

MINDFULNESS...TO WHAT END?

The latest and greatest buzzword is “mindfulness.” Before writing this article I did a quick google news search and here are a few of the top results: “How to use mindfulness to manage your money better”; “Mindfulness: a solution to unconscious bias in healthcare”; “How To Actually Have a Mindful Relationship With Your Phone.” A mindful relationship with your phone? Seriously??? Mindfulness has become the panacea for all that ails the world.

The legal profession has jumped on the mindfulness bandwagon as well. There are books on mindfulness for lawyers, Continuing Legal Education seminars, businesses providing mindfulness training for lawyers, and the University Of Miami School Of Law even offers a course called the “Mindfulness in Law Program.” But to what end?

Before we get to the end, we need to go back to the beginning. What is mindfulness? Although the term has been used interchangeably with the word meditation, mindfulness is much broader. And if you ask ten experts to define mindfulness, you’ll get ten different answers. But within those different answers you will find a common theme – that mindfulness is being present, paying attention, and being aware of what is going on around you.

Now that you know what mindfulness is, how do you become mindful? By practicing mindfulness. At its most basic, a mindfulness practice is anything that keeps you focused on the present moment. For example, as you’re reading this article are you fully present? Are you giving this article your full attention to the exclusion of what’s going on around you? Or are you checking emails, on the phone, or maybe eating lunch?

The most popular type of mindfulness practice is meditation. You can download a meditation app onto your phone and start meditating today. Two meditation apps I’ve used are Headspace and Calm. But you don’t need an app, a course, or even a YouTube video. You can just sit up straight, put your feet flat on the floor, close your eyes, and breathe...keeping your focus on your breath.

One thing I’ve noticed about the word meditation and meditating, however, is some people are turned off by the word. Because of their beliefs about what meditation is and the type of person that meditates, meditation is just something they won’t do. I used to feel the same way. Then I spent three days training with former Navy SEALs. I no longer feel that way.

Meditation is a huge part of Navy SEAL training, they just don’t call it meditation. To them, it’s just breathing. When the world is literally exploding around you, you need to be fully present and aware of your surroundings. So they practice breathing.

During the training we started every morning with twenty minutes of box breathing. Picture a box, with its four sides. Start by taking a deep breath in through your nose and into your

diaphragm (across the top of the box), hold your breath (down the side of the box), exhale (across the bottom of the box), and hold your breath (up the other side of the box). Repeat.

To start pick a length of time you're comfortable with. I started with 4 seconds – inhale for 4, hold for 4, exhale for 4, and hold for 4. You can increase the time as long as you're comfortable.

While meditation or breathing are great mindfulness practices, they are not the only ones. You can practice mindfulness while exercising, journaling, doing yoga, driving, doing the dishes, having a conversation, or doing anything anywhere. Remember, mindfulness is just being present, paying attention, and being aware of what is going on around you.

So to what end do we practice mindfulness? The benefits of being mindful are numerous and have been scientifically proven. A few of the greatest benefits, especially for lawyers, are that being mindful reduces anxiety, stress and feelings of overwhelm. When you're focused on the present moment, you can't be stressed, anxious or overwhelmed about the past or the future.

Another great benefit for lawyers is that mindfulness improves cognition by increasing your ability to focus and sustain attention for longer periods of time. So when you're working those 12-14 hour days, preparing for trial, reviewing documents, meeting with a client, or just need to block out the noise and distraction...having a mindfulness practice will help you stay on task.

Practicing mindfulness also has proven health benefits. A few of the benefits are increased immune function, lowered blood pressure, lowered heart rate, and decreased symptoms of depression.

At this point you need to ask yourself, does the end justify the means? Does spending as little as ten minutes a day practicing mindfulness justify having less stress, less anxiety, an increased immune system, lower blood pressure, a lower heart rate, and increased focus and attention? For more and more attorneys the unequivocal answer is YES.