min per day (40 min. formal, 10 min. informal), 6 days per week recommended.	10% 1/10 men participating in the study
Brotto and Heiman (2007)	[Mindfulness] is defined as being in a relaxed but attentive state.	In-session exercises, during 4 sessions spaced 1 month apart Home practice of 5 min per day to begin, with a gradual increase. Practices in non-sexual and sexual contexts (e.g., use a vibrator and being aware of all the sensations taking place during the stimulation). No additional description.	Not provided
Brotto et al. (2013)	A state of awareness in which thoughts are allowed to enter consciousness and then are let go without any emotional attachment. It has been described as “uncoupling” of the physical sensation from the emotional and cognitive experience of pain.	4 sessions of 2 h, spaced 2 weeks apart, including mindfulness exercises inspired from MBCT: eating meditation, mindfulness of breath, body scan, and mindfulness of thoughts.	0%
Gillespie et al. (2015)	The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.	MBSR program.	N/A <sup>1</sup>
Kocsis and Newbury-Hepls (2016)	A mental discipline and practice inviting intentional, non-judgmental moment-to-moment awareness of experience.	MBCT program adapted for sexual difficulties, including 6 weekly 2-h sessions and a full-day retreat (total of 18 h): mindful listening, joint sensory exploration of objects, mindful awareness of a partner's pulse, and guided walking with eyes closed.	Not provided
McCreary and Alderson (2013)	A particular approach within the Buddhist/meditative tradition; meditation makes use of a defined technique, logic relaxation and a self-induced state; mindfulness meditation has been described as the practice of cultivating awareness or wakefulness.	Regular mindfulness-meditation practice for at least 6 weeks but no more than 6 years.	N/A <sup>1</sup>
Mize and Iantaffi (2013)	A form of self-study in which we observe our present experience with curiosity and without judgment.	Six monthly 2-h meetings: mindful reading, awareness to breath, and psychoeducational component.	0%
Pruitt and McCollum (2010)	Not provided.	Regular practice of mindfulness-meditation for a minimum of 10 years.	N/A <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The study did not aim to report results on a mindfulness-based program, but rather on the impacts of practicing mindfulness among meditators. Therefore, no dropout rate is provided

mindfulness and its perceived repercussions on relational and sexual well-being. Second, the authors determine which studies are relevant to their topic of interest. As previously mentioned, eight studies met the inclusion criteria. Third, researchers read the articles several times in order to identify keywords, themes, or concepts. Fourth, they evaluate how the selected studies are related to one another by synthesizing previously identified keywords, themes, or concepts. Fifth, researchers transpose the studies into one another, which allows comparison and maintains the central concepts of each label in their relation to other concepts. Then, an open coding leads to codes that are regrouped to form conceptual categories, which involved uniting themes and subthemes derived from the coding of the data in the original studies, and which allowed to give meaning to the identified themes. Conceptual categories were compared with interactions

between studies and to build conceptual categories that were mutually exclusive, as Glaser and Strauss (2009) recommend for axial coding. In that optic, all of the conceptual categories must offer a better understanding of the studied phenomenon, inter alia by taking into account the key concepts identified in the source studies (Paillé 1994). However, since we only found 8 studies corresponding to our criteria, we did not attain empirical saturation of the third conceptual category. Empirical saturation is attained when more data do no longer lead to more information (Mason 2010). Sixth, translations are compared with find similarities and differences by linking conceptual categories together and developing a storyline that could allow a better understanding of the phenomenon. Lastly, the authors adapt the synthesis to their audience. In this case, the synthesis was performed by writing an article that is appropriate for researchers and practitioners who could benefit

from the results. N Vivo 11 (QSR International Pty Ltd.) was used to support the qualitative analyses. The data analysis was led by the first author, and the other authors contributed to the refining of the emerging conceptual categories throughout the analysis in a process of intercoder reliability.

## Results

Our analysis yielded three conceptual categories. Namely, the categories showed that the development of mindfulness-related traits (Category 1) enhanced sexuality and relationality (Category 2), which in turn allowed to open oneself to others and to what life has to offer (Category 2). However, the perceived benefits of practicing mindfulness seemed, in some cases, limited by a few obstacles, such as finding it difficult to maintain the practice after the intervention or the depth of the initial sexual/relational difficulties (Category 3). Between 2 and 3 subcategories were identified within each conceptual category. Table 3 presents an overview of the results, including the studies providing data for each of the subcategories. Each subcategory presents the number of meaning units that were associated to them ( $n = X$ ).

### The Development of Various Mindfulness Traits Leading to Mindfulness Abilities: The Onset of a New Approach to Life

First, the increase of mindfulness seemed linked to the development of various traits. Although specific mindfulness traits emerged from the data, all of them were, in some sort, intertwined together, which indicates that mindfulness-

related abilities occur altogether when one practices mindfulness. For example, paying attention in the present moment was associated to the acceptance of sexual/relational difficulties and differences, which in turn encompassed a lower level of reactivity. We still managed to regroup these traits into two major capacities that seemed more distinct from one another: acceptance and paying attention in the present moment. However, the authors want to emphasize that the development of these general mindfulness-related traits might not automatically or systematically lead to an enhanced sexuality/relationality. Indeed, they are conceived as prerequisites for the development of further sexual and relational abilities. In some cases, the subcategories identify examples of mindfulness-related traits that were specifically applied to relational and sexual contexts, whereas in some other situations, they occurred during a non-sexual, non-relational mindfulness practice.

**Peacefully Accepting Whatever Life Brings ( $n = 29$ )** The development of acceptance towards life events, difficulties, oneself, or others, as well as letting go of things one had no control over, was homogeneously reported across studies. More specifically, letting go of such things led to more acceptance. It was reported that practicing mindfulness allowed acceptance towards sexual difficulties: “I am becoming more comfortable with having situational erectile dysfunction” (Anthony, cited in Bossio et al. 2018) or that it allowed “to still have a fulfilling sexual life with the pain” (Claire, cited in Brotto et al. 2013). Acceptance could also be developed as a trait that was helpful within couple relationships. That was the case for Emily (cited in Gillespie et al. 2015), who perceived that her partner Ava developed “a subtle feeling of more acceptance.” Finally, acceptance as a form of openness could be increased as a broader trait in life in general, which could in turn prove useful in

**Table 3** Categories, subcategories and studies providing data for each subcategory

Categories	Subcategories	Studies
1. The development of various mindfulness traits leading to mindfulness abilities: The onset of a new approach to life	A. Peacefully accepting whatever life brings	1 to 8
	• From being reactive and overwhelmed to developing emotion regulation	
2. The perceived benefits and outlets of practicing mindfulness: A journey to heart openness	B. Paying attention leads to awareness and clarity	1 to 8
	• Refined observation and description of things allow seeing the bigger picture	
	• A closer relationship with bodily sensations	
3. Limits of mindfulness training marked by restraining conditions of life	A. Surging connectedness with others (close ones, members from mindfulness interventions, and the humanity in general)	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
	B. Contentment with one’s life and self	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
	• Self-sufficiency	
	A. The hardships of pursuing the practice of mindfulness	1, 3, 4, 6
	B. Initial sexual and relational difficulties that require patience	3, 4, 6
	C. An insufficient connectedness with significant others that hindered progress	4, 7

relational or sexual contexts, as Quinn from McCreary and Alderson's study (2013) mentioned:

When you're sitting your mind just opens up to things, because it's all you're doing. You're not busy doing something else... and typically it is quiet so you're opening yourself up more to whatever. I think being able to do that in a meditation makes it possible for me to take it into my everyday life and just be able to be more open to whatever comes...

**From Being Reactive and Overwhelmed to Developing Emotion Regulation ( $n = 32$ )** One of the main traits that seemed associated to acceptance was a decrease in reactivity—i.e., in contexts that were previously qualified as overwhelming, anxiety, or conflict-provoking, which was due to a better emotional regulation. The development of nonreacting abilities was often manifested towards experiencing less stress, anxiety, tension, or fear. Globally, reactivity seemed experienced and expressed when difficulties were encountered, whether they be sexual: “In terms of sexual experiences, I guess to approach them in the future in a way that would reduce my level of anxiety.” (Ethan, cited in Bossio et al. 2018) or relational, related to nonviolent, effective communication in the couple: “For the first time I was able to clearly identify and say what I was thinking and feeling without getting so upset that I got angry and he shut down or whatever and it turned into a fight” (Jill, cited in McCreary and Alderson 2013).

Developing nonreacting abilities did not imply that participants experienced a complete abolition of reactivity. It rather meant that when reacting to something, one calmed down more quickly than they used to because of an increase in the ability to be present in the moment and in one's body, which was characterized by an identification of one's sensations, emotions, and thoughts, as a participant in Mize and Iantaffi's study (2013) portrayed:

I had the experience during some of the exercises of going into... trance and then being... paralyzed, having shame... So because I had that experience... in here... now outside I noticed that I can tell when it is happening and then because I can tell in my body, I am able to... shorten the time of having a freak out from... maybe a day to... half an hour and I am able to... get out of the situation more quickly. So it is pretty helpful.

Finally, being able to regulate this reactivity was perceived as being optimizing and empowering outside of meditation sessions, since it allowed more individual and, consequently, relational well-being:

And you just, you become the investigator. And therefore, there's a curiosity... [I can] stand back and look at that fear reaction, rather than being it. You have a lot more leverage out there, just including that with everything. (participant cited in Pruitt and McCollum 2010).

**Paying Attention Leads to Awareness and a New Perspective ( $n = 13$ )** Mindfulness training cultivated the capacity or tendency to pay attention to what unfolded in the present moment. The analyses of the studies showed that the ability to pay attention to what unfolded in the present developed more awareness, an ability to be “grounded,” “focused,” and to “[clear] away the cluttered thoughts” (Brent, cited in Bossio et al. 2018) by most of the studies. For example, Brotto and Heiman's (2007) Patient 6 reported that the mindfulness intervention she encountered allowed her to be more present during sex by being aware of the experience that unfolded within her body:

Well, as bad as I had been at practicing the mindfulness and that sort of thing, that really was helpful. It seems incredibly self-evident that when you're having sex perhaps that you should think about the fact that you're having sex and not wonder if the parakeet is loose. Um, (laughter), but it helps to have those things reinforced (laughs). Uh, so, you know, you know, it's um, and it's probably, and especially useful for women like me who are getting older and who are finally, uh having a last minute desire, to...to teach you how to deal with this.

Pruitt and McCollum's (2010) participants being experienced female meditators, one of them also wisely portrayed this important but sometimes abstract difference between being aware and thinking:

That, for me, that's an important distinction between thinking and awareness. Awareness has to do with biting into a strawberry and being aware of the taste and the texture, looking at it, being aware of the color. And thinking has to do with, ‘This is a pretty good strawberry. I wonder where it came from. I wonder if I can get more of them’.

Sometimes, the nuance between being aware and thinking was also represented in a relational context. Instead of thinking about the past or the future when encountering an interaction, one could really be present to the interlocutor in front of them:

So, it really relates a lot when I'm encountering you on the telephone, or someone walks into my office or someone is sending me an email or another telephone call. You know, all interactions become focused on, what is it that I'm doing just now? Not trying to plan what's for dinner tonight when I'm talking to you. (Participant cited in Pruitt and McCollum 2010).

**Refined Observation and Description of Things Allow Seeing the Bigger Picture ( $n = 15$ )** The studies highlighted that acute abilities to observe and describe what unfolded in the present moment, with a particular accent on what caused difficulties in one's life, allowed to develop more conscience towards oneself and others. More precisely, observing oneself during a mindfulness practice allowed detailed observations of what unfolded inside and outside oneself, as well as a perceived capacity to put these observations into words. As one of Kocsis and Newbury-Helps' (2016) participants explained, observing and describing oneself as they really are was the beginning of the identification of what caused sexual difficulties: "I think I seek intimacy with a degree of desperation, but when I try and observe myself more coolly now, I see that I'm actually avoiding intimacy quite effectively a lot of the time."

This new understanding of one's reality allowed seeing the "bigger picture," underlying patterns, that hindered participant's well-being. indeed, Eleanor (cited in McCreary and Alderson 2013) illustrated this idea: "I think meditation helps me see things from a different perspective for sure. Basically I think it's just taking that little moment to breathe, to connect, and think like "what's the bigger picture here?"

**A Closer Relationship with Bodily Sensations ( $n = 18$ )** Many participants within the 8 reviewed studies reported that observing, describing, and awareness traits were interwoven to the relationship with the body and the physical sensations. Many mindfulness trainings being centered on paying attention to the bodily sensations, it appeared logical that the development of mindfulness went through a closer relationship with one's breathing: "You go into the situation, listening or feeling your breathing, taking a step back from your thoughts..." (participant cited in Kocsis and Newbury-Helps 2016), or all of the senses:

Also, paying attention to other senses, it's quite an interesting aspect of the mindfulness process, so it's not only the eyesight, or the hearing or even the sense of smell or the touch, but other senses which we don't pay attention to that we should and it may be more helpful to pay attention to. (Participant cited in Kocsis and Newbury-Helps 2016).

Ultimately, the relationship with the body was a key component in enjoying sexual activities: "When I have sex recently now I'm feeling more when I have intercourse with my partner. It is different, I am feeling more and that's a relief" (Participant cited in Mize and Iantaffi 2013).

### The Perceived Benefits and Outlets of Practicing Mindfulness: A Journey to Heart Openness

This second category showed that with the onset of or a consistent practice of mindfulness, a feeling of connectedness with others emerged. Mostly, being accepting and attentive to one's difficulties, as well as seeing the bigger picture in one's sexual and/or relational difficulties, allowed heart-openness. Then, all the positive repercussions that were encountered allowed a feeling of connectedness towards one's self and life. The positive emotions and states of mind that arose inside oneself, such as confidence, comfort, and amazement, were also shared with significant others, which allowed more harmony, happiness, and compassion within relationships.

**Surging Connectedness with Others (Close Ones, Members of Mindfulness Interventions, and the Humanity in General) ( $n = 47$ )** Improved mindfulness, and especially improved acceptance and nonreacting traits, allowed more connectedness in general. Across articles that studied mindfulness—referred to by participants as meditation or other relaxation practices, or the aforementioned abilities that were developed (see Category 1)—linked to relationality, connection to the intimate partner and other close ones was reported as a key element in participants' well-being following a mindfulness-based intervention or practice. More specifically, being caring, happy, compassionate, and harmonious within one's relationships was encountered as the aftermath of practicing mindfulness. For example, Ethan reported, concerning his partner Rebecca: "She cared about me and she wanted to make sure that she was there for me." (cited in Gillespie et al. 2015). Louise (cited in McCreary and Alderson 2013) also said that: "If it benefits me, and creates happiness and compassion in my mind, he feels that, either directly or indirectly. This creates harmony... I get closer because I practice compassion."

Relationality and sexuality appearing nested within the experiences of the participants, mindfulness training that targeted sexual difficulties also allowed this positive outcome:

I had done some mindfulness before, I did not know how to incorporate that with sex, because sex is with another partner—how does it work when it is with somebody else, not just me meditating, and so, the



course helped me incorporate it into the sex side. (Participant cited in Kocsis and Newbury-Helps 2016).

Some of the studies that evaluated group interventions also brought to light the beneficial aspect, reported by participants, to relate to other members of mindfulness-based interventions. This feeling of connection brought a sense of value and belonging to participants, who reported relief in their experience, since they no longer felt alone to experience relational and/or sexual difficulties: “I think I derived much benefit from the group sessions. Really just feeling inclusive, valued, not feeling alone, the fact that there are other women who can identify with a similar problem that I’ve got” (Maya, cited in Brotto et al. 2013). Indeed, no longer feeling alone and lonely seemed to be a major factor in improving one’s mental health, particularly regarding the experience of sexual problematics.

Finally, the relation to humanity in general was particularly marked by this feeling of connectedness among Pruitt and McCollum’s (2010) research participants, who were experienced meditators. A feeling of oneness emerged; as self-compassion increased, there was also more space for compassion towards others. Some of them noticed that: “Well, it helps me to see what’s — see who they are underneath what they are presenting, and remain compassionate... to just see the humanness in everybody.”, or that:

Love pervades the universe and if I can see in the other that they come from the very same center of the universe, source of life, and I’m coming from the same place, and try to love the other person. And the only way I can accomplish loving the other person is if I can love myself, there is no difference between she and I.

**Contentment with One’s Life and Self (n = 17)** A bettered proximity with bodily sensations, with increased acceptance of what life has to bring and letting go of things one has no control over, was identified as related to an increased relational, sexual, and life satisfaction, a contentment with oneself and one’s life as they were (e.g. by “letting the freedom of expression come out the way it needs to.” (Participant cited in Pruitt and McCollum 2010)). With enhancements in the quality of the participants relationality and sexuality, the satisfaction towards one’s life in general seemed to be found. Jessica (cited in Brotto et al. 2013) portrayed this outlet concerning her life following a mindfulness-based intervention aiming to help her with her provoked vestibulodynia:

[It’s] extremely positive. It’s, I mean, my life two years ago to now is, I mean, almost unrecognizable. I was in

such crisis two years ago, and now you know I’m so happy with my life and don’t want changes . . . I don’t have any need for change the way I did two years ago. Very very satisfied with the life that I have.

The ability to enjoy oneself, by being kinder and gentler in general, was also reported as a benefit gained since practicing mindfulness: “I can be kinder and gentler to myself and... I catch it quicker and... I can give myself a little inner smile and just chill out... I can relax with myself a little bit more. Like myself a little bit more.” (Participant cited in Mize and Iantaffi 2013).

**Self-sufficiency (n = 9)** One of the main underlying concepts that emerged as intricately intertwined with the satisfaction towards oneself, others, and life was a capacity to detach from the dependency towards others, an ability to “find happiness inside oneself”.

For example, one of the participants in Pruitt and McCollum’s study (2010) expressed that practicing mindfulness has “given me—because I feel with the belonging ... I can stand alone, if that makes any sense. I think needing — thinking that you need someone to hold you up, and realizing that you really belong, you do not need to be held up.” Louise (cited in McCreary and Alderson 2013) portrayed that this self-sufficiency also has repercussions in a relational context, since: “I think holding on to him as the source of my happiness would put an awful lot of pressure [and] tension... then I can just love him wherever he’s at... for free, which is nice.”

### Limits of Practicing Mindfulness Training Marked by Restraining Conditions of Life

A third and last category shows that some of the studies that evaluated the effects of a mindfulness-based intervention also reported limits and challenges linked to practicing mindfulness as a means to improve sexuality and relationality. The majority of participants who expressed limits to the mindfulness practice also expressed benefits related to that very practice. Therefore, it appears like benefits of mindfulness-based practices or interventions might potentially be hindered by limits or difficulties. Until further studies help to dismantle the relationship between limits and positive outcomes of mindfulness-based practices for people with sexual and relational difficulties, a flexible person-tailored approach should be prioritized, allowing adaptations based on each person’s needs. Mostly, these difficulties concerned the fact that mindfulness cannot be used as a panacea for relational and sexual problematics. It requires hard work, energy, time, and favorable life conditions. The more the expressed difficulties were deep, the more the perceived outcomes of practicing mindfulness were limited. More precisely, the difficulties that were

expressed regarded not being able to keep up with the mindfulness training, the necessity to be patient in front of challenging interpersonal and/or sexual problems and a desire for connectedness that was hindered by celibacy or a participant's partner that did not practice mindfulness.

**The Hardships of Pursuing the Practice of Mindfulness ( $n = 10$ )** Not being able to maintain the practice of mindfulness after the end of the training was perceived as an adverse effect by participants. For example, Jackie (cited in Brotto et al. 2013) experienced guilt and harsh self-judgment for not sticking with her practice as much as she would have wanted to:

I just have not found, after the sessions, that I've been able to come to a place where there is no stress or I can deal with it. There's always just that one more thing you know? I think my biggest hurdle has been the guilt of not sticking with it, like it's probably my own fault I'm not going to get better.

During stressful moments, it also looked like it was harder to find a peaceful space within oneself to practice mindfulness:

Well, I've been trying to do the mindfulness practice, and was pretty good with it at the beginning of the time just after I finished the education sessions, but it's kind of deteriorated over time. And I was trying to do some meditation just before I went to bed as well. That was sort of less successful, but sometimes that worked and sometimes it didn't. Sometimes I would do it, and I would still be wide awake and couldn't relax. And other I'd find it really hard to concentrate. So I have to say at this stage that it's completely off the rails. I'm finding it really hard to do the mindfulness practice. There's just been a lot of stress lately, and I think that's just thrown me off course. (Allison, cited in Brotto et al. 2013).

It was also reported that the mindfulness training would have benefited from being longer, which might explain why some participants expressed having a hard time keeping up with the training.

**Initial Sexual and Relational Difficulties That Require Patience ( $n = 8$ )** Some of the participants expressed that since their initial difficulties were challenging for them, the improvements they noticed were modest: “But, you know, it did not make a huge difference for me... And so I'll say this out is that, you know, with all the medical issues going on and all the pain, uh, migraines, uh, getting a little bit of her back helped, but that there's such a long way to go.” (Eli talking about his partner Jennifer, cited in Gillespie et al. 2015) or needed to be

bettered: “I definitely learned things about myself and I have a desire to be more mindful and more aware. I think I've made progress, but I need to make more.” (Participant cited in Mize and Iantaffi 2013).

**A Scarce Connectedness with Significant Others That Hindered Progress ( $n = 8$ )** In Mize and Iantaffi's study (2013), targeting women with sexual difficulties, it was noticed that the ones who were not partnered found it challenging to apply the things they had learned in their real life-context, since they had no one to test them with: “But for us women who do not have partners and are dating somebody or something like that... you know there's a whole other coping thing in that how do you even bring this up and discuss this with somebody.” (Unnamed participant). In Gillespie et al.'s research (2015), which studied partners of graduate students who attended a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) intervention, the need for connectedness was rather expressed when both partners could not find a common ground facing the change that was experimented by the person who encountered the MBSR program: “It's different trying to develop a daily practice when you know that the person you are with dismisses it as you being crazy.” (Jill) or: “I started changing and he wasn't, and I did find that very difficult at one point.” (Lynn).

## Discussion

This study aimed to produce a metasynthesis of the qualitative studies of mindfulness-based practices and interventions on sexuality and/or relationality in order to obtain a richer and more complete overview of these concepts. The data provided new insights on the characteristics in which sexual and relational difficulties can be decreased through the practice of mindfulness. In fact, practicing mindfulness on a regular basis allowed the development of mindfulness-related traits—living in the present moment, a lower reactivity—that were closely linked to the ability to enjoy one's relationships and sexuality. The practice of mindfulness allowed participants to notice enhancements in their sexuality and/or relationality.

The main mechanism that allowed positive outlets of mindfulness on one's partnered sexuality and relationships was the development of abilities to live mindfully within themselves, prior to being able to live mindfully with others. This notion reinforces the idea that the relation to the self and the relation to others are similar to one another (i.e., Berger 1952; Maltby et al. 2001); that one relates to oneself in a similar way than they relate to others. This provides insights as to how mindfulness-based practices, which are individual by nature, may have repercussions in the relational and sexual realms, which are conceptualized in an interpersonal way in the current study. For example, self-acceptance is linked to the

consideration of oneself as equal to others and, oppositely, does not deny the worth of others or their equality as persons with them (Berger 1952). Therefore, self-acceptance and acceptance of others are linked to one another (Berger 1952).

Despite the impacts of mindfulness-based interventions and practices being mostly positive since allowing, for example, a sense of peace or a kind stance with oneself and others, as well as closer intimate relationships, some challenges were expressed by participants within the studies that assessed such limits. Indeed, it seemed harder to remain thorough in one's practice of mindfulness when encountered difficulties were considerable. It also appeared more tedious to remain mindful when appropriate support from close ones was scarce, or among novice meditators. Therefore, mindfulness-based practices and interventions should be approached cautiously when targeted to address sexual and relational difficulties or to improve these very spheres of one's life. Moreover, mindfulness-based practices and interventions might not be appropriate for everyone. As such, a person-centered approach is recommended.

The data analysis provided an outlook concerning the fact that increasing mindfulness abilities allow the experience of enhanced sexuality and relationality. As previously mentioned, increasing specific components of mindfulness (i.e., acceptance as manifested by lower reactivity to one's problems or other peoples' differences) allows the betterment of specific relational and sexual elements as well. When recommending a mindfulness-based practice to people who encounter relational and/or sexual problems, practitioners should be aware that (1) as showed in Category 3, within a relational context, it might be best if all partners perceive the advantages of practicing mindfulness in order to prevent increasing conflicts or differences, and to promote partner support on the mindfulness practice; (2) the expressed limits in Category 3 were not empirically saturated, and therefore, the suggested adverse effects linked to practicing mindfulness individually while being involved in a relationship should be further inquired; (3) people who present challenging difficulties within their relationality and/or sexuality should be informed that practicing mindfulness tends to bring the most results in the long run, through a consistent practice; (4) one should not be discouraged and ashamed if they experience a return of their difficulties when they have a hard time keeping up with their mindfulness-based training; and (5) one should not expect that mindfulness-based practices will solve all sexual and relational difficulties. In conclusion, mindfulness-based practices should not be considered as a panacea to relational and sexual difficulties, but as a helpful technique to help reduce these difficulties.

## Limitations and Future Research

A few limits have to be taken into account to appreciate the findings of this metasynthesis. First, the number of studies that

was included in the analysis is limited. Therefore, we did not attain empirical saturation in the data, and additional categories, or subcategories, could be identified in further studies. Also, despite distinct subcategories in Category 1, mindfulness traits appeared related to one another. These findings point that although some of these traits are integral or related to mindfulness, they might not be specific to mindfulness, which also highlights the difficulty to properly define mindfulness (e.g., Chiesa 2013; Grossman 2019). Despite these traits being linked to mindfulness and appearing to have positive repercussions in the sexual and relational realms, more studies are necessary to dismantle holistic versus sexuality or relationality-specific benefits. Future studies could help closing this gap in knowledge, including mediation and moderation studies. Moreover, 3 of the 8 studies that were analyzed did not cite their participants in their results, which represents a methodological limit hindering the analysis of the content reported by the participants. The quality score of one study in particular was, unsatisfactory due to a lack of details concerning the study's methodology. We still decided to include the aforementioned study in our sample, since (1) excluding it could have impacted our capacity to produce a metasynthesis; (2) it reported results of a mixed methods, mindfulness-based intervention, which makes unsurprising that the qualitative data were not as detailed as in other qualitative studies, hence a lower score (i.e., the lower score does not reflect a poorer study, but the different methodology); (3) the verbatim extracts that were presented in this study were relevant to achieve our objectives; and (4) the inclusion of this particular study did not change the meaning of our conceptual categories' themes and subthemes, but allowed to enrich them (particularly Category 1). In all cases, quality scores were lowered due to the absence of the authors' positioning and discussing of their own reflexivity in the articles (the ability to position oneself concerning their study object, or on the way their personal characteristics (i.e., their gender or background) influence their interpretations). Furthermore, the body of literature that was included in the analysis targeted a variety of participants (gender, problematic targeted by the mindfulness-based intervention, age, marital status, beginner vs advanced meditators, etc.) and study designs. Although the inclusion of diverse samples is pertinent, this heterogeneity has to be considered as a limit to the present conclusions, since qualitative studies usually try to include homogenous samples. Lastly, using a more critical stance towards mindfulness research, it is important to note that two of the analyzed studies (Brotto and Heiman 2007; Kocsis and Newbury-Helps 2016) reporting results of a mindfulness-based intervention did not include the dropout rates of their participants. Future research on mindfulness and relationality/sexuality should not only transparently report such rates to better situate the reader regarding the interviewed participants but ideally also conduct research among participants who dropped out of interventions to assess potential obstacles to—or adverse effects induced by—

mindfulness practices. Moreover, as qualitative research linking mindfulness to sexuality/relationality continues to be popularized and better understood, authors should document definitions of mindfulness (e.g., as reported by the participants). Mindfulness is a complex and multifactorial notion. Providing more attention to its conceptualization and documenting the definitions as reported (or experimented) by the participants themselves, considering participants' voices would increase the quality of future studies and benefit scientific knowledge on this concept.

More qualitative research should be conducted concerning mindfulness-based interventions targeting sexual and relational difficulties in order to better understand their repercussions as well as the mechanisms in which they take place. In that aspect, future metasyntheses could be produced with more homogenous samples to examine potential particularities within specific populations to better understand the contexts in which mindfulness practices allow better sexuality and relationality. This could allow the production of more adapted recommendations to different types of participants (i.e., males, females, people presenting sexual or relational difficulties). Further analyses (e.g., path analyses, factor analyses, other qualitative analyses, and mixed-methods) also need to be conducted to confirm the current findings. Lastly, as the current study included a limited body of research, mostly on interventions targeting sexual and relational difficulties, it could be interesting to produce more research on the perceived effects of mindfulness practices in nonclinical samples who experience satisfying sexualities and relationalities, in order to verify if such positive repercussions and potential adverse effects apply to them as well. In that optic, researchers who study the impacts of mindfulness on sexuality and relationality should address potential adverse effects in their participants, which could allow a better understanding of who might be at risk (Van Dam et al. 2018).

The depth of understanding we may acquire concerning the practice of mindfulness could be beneficial to health professionals in order to recommend more adapted interventions, and benefit people presenting difficulties in the sexual and relational realms. For example, addressing potential limits to mindfulness training (i.e., requires a lot of time and a sustained practice following the intervention) appears important to informed practices with people encountering sexual and/or relational difficulties, since participants could experience potential delays before noticing benefits to their practice and must be motivated to engage in a sustained effort. The knowledge concerning the potential of mindfulness in enhancing sexual and relational quality of life is still very limited, especially within studies that address both relational and sexual difficulties. It would be interesting to replicate such a metasynthesis with a larger body of research to ensure empirical saturation. In that matter, more qualitative studies are necessary. As some quantitative studies have shown promising results concerning

higher levels of trait-mindfulness on relationality (i.e., Dekeyser et al. 2008) and sexuality (i.e., Déziel et al. 2018; Godbout et al. 2020), it appears important to examine whether mindfulness practices might increase levels of trait-mindfulness, which was scarcely done in previous qualitative studies.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals** No human participants or animals were involved in this research.

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