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BEING IN THE MOMENT: THE POWER OF MINDFULNESS IN LAW FIRMS

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changes brain structure and circuitry in areas responsible for learning, memory, concentration, planning, problem solving, emotional regulation, resilience and compassion. Mindfulness is also a potent strategy for reducing stress and improving physical and mental health. So, why aren’t we all doing it?

Simple But Not Easy

Set a timer for one minute and purposely focus only on your breathing. During that minute, did you find yourself thinking about the past or the future — planning, worrying, daydreaming — thinking about anything but the breath? Did you judge this exercise or how well you were doing it? If so, you’re not alone. A Harvard University study concluded that 47 percent of our waking hours are spent thinking about something other than what we are doing at the time. This wandering mind is a normal part of the way our brains have evolved, but it makes it easy to get distracted, react out of habit in ways that don’t serve us and lose the ability to make skillful choices in the moment. Fortunately, it doesn’t have to be this way. We can cultivate new mental habits by practicing mindfulness.

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the ability to attend to the moment-to-moment experience of life in a curious and non-judgmental way. It is the capacity to be present for whatever is happening, however it is, with a sense of clarity, perspective and even friendliness. This doesn’t mean you have to like everything that arises in your life. But what if no matter what arises, you can more easily access your innate capacity to cope and respond skillfully?

Advances in neuroscience and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology have supported more than 3,000 studies on mindfulness since 1979. Research shows that mindfulness actually changes brain structure and circuitry in areas responsible for learning, memory, concentration, planning, problem solving, emotional regulation, resilience and compassion. Mindfulness is also a potent strategy for reducing stress and improving physical and mental health. So, why aren’t we all doing it?
Find a few minutes of uninterrupted time. Since mindfulness is about being aware of what's happening as it's happening, become aware that you are breathing. Attend to the flow of breath in and out of the body and notice where you feel the breath most vividly. Are you aware of the breath at the tip of the nostrils? Perhaps you can sense the expanding and releasing of the stomach or the rising and falling of the chest as the lungs fill and empty. Find the place where the breath is most prominent, and let that be a reliable anchor for your attention.

If you can, follow the full cycle of breath, including the inhale, exhale and pauses at the top and bottom of the breath. Bring an attitude of curiosity to the process of breathing, perhaps noting whether the breath is shallow or deep, flowing or constricted. Remember, we are cultivating non-judgmental awareness, so there is no need to judge how the breath is or to change or improve it in any way. Just be with the breath, however it is, moment to moment.

Of course, because you’re human, you’ll find that your mind will occasionally wander, and you will become distracted by thoughts, feelings, body sensations and/or events around you. As soon as you notice that your mind has wandered, gently but firmly bring it back to the breath. As many times as the mind wanders, escort it back to the breath. You’re not trying to get rid of thoughts, but simply to strengthen your ability to notice when you’ve been distracted and return to your focus.

Over time, you might notice an expanded ability to accept whatever is arising in your life with more ease and perspective. Also, as you continue to practice with the breath — even when you’re distracted or uncomfortable — you are strengthening your capacity to be fully present for all the moments of your life.
This is sometimes true, but the thought became so persistent that it would pop into my head even when I had plenty of time. I wish I could say that my mindfulness practice has eliminated it, but it hasn’t. What mindfulness has done, though, is help me immediately notice when that thought arises and intervene before it takes me down a rabbit hole of stress.

Take a look at the sample stress cycle to see the chaos that one automatic and unexamined thought can create. We all have these habits of thought that play over and over in our heads. Consider some of yours and create your own stress cycle diagram. Once you are more able to notice and respond to thoughts, emotions, physical sensations and behaviors as they arise, you can take action to break the cycle.

Your Stress Is My Stress

Stress is contagious. Have you ever felt confident, capable and relaxed, but then you encountered a stressed-out colleague and suddenly, you were also oozing stress?

We are built to connect to others, and that involves relating to what they are feeling and doing. That’s why we wind up mirroring others’ stress and anxiety. With greater awareness, it’s possible to discern when the stress you feel is actually not yours, so that you can disconnect from it.

A 2016 American Bar Association/Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation study of more than 12,000 lawyers found that, on average, lawyers had higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety than other professional groups. Recognizing that this is the climate legal marketers work in and learning not to internalize others’ reactivity may help buffer us from the day-to-day challenges of law firm life. Mindfulness practice also increases compassion, and you may discover a more empathetic response arises in stressful circumstances when you previously became angry or shut down.

Building the Muscle of Mindfulness

There are many ways to cultivate mindfulness. The most important consideration is regular and consistent practice of whatever strategies work best for you. Perhaps setting aside 10 or 20 minutes a day to bring awareness to your breath and body or doing some mindful stretching calls to you (see Mindful Breathing 101). You can also cultivate mindfulness by incorporating short moments of practice many times a day. Schedule a few one-minute mindful pauses to get out of your head and “come to your senses,” becoming aware of the feeling of your feet on the floor, body in the chair, breath flowing in and out, sounds, smells, and sights.

“Center before you enter” is another practice I recommend in a legal environment. Before entering a meeting or conversation or beginning the next task, take a moment to check in with yourself, acknowledging your feelings, thoughts and sensations. This will help bring you into the present moment, so you can respond effectively in terms of taking care of your needs and offering your best self to others.

If these suggestions feel like too much to add to an already busy schedule, simply “staple” your mindfulness practice to something you’re already doing. When you get up for coffee or go to the printer, practice mindful walking by noticing your feet for a few steps. Or, you might choose to bring awareness to the first few sips of a beverage or bites of a meal. Another option is to practice mindful listening whenever you’re in a conversation by noticing when your mind wanders and bringing it back to your breath and what is being communicated to you.

Remember, the intention of mindfulness practice is not to make anything happen. It’s actually not about doing at all; it’s about simply being in the present moment. This quality of awareness is innate in each of us, and we need only strengthen our ability to access it. Every time you take a minute to come back to the present moment, it’s as if you are doing a bicep curl for your mind. Don’t worry if it feels a bit uncomfortable at first. If you go to the gym and never step out of your comfort zone, you won’t make much progress. The same holds true for mindfulness practice. And even if your mind is going 100 miles per hour and you feel like you can’t settle, the moment of mindfulness is not when you feel quiet and peaceful. The moment of mindfulness is when you wake up and notice you are distracted and come back. Those are the moments to celebrate!