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Dr. Jeffrey M. Schwartz is a research psychiatrist at the School of Medicine at the University of California at Los Angeles and one of the world's leading experts in neuroplasticity. Decades ago he began to study the philosophy of conscious awareness, the idea that the actions of the mind have an effect on the workings of the brain. Jeff's breakthrough work in obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) provided the hard evidence that the mind can control the brain's chemistry. He has lectured extensively to both professional and lay audiences in the US, Europe, and Asia. Jeff's books include *The Mind and the Brain* and the bestseller *Brain Lock*, the seminal book on OCD. He is the co-organizer of the upcoming international conference on neuroleadership. Contact: [Jeff Schwartz](#)

Exercise Mind Hygiene On A Daily Basis

Self-awareness is the key to making real changes in your life

By Stephanie West Allen and Jeffrey Schwartz

Do you ever have days when you describe your life as out of control? Is your career going in an unintended direction? Do you feel as if you don't have the time to assess whether your personal and professional trajectory is consistent or colliding with your goals and values, or if it's aligned with your daily preferences? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, stop! For just a moment, step off the treadmill and join us on solid ground.

Do you want to take control? If so, you already have the necessary tool—your reflective mind. Unfortunately too few people use this life-correcting instrument. Instead, most lawyers operate in a reactive mode. Some are so governed by the billable hour that their brains are like metronomes, still keeping time even when they are away from work, preventing them from paying full attention to life outside the office. Others are so motivated by fear of not scaling the Mt. Everest heights of the legal profession, of not meeting elusive standards or not moving fast enough

that they suffer self-induced workaholism. Sadly, some lawyers are so governed by their reactive brains that they become physically ill.

Become More Self-Aware In Three Steps

Your reflective mind is your shield against living reactively. It can help you become wiser, healthier and more satisfied—which is worth more than any imaginable income. It is easy to use—but not often simple. Here are three steps that will help you separate yourself from your reactive brain and begin to move into your reflective mind.

Learn to observe yourself and to increase self-awareness. Throughout the day, step back and ask yourself, "What am I doing?" "What am I feeling?" "What am I thinking?"

Increase the amount of time you spend in your reflective mind, which, of course, decreases the share of each day your reactive brain claims and captures.

Learn to consciously rewire your brain in your Golden Moments of Choice (GMC).

Recognize—And Act!—During Golden Moments Of Choice

If you understand how to skillfully orchestrate your GMCs, your reflective mind will be in command of your reactive brain and you will have much greater life control. Golden Moments of Choice are possible because your brain is always changing (that's called neuroplasticity). The changes are either by default as it interacts with your environment or deliberately as it interacts with your mind. Your brain can either be randomly molded by external circumstances or artistically sculpted by your self-aware mind. Which do you think leads to an intentional-and self-directed life—letting your brain be rewired by outside forces, or ensuring that the brain rewire is an inside operation?

Here's an example of a Golden Moment of Choice: You have decided that you are going to keep your promise and get home each evening in time to put the kids to bed. When 7 p.m. rolls around, you recognize that you can move in one of two directions: you can keep working or get going. Because of your habit of working very late, the synapses in your brain have been forged to support your habit, and you feel the urge to stay. This physiological component of your habitual behavior is making your decision difficult. Nevertheless, you decide to leave. Now, each time you make this new choice, it will be easier: You will be laying down "going-home-to-the-kids" synapses to support the new behavior (and you will be using self-directed neuroplasticity).

Our ability to step back and see that we have the choice is key. Often we do not even get that far: 7 p.m. comes and goes without our realizing that it's a GMC. In

order to improve your ability to observe yourself and your choices, you need to develop your self-awareness. Many strategies can help you (see our previous article, "Lead Your Brain Instead Of Letting It Lead You," [TLC Volume 3, Number 3](#))

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Here are three more tried-and-true practices to increase your awareness of self:

1. **Make T-notes.** Draw a vertical line down the middle of a clean sheet of paper. At the top of the left column, write a quality you would like to have more of in your life (calmness, energy, patience, efficiency, humor, joy—even self-awareness). For the next five minutes, use the left column to write down what you think makes up the essence of that quality. Each time you are distracted by a thought, write in the right column what distracted you. Then draw a horizontal line under what you have written so far. Under the horizontal line, for the next 5 minutes, write in the left column what it would be like to have more of that quality in your life. Again, write distractions in the right column. Use the same quality for three weeks to a month. If you do this exercise regularly, it will increase your self-awareness: you will notice certain recurring themes and come to recognize which are your personal self-awareness blockers.
2. **See your life as a story.** In your self-talk, use the third person and observe yourself. ("Stephanie is now writing an article. She is aware that tonight she has to teach a class and still has work to do on it. She is feeling stretched for time and her jaw is tense.") Watch the improvement in your self-awareness with daily use of this strategy.
3. **Meditate.** More and more lawyers, firms, and law schools are using meditation.¹ In addition to increasing self-awareness, research has shown that meditation increases the ability to prioritize and manage tasks and goals, focus on specific information, and stay alert to the environment.² Meditation is a multi-faceted bonus for those who practice it regularly.

Those three strategies alone are enough to constitute an excellent program in self-awareness, which will take you down the path to self-management. They are also a good program for bolstering sound mind hygiene.

Unfortunately, few of us, especially lawyers, discuss mind hygiene. The word "hygiene" comes from the name of the Greek goddess who represented good health and the prevention of sickness. If you regularly engage in good physical hygiene (by bathing, brushing, exercising, and eating well to maintain your health), practicing mind hygiene is important for the same reason. Mind hygiene requires your reflective mind to be active. If your reactive brain is in charge, you are more

likely to experience detrimental levels of stress, which isn't good for your mental or physical health.³

Exercising poor mind hygiene—leaving your reactive brain in the director's chair—also harms others in your immediate vicinity. Our emotions are as contagious as illnesses: If you are careful not to expose people to your cold or flu or worse, are you also careful not to expose them to your reactive brain?

Because of what we know about emotional contagion,⁴ we can see that maintaining mind hygiene is in the best interest of those with whom we come in contact, too. Each lawyer practicing good mind hygiene may be a firm's most effective health insurance.

FOOTNOTES

1. See, e.g., "Zen and the Art of Lawyering"
2. "Improved Attention With Mindfulness Training Demonstrated By Penn Researchers"
3. Not all stress is bad. *Eustress* is pleasant and often curative. It also may give us focus and the competitive edge.
4. Hatfield, Elaine; Cacioppo, John T.; Rapson Richard L.; *Emotional Contagion (Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction)*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

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