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Move From Being a Mindless Lawyer To a Mindful Lawyer

Lawyers who meditate sharpen their practices

By [Stephanie West Allen](#) on 1.14.2009 - 2:00 am [Comments \(1\)](#)

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About The Author

Stephanie West Allen practiced law in the San Francisco Bay Area where she held several offices in the local bar association, wrote for the California Continuing Education of the Bar, and founded a child advocacy project. She created a stress reduction program for lawyers and mediated multi-party disputes.



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This is the first of a three-part series on mindful lawyers.

Suppose you could increase your ability to prioritize and manage tasks and goals, focus on specific information and stay alert to the environment.

Would you be a better lawyer? If you said yes, you're in luck. There's a certain practice, written about in the mainstream media and law reviews, that can allow you to do so and is easy to master.

One Supreme Court Justice employs this practice twice a day. In classrooms of law schools, and conference rooms and offices of law firms large and small, both budding and senior lawyers are engaging in this practice in growing numbers. What is this practice that seems to be reaching

the tipping point among legal practitioners of all stripes?

Meditation.

Change Your Brain Chemistry Through Meditation

Meditation not only increases attention, enabling you to prioritize, focus and stay alert, it also changes the way the brain works, according to researchers at the University of Pennsylvania. “Researchers [[Amishi Jha](#) and [Michael Baime](#)] found that even for those new to the practice, meditation enhanced performance and the ability to focus attention. Performance-based measures of cognitive function demonstrated improvements in a matter of weeks. The study . . . suggests a new, non-medical means for improving focus and cognitive ability among disparate populations and has implications for workplace performance and learning.” (Medical News Today, [“Improved Attention With Mindfulness Training Demonstrated By Penn Researchers.”](#))

Although this area of research is not new, many new, peer-reviewed scientific studies confirm the value of meditation and its byproduct, mindfulness. Even skeptics can read about its benefits, ranging from enhanced immunity to lowered blood pressure. Today, no one needs to take it on faith.

Lawyers Are Becoming More Mindful

In October 2008, lawyer, author, and founding dean of City University of New York’s Law School, Charles Halpern, one of the original and long-time proponents of meditation in the legal profession, gave two Continuing Legal Education presentations at University of Denver’s Sturm College of Law during which he stressed mindfulness.

Having led several meditation retreats for lawyers, judges, and law students, he mentioned that the idea of such retreats is “of fairly recent vintage” and he is “pleased to see the increase.” He regards the increasing numbers of meditating lawyers within the larger context of “reviving wisdom in the legal profession.”

All lawyers can reach their wisdom, he believes, by:

- “Taking time for inner work” using meditation or some other strategy
- “Aligning our work with our values”
- “Thinking about how to live our lives in balance”

Halpern thinks that wisdom is “vocationally relevant” because it “increases our capacity to bring full, focused awareness,” which is a key strategy to building a bond with those in our professional lives ranging from clients to judges. He also believes that the practice of wisdom is a good way to “deal with a stressful profession.”

Mindfulness is an asset for lawyers because by increasing our awareness and attention we not only build stronger bonds with others, as Halpern mentions, but we also improve our decision-making and skilled improvising. Still another fundamental element in making good decisions is also fostered by mindfulness: metacognition, the ability to think about your thinking. University of California’s Professor Philip Tetlock memorably describes metacognition as “the art of self-overhearing.” No wonder a growing number of lawyers are studying—and practicing—mindfulness and meditation.

According to Halpern, Justice Stephen Breyer meditates twice a day, each time for 15 to 20 minutes. Through this practice, Breyer has reduced his blood pressure, and feels he is better able to focus and attend to the tasks at hand. If Breyer skips meditation, Halpern added, he “suffers.” Last May, Halpern and University of Denver law professor Tamara Kuennen led a program on mindfulness and meditation at a conference of the Association of American Law Schools; they were gratified and a bit surprised to have a large number of attendees. Halpern reported “a high level of engagement and enthusiasm.”

For more information about the profession’s increased interest in mindfulness, visit [Contemplative Lawyers](#). This ever-expanding list of resources and articles is updated frequently. Is the day coming when a mindless lawyer will be a rarity?

Next in this three-part series, we will look at how to practice meditation and mindfulness and what these practices do to the brain; visit with a lawyer who is teaching mindfulness to lawyers using novel and creative methods; and consider other practices besides meditation that can increase mindfulness.

One Comment



NDLawyer says:

[January 14, 2009 at 8:10 pm](#)

Great topic. I've been practicing meditation for the past 5 years and have seen its benefits. I generally dedicate 30 minutes twice a day to meditation and I more than make up that time with productivity. Look forward to the follow up articles.

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