

A Mindful Practice

BY LORI WALD

No one would consider Antwon powerful, but he is. He is the class bully in the fifth grade at a Cleveland public school where nearly 30 percent of the kids are homeless. As usual, he is in ISE (in school suspension), and as usual, his suspension is the other kid's fault. He's permitted to attend the weekly book club I lead and he walks in unable to control his outrage and his anger, but imagine what the world would be like if he could.

Imagine a world where the most powerful and influential people are also the most mindful.

So, I ask him, "On a scale of one to ten, how angry are you?"

He is startled and belligerent. He says he doesn't know.

"You're the only one who does know. One to ten, how angry?"

"Nine," he admits.

I tell him I am going to teach him to use a simple but effective tool I often use when I am feeling out of control. We do something called square breathing where we inhale for five seconds, hold (the top of the square), exhale for five seconds, hold, then repeat.

Twenty minutes later, Antwon is a five. We do another round of square breathing. By the end of the class period he is a one.

The next week Antwon informs me he had gone swimming, and when a boy bothered him in the pool, he did the breath exercise instead of grabbing the kid's legs and drowning him.

With power and influence comes responsibility and challenge. Antwon found a way to be nonreactive in a moment of conflict. Decisions made with more equanimity and less anger tend to be clearer and better decisions. This is as true for a high-powered attorney as it is for an angry fifth-grader.

Breathing techniques are a part of mindfulness training. Mindfulness, the subject of much attention in the media and the health sciences, is a method of training yourself to attend to the present moment. It is often looked to as a tool to reduce stress and increase focus. It is a powerful tool for powerful people to face challenges in more constructive ways.

The practice of law is rife with challenges. There are deadlines, cranky clients and sneaky opposing attorneys. There is the brutality of timesheets. There are judges. It is a profession renowned for unintelligible legal garble and wordiness. Lawyers are known for being prickly, tricky, and subversive.

There is a growing body of research that asserts a mindfulness practice has a beneficial role in reducing stress, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. The laundry list of afflictions a mindfulness/meditation practice seems to help alleviate include high blood pressure, anxiety, depression and insomnia.

Although mindfulness is probably best known for being a tool to reduce stress,

it can also improve listening skills. To listen deeply and openly is more difficult than it seems. Anyone who has ever sat in a meeting with a client or a senior partner knows this. The mind wanders. Grievances from the past intrude. Worries about the future loom. Mindfulness assists with focus and helps to free the listener from preconceived notions, prejudices and other agendas.

Lawyers are driven by time. Every fraction of an hour is measured in dollars. There is not a magic way to manufacture more time, but a mindfulness practice makes it easier not to get caught up in unhelpful thoughts. Priorities become clearer and it is easier to let go of non-productive activities.

Spend less time fretting about what cannot be accomplished and there is more time to focus on the important tasks at hand.

More powerful than an executive stress ball, a mindfulness practice can help with the difficult problem of adapting to change. The reason I went to law school was because I had a desire to be an agent of change. That happened to be true for most of the people I met there. But now, some decades later, lucky enough to have enjoyed some privileges and some miracles, I've also had some brushes with death, cancer and the IRS. My relationship with the idea of change has deteriorated. The same is often true for clients: stasis seems peaceful while the unexpected is often uncomfortable. The job of an attorney is often to advise a client to take the least bad option.

The simple act of sitting in stillness allows me to embrace surprises.

It helps me find a way to accept and adapt to change. What may once have seemed hopeless and absurd (teaching lawyers to meditate for example) is now something I might consider. I allow myself to pursue possibilities in the face of almost certain failure.

Mindful meditation is the deliberate act of channeling your thoughts down to a trickle. Your thoughts will not stop. When I meditate, I sit in stillness for 20 minutes. Here's my process:

Sit in a comfortable place. I like to sit on a straight-backed chair with my feet flat on the floor.

I take five or six diaphragmatic breaths. That means when I inhale, my belly goes



out. I imagine a waterwheel in my body (the square breathing would also work). Inhale and exhale smoothly. Inhale, the breath travels up to my head; exhale, the breath spills down. Try to stay rhythmic and not to work too hard.

Next, I imagine a bright light shining out from my eyes, my ears, my nose, my mouth. It's important to relax your jaw. All sensations that I have experienced so far in the day are gone. I will them away. I send the light down my neck, both shoulders and arms and all fingers. I send the light down my spine to my legs, including my toes. The light ends in my chest cavity where I try to imagine a colorless, empty space.

If you get an itch, feel free to scratch. This is meditation, not a trance.

I focus on my "third eye" (the light between my eyes that I am able to see with my eyes closed). I repeat a mantra. Something simple like *at ease or peace* or the ambitious *Who am I?* I use the mantra to remind myself to let go of my thoughts. As a thought passes into my mind (and thoughts constantly pass through my mind), I encourage myself to draw the thought down to my heart. It helps to imagine a magnetic force from my heart that draws the thought downward.

When the next thought pops in, I encourage myself again. Treat yourself kindly, like you would a small child. Say: It's okay, "you'll get it next time," or "try again."

The whole process takes me 20 minutes although I do not set a timer. My body seems to know when the twenty minutes is up. I try to find the stillness, but it is rare to succeed for more than a moment or two. The only way to fail at mindful meditation is to never try.

There are lots of great reasons lawyers should meditate. There are lots of great reasons everyone should meditate. Even the bully of the fifth grade managed to bully a bit less when he stopped merely to breathe. Imagine a world of calm and compassionate lawyers. If more lawyers found their way to a mindful meditation practice, it would not only be good for those lawyers, it would be good for the world lawyers inhabit.



Before she learned to meditate, Lori Wald practiced law for about 20 years. She now teaches meditation workshops for lawyers and other people with busy brains. She joined the CMBA this year. You can read her musings on meditation at IntentionalLawyer.com. She can be reached at (216) 570-7396 or loriwald1@gmail.com.

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