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Six Easy Ways to Incorporate Mindfulness Into Your Life

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"This job is not healthy for me. I love what I do, but not how it makes me feel."

Those were my thoughts about my legal career back in 2019, when I no longer could ignore my anxiety and burnout. I suspect that many of you have experienced similar thoughts. Over the last decade, numerous studies have shown that lawyers have higher rates of depression, anxiety, burnout, and substance use disorders than the general population. We are members of a difficult and stressful profession.

Since then, I have developed a number of habits that have allowed me to build a more sustainable and enjoyable legal practice. (Sidebar: I also realized that Batman and John Wick are not good career role models or paragons of mental health.) I am grateful for the opportunity to share what I learned with my fellow MBA members. Even if you are skeptical about mindfulness, I encourage you to read on. I was extremely skeptical before I decided to give mindfulness a try.

We are members of a difficult and stressful profession.

Breathing. Yes, breathing. Stop reading this article and take three deep breaths. Do you feel a little better? When we experience stress, our breathing gets quicker and shallower. (For example, many people breathe shallowly or even hold their breath while reading emails.) By taking deep breaths, we can slow down and then respond rather than react to whatever is causing the stress. If you have a little more time, you can use a technique called box breathing - inhale for four seconds, hold that inhale for four seconds, exhale for four seconds, and hold the exhale for four seconds. If you do that for a couple of minutes, you can reset your nervous system the same way you restart your computer.

Sitting still. OK, this is actually meditation, but I know that some people don't react well to that word. Numerous studies have shown that a daily practice of sitting still (even for just six minutes a day - our favorite unit of time) and focusing on your breath can have many beneficial effects, such as reduced stress and increased focus. One reason is because sitting still calms your amygdala - the primal part of your brain that controls your fight or flight reflex. You can sit in the morning, in the evening, or even in your office with the door closed - no special cushions or props are required. You are not expected to empty your mind (no one can), and a racing mind does not mean you are a "bad meditator." The key is to notice your racing mind (maybe for the first time) and come back to your breath, over and over again. Give it a try for a month - it's just six minutes a day - and see how you feel.

Exercise. Most lawyers have sedentary jobs. Even with a sit-stand desk (which I highly recommend), we still need to find ways to move our bodies every day. This does not mean running a marathon - you can just take a walk. For most of my life, I fell into the trap that my body existed as a vessel to transport my brain around. Now I start my day by taking my dog for a long walk, rain or shine. It's a great way to get moving in the morning. Find a form of exercise that you enjoy and that fits your schedule. Regular exercise improves both physical and mental health.

Gratitude. I confess that this is a tough one for me, because I have a strong tendency to focus on worst case scenarios. (Sidebar: This is actually a very common trait among lawyers. We are excellent at worrying.) The good news is that reasons for gratitude are all around you - if you take the time to notice them. Take a minute to think about some good things in your life, both big and small. How often do you express appreciation for those things, even to yourself? When I am having a particularly negative day, I carry around a journal and force myself to fill a page with good things that I have noticed. By doing this, I am building a mental habit that will become more automatic. Another time to practice gratitude is when you are particularly busy at work. Remember that you chose this career and worked hard to have those opportunities (even if you wish there were fewer of them at that particular moment).

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Being present. According to one widely quoted study, we spend almost half of our time either ruminating on the past or worrying about the future - not living in the present moment. We also carry smartphones that keep us connected to our offices and are filled with apps designed to be addictive. It's no surprise that our amygdalas are firing constantly. Despite all of that internal and external noise, we can make an effort to live more in the present moment. If you're on a walk, try listening to the sounds around you instead of a podcast. If you're talking with someone, focus on what they are saying instead of formulating your response in your mind. If you're playing with your children, remind yourself to enjoy those experiences, which this empty nester can confirm will not last forever and will go quicker than you think.

Hobbies. While our jobs are extremely important, there is more to life than being a lawyer. Getting away from legal life can recharge your batteries and bring you joy. I play in a weekly pool league, which allows me to become immersed in a non-legal activity. I also read crime fiction and follow my beloved New York sports teams (Go Knicks!). I've talked with people who get the same enjoyment from fly fishing, playing an instrument, hiking, cooking - the list is endless. If you already have a hobby, make sure you are spending time on it. If you don't have a hobby, think about what you liked to do before you became a lawyer.

If you are struggling with stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, or substance use, you are not alone. I encourage you to seek help from the attorney counselors at the Oregon Attorney Assistance Program - they are lawyers who received mental health training so that they could help other lawyers. Their services are free and confidential.

If you are interested in learning more about mindfulness, email me at john@johndevlinlaw.com. I am happy to speak to law firms or legal groups, pro bono, because I know that these tools can relieve suffering. You also can check out the website of the Mindfulness in Law Society (www.mindfulnessinlawsociety.org).

One final thought: lawyers have a tendency to be perfectionists. I just gave you a list, so now some of you are going to be tempted to check off each item. Spoiler alert - you won't be able to achieve that goal. I talk about and think about this stuff all the time, and I fall short on a regular basis. That's why it's called a practice. You try something, you take two steps forward and one step back, and you keep going. Every day is a chance to live a healthier life.

John Devlin is the Oregon Chapter Chair of the Mindfulness in Law Society. He mediates all types of civil cases, and he litigates civil rights cases. You can find his full biography at www.johndevlinlaw.com.

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