

LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

MINDFULNESS REDUCES STRESS

A large portion of my time practicing law was either focused on past events to determine what had already happened in a case or focused on the future as to what litigation steps should be taken and probable outcomes. As for time spent totally in the “present moment,” it was consumed with meeting the day-to-day pressures of filing deadlines, managing the office, and landing new cases so payroll would be met each month. It seemed there was never any time to practice something like mindfulness.

Mindfulness is described as the practice of directing your full attention to the present moment without judging it. It is the ability to live fully in the Now without running multiple soundtracks in your head. I knew nothing about mindfulness back then, much less how to practice it. I didn’t know an “off switch” was necessary, much less available, to reduce stress and improve my mental health. As far as I was concerned, high stress was just part of practicing law.

Experts say that learning mindfulness and meditation techniques can effectively reduce stress and make the high-pressure environment of practicing law more manageable. Simply put, one does not have to suffer unrelenting stress to successfully practice law. By forming new mindfulness habits and taking time to incorporate those habits into your regular routine, you can, in fact, become a happier and more productive lawyer.

I first had a glimpse of mindfulness by accident. I stepped totally outside of my solo practitioner’s pressure-cooker life for several years to undertake a sailing adventure. I took my Type-A-perfectionism to sea with me, along with my wife, Melissa, and we covered 19,000 nautical miles aboard a 38-foot catamaran.

The results were interesting. Sailing was not an easy, carefree life. I was up very early every day, completing the hard work to sustain the adventure. It felt less stressful

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than practicing law, though, because a large portion of my time was directed to addressing tasks occurring in the *present moment*.

While living on a boat, things are often so demanding that you can’t think about anything except what is actually happening in the Now. You have no choice but to be fully engaged in the present. For example, when awakened at anchor at 3 a.m. by a violent squall blowing through, you may fear dragging onto a reef. You don’t have time to judge or ponder the fairness of what is happening or worry about what you will do if your vessel is eventually impaled by the reef. Instead, you jump out of the rack and all of your cognitions and actions are instantly directed toward securing the decks and activating all systems to ready the vessel for getting underway if the anchor does not hold. Likewise, sailing in the open ocean often presents challenges that require full attention and quick action. There is only the present moment and nothing else matters.

Basically, mindfulness was externally imposed upon me to a large degree, and without me even knowing it, by the very nature of the sailing adventure. It dramatically shifted my perspective. What I know now is that even though law is a fast-paced pressure-cooker full of deadlines, lawyers can actually learn new tools and adopt new perspectives that will train them to use mindfulness techniques that reduce stress. You don’t have to sail away to master

mindfulness. Instead, you can readily learn about mindfulness and incorporate it into your life regardless of your circumstances.

The Lawyers Assistance Program (LAP) is here to help lawyers learn these new techniques. In the coming year, LAP will produce professionally designed programs on mindfulness so every lawyer will have direct access to training in mindfulness and meditation.

The challenge for LAP will be convincing busy lawyers that it is safe to occasionally press an “off switch” and “let go of the tiller” in their practice as necessary to achieve a new balance that includes dedicating time on a regularly scheduled basis to self-care and mindfulness activities. A lawyer really *can* escape being run ragged by the fast pace and stress of the practice of law. All the lawyer has to do is be willing to learn a new perspective and implement new practices.

It is hard to make life changes. Many of us need support and a “coach” to help us stick to the program, whatever it may be. If you are stressed out, want to regain control of your life, and need support and guidance in implementing mindfulness techniques and tools into your daily life as a busy lawyer, call LAP for *confidential*, free and professional clinical advice. You really can set boundaries and incorporate mindfulness into your life. For more information, call (866)354-9334, email lap@louisianalap.com, or visit LAP online at: www.louisianalap.com.

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