

The evidence is in. 'Mindfulness' is a powerful stress reliever

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Paul Paton: University of Alberta

Jumped on the “mindfulness” bandwagon yet? A January 2014 Time magazine cover story on “The Mindful Revolution” correctly noted that “mindfulness” is now mainstream, no longer the exclusive province of Zen Buddhist retreats. Fortune 500 companies are exploring how being “in the zone” can lead to greater productivity and creativity. Even lawyers are starting to wonder whether all this “mindfulness” might actually be an answer to our stressed out, distracted, uncivil lives.

A *Globe and Mail* article in the fitness section earlier this summer trumpeted how “mindfulness meditation can enliven a workout routine and invigorate a sports performance.” Time, for its part, reported that the US National Institutes of Health has funded some 50 clinical trials in the past five years, and that by 2012, 477 papers were published in scientific journals on the subject of mindfulness. Studies show clear links between mindfulness practice and brain neuroplasticity.

So I was both skeptical and intrigued when the American Bar Association’s National Conference on Professional Responsibility last May dedicated an entire session to “lawyers and mindfulness.” After all, the paradox of high-powered, intensely focused legal eagles getting together to “focus on our breath” on a Friday afternoon seemed laughable (although the idea of pulling out my mat to have a nap had tremendous appeal). But there’s more to it.

The University of Miami School of Law actually has a Mindfulness in Law Program. Its director co-chairs a task force bringing together members of the judiciary, Bar associations, law firms and law school faculties to provide “information, training, and the opportunity for lawyers to gather to share mindful meditation sittings.” (in Florida, not California)

This isn’t a new idea — Steven Keeva’s seminal 1999 book, *Transforming Practices*, didn’t label it mindfulness, but focused attention on how stepping back, taking a breath and managing impulse control could lead to greater civility and consequently more effective (and less stressful) representation. Others cite a law and meditation retreat at Yale Law School in 1998 as the starting point. Whatever the origin, it’s receiving revitalized attention and focus.



In a remarkable chapter for the ABA’s 2013 book *The Essential Qualities of the Professional Lawyer*, Jan Jacobovitz makes the direct link between mindfulness and professionalism, noting how the emphasis of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) on “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” can be applied directly to the impulse control

necessary for lawyers to ensure that first reactions aren't uncivil ones. "The idea of mindfulness is to enable you to notice, in the moment, that you are experiencing these thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations so that you may place a pause between the event that is occurring and your response to the event."

While it's tempting to dismiss it all as poppycock, Jacobovitz notes that "it may be compelling, for the skeptical mind, to know that early findings from a variety of credible labs and neuroscientists ... lend themselves to the conclusion that a mindfulness practice may not only assist a person in achieving more effective decision-making – and for the purposes of our discussion, thereby enhance professionalism – but also that mindfulness may literally cause positive changes in a person's brain."

So there you have it. While there are any number of ways to spend your money on retreats and workshops (there's even an app, if you can believe it), the evidence seems to be in that taking those 15 minutes daily – to breathe, pray, chant your mantra or engage whatever practice, religious or not, appeals to you – you might be better off for it. And is a little quiet such a bad thing?

Paul Paton is the Wilbur Free Bowker Professor and Dean of Law at the University of Alberta. He can be reached at paul.paton@ualberta.ca.

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