



Maci Daye

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Maci Daye is the creator of Passion and Presence®, a mindfulness-based sexual enrichment process for couples. Maci is a Licensed Professional Counselor, Certified Hakomi Trainer, Certified Master Career Counselor and Life Coach who lives in Atlanta, GA and Mallorca, Spain. Maci has graduate degrees in Education and Counseling from Harvard and Georgia State Universities, and completed the Somatic Experiencing training through the intermediate level. Maci has been practicing Hakomi for 25 years and teaches in the US, Europe and Australia.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Relational Implicit* project (<http://relationalimplicit.com>).

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge Prengel: I'm with Maci Daye.

Maci Daye: Hi Serge.

Serge: So your work centers around sexuality and mindfulness?

Maci: That's true.

Serge: Yeah so what's this about?

Maci: You know a lot of couples are really shocked when they hit the phase in their relationship when sex becomes lackluster. They think, "there's something wrong with me." And all couples reach a point where sexual intensity wanes, for a couple of reasons: One is familiarity, in the sense that we know each other so well that we can predict every move. So every couple is going to run into this. But when we bring mindfulness into the sexual arena and use it as a practice, it helps cultivate qualities that keep sex fresh and mysterious.

Serge: Mhmm.

Maci: Some of the qualities that get lost over time are there in the early stage of a relationship.

Serge: Yeah Yeah. So as the relationship matures, and people notice there is less intensity. And that's another avenue to recapture that freshness?

Maci: Exactly. In fact what tends to happen is that when the couple wants to reinvigorate their erotic life, they often reference the sex they are having now against the sex they had in that highly libidinous-charged and uninhibited phase at the beginning. And a lot of the passion at the romance phase is biochemical, but there are other qualities that are happening when two people are coming together: There is novelty. There's a quality of chase. There's something forbidden there. And when you have an always-available mate, those qualities disappear.

Serge: So so. Uhm what you are doing is normalizing the fact that no you can't go back there again, but not going back there doesn't mean settling for less satisfaction.

Maci: Exactly! That is so well said! We are not trying to replicate an experience we had at the beginning. No, we are sitting here together. And if we did this week after week, we wouldn't be paying attention as closely as we are right now because we are coming into contact for the first time.

Serge: mhmm.

Maci: And it's true that after we've known someone for a while it's not the same as the first time. But it doesn't mean that sex can't continue to be surprising by moving into something that has a live quality where there's mystery and surprise. In the beginning, every time a couple enters into a sexual experience it takes them to an unknown destination, but after a while, we get into these routines. We know what turns each other on. We kind of come to expect sex to be somewhat predictable and formulaic, and that's when it's flat. When we bring mindfulness into the sexual arena that allows us to enter an encounter fresh every time!

Serge: mhmm.

Maci: so it's permanently novel. It's almost like a first every time.

Serge: right right. So we are not using mindfulness in the sense of something mystical or something that feels strange to apply to sex. But you are talking about engaging the mind in the sense of rediscovery and being fresh every time.

Maci: Yeah. I'm really glad that you are using the phrase, not "mystical", because we describe our approach - "Passion and Presence[®]" -- as a consciousness-based model. Sometimes people who have a background in Tantra or some other esoteric training think that we are talking about transmuting consciousness, or manufacturing a particular state. The way we are working with consciousness, and mindfulness in particular, is meeting what is here now, and bringing our full attention and presence to the experience that's unfolding moment to moment. And that could be highly lusty and charged. It could be tender, or something that's a little more um transcendent for a couple. We are not prescribing what kind of sex to achieve. It's the state we are in when we enter into the experience that we are working with.

Serge: Right. So so it's not going to be an escape from reality, and actually a way to embrace reality, and from there as a nice starting point.

Maci: Yes. And again that's really nice to point out. When couples start to experience low desire, and that's the number one sexual reason that couples go into therapy, whether they go into therapy or seek help on their own, they tend to run into what I call performance-based models. And these models are embedded in our cultural ideal to be "bigger, better and more." So we source out erectile enhancers and we learn techniques to have stronger organisms. Reality may mean there's very little juice that we can access at this moment. But if we attune to the erotic thread that is within us in each moment and follow it ...starting with right now, not some place we think we should be, it will often take us into unexpected territory.

Serge: mhmm mhmm. Yeah, so so that sense of the present moment, the reality, is exactly opposite of the "should."

Maci: Absolutely.

Serge: and if we get into the "should," then we are already performing from the beginning.

Maci: Yes. Yes exactly. And you know, part of the performance-based model is the view that we've been steeped in for a long time. I love Masters and Johnsons and they took us forward in understanding the sexual response cycle, but it's also based on this idea that intercourse is what we are working towards, so to get there we have to have arousal, then reach plateau. Then we are gonna strive to climax, and then we move into resolution. So when couples enter into a sexual experience, from the beginning there can be these concerns of "Am I aroused enough?" "Am I going to have an orgasm?" "Is this taking too long?" "Is this too quick?" As if there is some place we are supposed to be, as opposed to we are just here in the moment, in a place of mutual exploration, even play, rather than performance.

Serge: So you know, as you are describing this thing, a visual is in my mind of somebody having a check list before we launch. You know, this check, this check, the stages you have to accomplish before something can happen. And you are describing something about being in a state, or something happens, but it's a black box you follow, as opposed to following a procedure.

Maci: Yeah. I have a colleague, Melissa Grace, who calls the mandate to be a "10" in all areas of life, including the sexual arena, the "Olympian Imperative." And when we look at how sex is portrayed, it seems that people are having sex all the time, and not just ordinary sex, but cirque-du-soleil type sex. And when we compare what's actually happening in the bedroom, in our own sexual experience, with those portrayals, a split starts to happen between our intrinsic eroticism, what turns us on, our bodily felt experience, and the check list of how we are supposed to look, how we are supposed to sound...It's been ten minutes, we should be at this point, and that whole mind set, from our perspective, only increases fears and inadequacy, and puts people in this loop where they may start avoiding sex all together because it's too anxiety provoking.

Serge: Right, but in a way as you are describing this way, we are kind of shifting away from sex per se, and putting it in a larger framework, where what has happened is your attention has shifted from sex to performance, and to not being adequate.

Maci: Yes, exactly. There are a number of people, Gina Ogden, Barry McCarthy and some well-known sex therapists, that have helped broaden the view of what sexual activity is. They have encouraged us to look less at these goals, and the performance model, and more at finding fluid pathways to arousal. And broadening our notion of what is sexual play, so that it fits what's realistic and desirable for a couple. It also recognizes that our body changes all the time. So yes, we are kind of suggesting a makeover regarding how we consider sex.

Serge: right, right two things, the difference regarding what sexual activity is, and the sense of a fluid pathway as opposed to some kind of rigid road map.

Maci: Yes, yes. Exactly. Yeah.

Serge: So as we describe this, in a way I want to just ask, in what way is it somatic?

Maci: Great. Love that. So we are... I keep using the word “we,” because although I have developed this method, I co-facilitate the Passion and Presence® couple’s retreats with my partner, Halko Weiss, who, as you know, because you’ve interviewed him, is a co-founder of the Hakomi institute and the author of the Handbook for Somatic Psychotherapy. I am also a somatic psychotherapist. So I think a lot about embodiment, and embodiment to me means living from the inside out, inhabiting ourselves, and attuning to the eroticism that’s moving through us. We are a vessel for eroticism that has its own energy and its own expression. And if we are operating in our minds, with this picture of what sexuality looks like, we are not attuned to this eroticism, which Joy Davison describes as a sense, which like hearing, or seeing, or tasting can take us to this place, as opposed to directing the experience from our road map. So the somatic part is helping people to become more fully embodied, to listen inside first, to locate and then follow that erotic thread that first exists within them, and then to attune to their partner in a somatic call-and-response way of riding the wave of what’s unfolding, moment-to-moment, but very much checking inside.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah.

Maci: Very much connected to what’s in here, what’s my natural impulse?

Serge: So in a way, I can take that last sentence “connected to what’s inside.” There is something very rich. There are a lot of things in it. Because, you know in order to connect with what’s inside, there has to be trust that there’s something inside.

Maci: Yes.

Serge: and you are describing a method, a way, an approach, an attitude about how to connect with something inside.

Maci: Yeah.

Serge: but so, you know. There is both the trust that there is something inside and how to connect to it.

Maci: Yeah. So I want to mention this is a couple’s practice. But I also want to say that this idea of a more fluid view of sexuality also supports a phase we are in socio-culturally, where there is greater respect for sexual pluralism, the diverse expressions of sexuality. The more we can attune to our intrinsic eroticism, the more we can find authentic paths to its expression, as opposed to trying to match some view of what sex is supposed to look like, the more trust we have. And for many people who’ve been cut off, who haven’t been self-connected in that way, it takes some time. This is where mindfulness goes hand-in-hand with embodiment, because mindfulness makes us more sensitive to subtle shifts that happen physically, it makes our senses more acute, it helps us recognize choice points for our erotic expression as opposed to going down the well-etched tracks of automaticity.

Serge: mhmm.

Maci: and when we are automatic, which happens when we have enough muscular memory that we've started to move into these patterned responses, we don't have to be fully attentive. When we are automatic, we are not really embodied.

Serge: So there are two things in there. One part is that uhm, we have uhm preconceived ideas, ideas that society reinforces about what sex is, so these ideas are very strong. It's going to be difficult for us to be able to recognize what's inside.

Maci: and trust, if you could.

Serge: and trust.

Maci: yeah.

Serge: and the other part is that uhm regardless of that, in addition to it, we develop automatic habits that are also not embodiment...

Maci: Absolutely! The first thing that glues couples together is their curiosity for one another. That makes them very attentive. I really want to know you deeply. I'm very curious. At a certain point, couples feel like they know everything that needs to be known about their partner, and at that juncture they often stop being curious. And the other thing that happens is that when the hormones that produce lust and desire return to baseline levels, the hormones associated with bonding and attachment become more dominant. This makes people more affectionate and less erotic. What's interesting is that when this happens, I'm going to use a term Tammy Nelson came up with, and she's a sex therapist who wrote a wonderful book, "Getting The Sex You Want," they start to engage in "Maintenance Sex". Sex is on your to-do list, like it'd be good to do, but it's not exciting. It's not awesome. It may be pleasurable. Couples may have orgasms, but the sex is more push button, because I know what to do to evoke particular responses in you. And the more we develop these prescribed pathways to arousal, and the less curious we are, the more automatic we become.

What we know from neuroscience is that automaticity is something that gets stronger over time. It becomes easier to fall into this patterned behavior. So it takes some consciousness. This is why I'm saying it's a consciousness-based model. We use mindfulness to be aware that this is a pattern of responses. Automaticity takes us down the same rabbit hole, so that we miss potential trailheads.

Serge: mmhmm, and the context is actually part of the good thing, because, as you said, as couples get to know each other better, there is more affection, and affection itself is desirable, but the other side of the coin of affection is not being willing to take risks or to follow the curiosity.

Maci: Yes. Tammy Nelson says the old school thinking was that if the relationship was good, the sex would follow. So couples therapists would work on building emotional connection and trust. And what we are finding is that yes, it's important, but too much of that --and Esther Perel really called attention to this -- and we start to de-eroticize our partner. We don't see them so much as a lover. So the current thinking is we have cultivate these two tracks, simultaneously. One track is the emotional connection, but the other track is the erotic connection. And once we are in that emotionally connected place, we may avoid risk-taking, but the term I use... is that we start to practice "safe sex." When we get to this point where we don't want to rupture the attachment by introducing elements that may be off-putting to our partner, we start to practice "safe sex." But,

“safe sex” in this context prevents us from experiencing the pure potential of entering into an encounter fresh. We start to exile some of the edgy aspects of our eroticism because we think we have to trade excitement for the security we get through a committed relationship. So if we are going to bring these elements back in we have to be what I call “radically naked,” by revealing the inner most fears and desires. And that’s a path and a process, and that’s why Passion and Presence® is for couples, so that they can develop the safety and trust to use the relationship as a theater upon which they can enact numerous erotic scenarios.

Serge: So so, uh in a way, it’s nice to, for the two of you as a couple to feel closer and so on, but remember you are just good friends. There is something, you are losing out on something. So it’s not about avoiding being good friends and strengthening that kind of intimacy, but it’s also that naked part, of showing the vulnerability, and that emotional connection, a different nature of affection.

Maci: Absolutely. For couples that are really anxious around enacting fantasies or even disclosing the erotic scenarios that turn them on, beginning to dialogue around this helps revive curiosity towards one another. I realize that I don’t know you as much as I thought I did. That reignites my curiosity and therefore my attraction to you, even if nothing changes in what we actually do in bed.

Serge: So the interesting part is actually how it works. As an individual, we know who we are in terms of the reflection we have in other people’s eyes, so there’s a possibility of expanding on that, instead of shrinking. Because all this “oh I can’t really show that, I can’t really show that,” and so it’s like the waning of the desires, and so the waning of who you are.

Maci: Oh that’s so well said! I Love how you said that. And what locks that in place, and creates that waning of self and who we can be, are the implicit contracts we make with one another to not put either one of us on edge. I mean I expect you to behave this way, because this is how I know you, this is what I was attracted to, this is what I married, I don’t know who you are becoming and I don’t want to know because it scares me. But if we can see that our being is fluid, just like our sexuality is fluid, just like what’s unfolding here and now may be very different from what we did together last week, what turned me on last week may not turn me on now, but what turned me off ten years ago may be very exciting to me now. So it’s that sense that yes, let’s not lock ourselves into these expectations that we’re in a steady state.

Serge: So as the bond of affection grows, this is not a prison, where you can’t grow from. There is a possibility of actually growing while at the same time having that closeness.

Maci: Well I would go further and say, it’s not just a possibility, but it’s also in the design. People like David Schnarch say desire problems are people-growing machines, because desire problems are a catalyst to come back to life, not just in a sexual arena, but a call to become a fuller, more differentiated self, and that’s very exciting, and that’s again why I love doing this as a couple’s path or project. We’re supporting each other, by inviting these parts of ourselves to have fuller expression, rather than damping them down by saying, “Oh that scares me, would you please act the way you were five years ago.”

Serge: Yeah. So, so then at least these kinds of problems are an invitation. You know things are changing and there’s room to grow in it.

Maci: Absolutely. This is where mindfulness can heal issues, can breath new life into a relationship that's falling a little flat, and also support transformation, inviting us to move into a more differentiated, more complex self where there's more aspects of us that can have expression in the world. I once heard Esther Perel say that when people have affairs they often do so because they want to give expression to a part of themselves that doesn't have play in their regular life. So, one of the techniques that's part of Passion and Presence® is called "Parts Play," where we find a way to let aspects of ourselves that don't show up in the role of mother or husband show up in the bedroom, and again that makes things more edgy and more unpredictable, and it can be scary initially, because these are parts of the self that haven't been supported or nurtured recently in the relationship, but ultimately, it's what most people seek.

Serge: Right, right. So as you are saying that I have a visual sense of a person being a gathering of parts and that what happens is as the relationship intensifies, there are a lot of good things to it. But some of the parts that are put forward take so much room that other parts shrink. So there's also a sense of atrophy or dying of these other parts or a sense that you have to go elsewhere to look for them.

Maci: Exactly, so again the idea of this being a couple's process is that we make a contract that we are inviting impulses back into the relationship to support our full expression of our aliveness together, and that's a scary practice. Because of that, some of the skills that we teach involve sharing with each other using mindfulness. Again, every aspect of Passion and Presence® is mindfulness-based, to increase safety and reduce reactivity. Because if you come in and you suddenly tell me about a fantasy you've had forever, or say that from now on you're going to just be really spontaneous, and I've known you as someone who's fairly cautious and deliberate, that's going to scare me and I'm going to have a reaction to that. And I'm not going to be very curious about what this desire is, and what needs to be integrated into our relationship. But if we've created a context where we are invited to track our internal reactions and to report more from the observer than just blurting from the part that may be scared, then we are creating the context for what Tammy Nelson calls "Erotic Curiosity," where we create enough safety so that each other feels invited to share their deeper selves with their partner. So it's not just like it's a free-for-all, or coming in and saying "this is who I am today," it's really a very deep sharing and a deep disclosure of impulses and desires and agreeing to find ways to integrate various parts of our selves into our relationship.

Serge: and the key word is safety.

Maci: The key word is safety, but safety um along with that kind of commitment to unprotected sex, the radical nakedness.

Serge: So maybe the right word might be, because the bad connotation of safety which can be a kind of prison, maybe a sense of respect. There is a possibility of respecting each other, you know there are needs, but that each person's needs are going to be respected and there is not going to be either intimidation or someone bringing in their desires in a tyrannical way, but not letting somebody's fear be a tyrant either.

Maci: Yeah, and one of the practices that we use around mindfulness is exploring our reactions to certain sexual activities. If we've exiled our desires because earlier in the relationship we've gotten the direct message that this/that thing makes the other uncomfortable, it is going to stir up

emotions in our partner when we decide to bring those desires back in. The typical response is: I don't like it. I don't wanna talk about it, I don't wanna be curious about it. But again, when part of the contract is to use mindfulness to explore our reactions, we can create an experiment, we call this "Mindful Co-Investigation," where I can be the stimulus or trigger, and you can study what your aversion is. The intent is not to override limits and say yes to something that isn't right for you. To the contrary, this kind of exploration might mean we establish firmer and clearer boundaries. But the exploration, itself, has created more intimacy, understanding and awareness.

Serge: Right. And as you keep explaining this going into the territory, going beyond aversion, going beyond fears, you know it also becomes clearer, the mindfulness you are talking about is a way to ground the exploration, because it's about paying attention to bodily sensation and that kind of information, as supposed to staying in your head. And so it's kind of also related to safety.

Maci: Absolutely. I'm a certified Hakomi Therapist and Trainer, so I come out of that tradition, which is based on mindful self-study. Passion and Presence® uses mindful self-study to stay with an experience to learn more about it. It could be a physiological experience, sensation, emotion or impulse. I pause to turn my awareness inside, lingering with my felt experience long enough so that I can discover the information embedded in that experience. So, yes, mindfulness is the core practice that helps us be more embodied and creates the kind of safety and trust that sometimes gets lost when we've become self-protected.

Serge: Yeah yeah. And so as you describing it, as that program of self, there is something about both people being involved in that process where that process is about each person individually and about sharing it. So there is also a way, which is about expanding the room each person has and expanding the relationship in that way.

Maci: Absolutely. So mindful self-study means I'm gonna take the time to explore what happens when we are making love that causes me to shut down or to stop or to go into some state that's really uncomfortable, since I'm likely to hit that spot again and again and again. I can choose to override it, I can choose to numb out or get resentful and angry. I can avoid sex, or I might want to investigate it. Another step would be to co-create an experiment that allows us to study our reaction as it is happening. Our partner might offer a toned down version of the trigger, so we can discover what is underneath it. In Hakomi language, we would say we are using mindfulness to make our implicit processes more explicit.

Serge: Right right. So there is something about the sense of respectful negotiation that also involves an awareness of bodily sensations, so that you don't go farther than you can.

Maci: Absolutely, so that's about being with what is unfolding moment to moment. I might be feeling quite alive, quite erotic, and then something shifts the energy, where it's not fully alive, but a non-goal approach means we don't effort at that point. We might pause. We might turn inside and see what's happening. Is there some other impulse showing up? Or would it be better if we just let this go for now and come back to it later. Conversely, I may enter into an experience not feeling that erotically charged, but my partner starts to express some energy that I attune to, that evokes some response in me that takes me into some direction I didn't foresee at the beginning of the encounter. But, at any point, either person can say, "You know I need to pause and study this." "I'm not quite comfortable," or "This isn't feeling authentic to me right now." And that's the beauty of being a

cooperative erotic team, we are agreeing to be in this journey together of using sex as a portal for self-awareness and embodiment.


Serge: As you describe the moment by moment description, I have a very nice sense of how it is that two people who know each other a lot, who have connection and affection are, you know, in a mindful quest, can actually also experience a kind of novelty moment-by-moment, because things unfold, and you are going to pay attention to what's happening right now instead of going into the automatic route.

Maci: That's exactly right, Serge. You've said the whole point of the model. It is to use mindfulness as an antidote to sexual familiarity and automaticity and to shift from performance to exploration by being increasingly more sensitive to what's here now, that kind of deep listening, that attuning to our own eroticism. And, as I said earlier, that intrinsic eroticism is ever changing and mysterious, so we are attuning to something that by its very nature is variable and therefore unknowable. Every second it's going to take a new shape and form, and our response to that, our responsiveness to that, is going to make every moment a refreshing encounter. That's the aspiration.

Serge: Yeah and then to shift focus and instead of keeping your focus on what you expect, letting things unfold and being able to shift the focus on what's new. And what is new is unfolding moment by moment.

Maci: Yes exactly! That's exactly right.

Serge: Thanks Maci.

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