

What's Mindfulness Got to Do with It?

BY LAURA MAHR

After six weeks of Mindfulness Meditation for Building Resilience to Stress, lawyers from the 28th Judicial District Bar have the answer...

There are few things we lawyers love more than our brains. Which is why, when our brains tell us we are tired, most of us lawyers tell our brains to keep going. The last thing we give ourselves permission to do is to slow down and meditate. The latest neuroscience research, however, tells us that the very best thing to do to refuel our brains is to slow down, be mindful of what we are experiencing, and take a few minutes to reset the brain through meditation. For six weeks, lawyers from the 28th Judicial District Bar got the chance to do just that.

In order to support local attorneys in reducing their levels of stress, the 28th Judicial District Bar decided to try something never before done in the state: offer a Mindfulness Meditation for Building Resilience to Stress course in partnership with my business, Conscious Legal Minds. When registration opened for the six weeks of CLE classes, we didn't know how many—or if any—lawyers would sign up. However, within a few weeks not only were all of the spaces filled, there was a waiting list. The class was diverse, filled with newer and more experienced attorneys, men and women, those who had never meditated and those who had meditated for years.

While some might envision a mindfulness meditation CLE to be a group of lawyers sitting in a yoga pose chanting “ohhhmmm,” this course took a different approach. The classes were offered every Friday at noon in a boardroom provided by Robert & Stevens, PA. We sat in comfortable chairs around the boardroom table. Each class covered neuroscience, mindfulness theory, and practical tools that lawyers can use at work or home to train their brains to stay relaxed and be less reactive to stress. My favorite part of the course was each week's rich discussion

about how participants were integrating the tools into their legal practice.

Margie Huggins, a consumer lawyer and avid *pro bono* attorney, was a frequent contributor to these in-class discussions. Margie signed up for the course because she was curious about how mindfulness relates to the practice of law. Margie said what she loved most about the CLE was that she “learned the science behind how our minds work, and learned very useful skills for how to keep our lawyer brains from running wild.” Margie did not have a meditation practice before the course started, but found that after just six weeks of classes the new tools “honestly greatly improved the quality of my life in all areas—professional and otherwise.”

Margie wasn't the only one whose life changed for the better as a result of the course. Based on the results from a comparative pre- and post-test, approximately 85% of the lawyers who attended the classes reported a reduction in their stress level at work or outside of work when the course was complete. At the end of the course, 100% of the attorneys reported that they were practicing mindfulness tools during their work day at least 5-10 times a week, and many as often as 20-40 times a week. These are very impressive results for six hours of class, especially given how challenging it is to move the dial on practicing lawyers' stress levels. Margie explained how she personalized the tools she learned and used them to improve her work day. “The course offered so many different meditation and mindfulness techniques,” she said. “I discovered several techniques that worked for me. It's not about sitting in a yoga pose for an hour. I now meditate 20 or 30 times a day for just a minute to two. It's so easy to weave these



techniques into the work day.”

An unexpected benefit of the course was the sense of community that was fostered. One attorney shared what he enjoyed most about the course was “connecting in a new and better way with colleagues.” Another participant, immigration attorney Dr. George D. Pappas, expressed, “Finally, a space where my mind could embrace positive thoughts, positive people, and positive results. I can't express in words just how much my life has already changed using the methods Laura introduced in the mindfulness CLE. Even better, I was not alone in this experience—I was in a group that truly was in sync with positive energy. I look forward to using the tools I learned to maintain a healthy mind and body.”

I was inspired to create the Mindfulness Meditation to Build Resilience to Stress curriculum for lawyers after using mindfulness and neuroscience tools to bring myself back from the edge of professional burnout. In 2015, after almost ten years of practicing law as a sexual violence attorney, I sensed that I needed a break. At the time, I was baffled why—despite all of the meditation, yoga, eating well, and exercising I did—I felt chronically tired. After addressing my internal resistance to taking a sabbatical from practicing law—including grappling with fears that I would lose my professional

identity and value in the world—I decided to take a year off. I used the year to research and practice the most cutting edge tools for building resilience, including experimenting with the practical applications of modern neuroscience research. Neuroscience focuses on the brain and nervous system and how they impact our behavior and cognitive functioning. Discovering the practical applications of neuroscience was like finding the missing piece of a puzzle. Delving into neuroscience opened my eyes to understanding that how our brains are wired impacts the way we experience the world, AND that we have control over the way our brains are wired.

The work of neuropsychologist Dr. Rick Hanson captured my attention immediately. In his book, *Hardwiring Your Brain for Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm and Confidence*, Hanson explains that our brains have two different operating modes: reactive and responsive. When our brains are in reactive mode, they are less effective—we think less clearly and our cognitive functioning is diminished. When our brains are in responsive mode, we feel “in the flow,” resulting in greater productivity and increased satisfaction in our lives. While evolution has thus far wired our brains to experience the world in reactive mode, we have the ability to rewire our brains and experience life “in flow.”

When I began experimenting with neuroscience tools, I found that mindfulness and mindfulness meditation supported the rewiring of my brain. Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to whatever is happening in the present moment. For lawyers, there is often an overwhelming amount occurring in any given moment. While we are dealing with copious external pressures, multitasking on every front, we rarely pay attention to what is going on internally, such as how we are breathing, or how we are feeling emotionally or physically. Mindfulness helps us to practice having dual awareness: doing what we are doing while at the same time tracking what is going on inside our bodies and minds. Once we are aware of what is going on inside, neuroscience tools—such as focusing on and enhancing the feeling of being safe or satisfied—can be used to bring into balance anything that feels out of balance in our internal world. Moment by moment, we can switch the brain out of reactive mode and into responsive mode,

allowing us to do things like think better on our feet or process information quickly, and a host of other cognitive functioning we lawyers rely on.

For example, by paying attention to your body, mind, or emotions, you may notice you are feeling anxious, frustrated, or stuck, or that you are holding your breath, having heart palpitations, or have sweaty palms. These are all cues that you are likely in reactive mode. Once you notice these cues, you can use mindful breathing or focus on feeling safe to calm your brain and coax yourself back into responsive mode. Once our bodies and brains experience and take in what it feels like to be in responsive mode (a practice Dr. Hanson calls Taking in the Good), we are more apt to stay in this “flow state,” even when encountering stressful situations. In this way, we literally rewire our brains to live life from a responsive vs. reactive state, resulting in feeling more calm and having a greater ability to enjoy life.

One of the most satisfying things to hear from lawyers in class was how the course supported them in their daily lives. Barbara Davis, a mediator and collaborative law lawyer, said that she used the meditation techniques she learned in class to slow her heart rate. “This week,” she shared, “my heart was racing. I measured my heart rate at 114 beats per minute (BPM). After ten minutes of meditation, my rate was 90 BPM!” Margie shared, “I use my new tools to go to sleep or get back to sleep if I wake up in the middle of the night.” Another attorney shared how mindful listening helped him to better handle a distressed client. Yet another lawyer shared how she used the tools to help calm herself in a tense courtroom.

Having the tools to better enjoy our profession and our lives while improving our effectiveness as lawyers is what the mindfulness course is all about. I often wonder if I had learned neuroscience-specific skills in law school or earlier in my legal career if I would have needed to take a break from practicing law. And yet, to “take in the good” of my experience, I feel more energized and have greater meaning in my life as I’ve recently returned to working at the Victim Rights Law Center as a contract attorney and, through Conscious Legal Minds, am helping other attorneys build resilience to stress. It brings me great joy to hear Margie say, “For all of the CLEs we are required to take year after year, this one ranks at the very top; I

hope it will be available, somehow, to every lawyer.” I wholeheartedly support Margie’s vision and am grateful to the pioneering lawyers who made the first mindfulness meditation CLE series in the state a success. I look forward to sharing this curriculum with many, many others.

Interested in Having This Program in Your District?

The Lawyer Assistance Program will be working with local district bars across the state to bring this program to as many lawyers as possible. If you are interested in offering this program to lawyers in your district, please contact Robynn Moraites, director of the Lawyer Assistance Program. ■

Laura Mahr is a contract attorney at the Victim Rights Law Center, and a resilience coach and workplace consultant at her business, Conscious Legal Minds. She works with individual clients and workplaces around the country to build resilience to stress, address secondary trauma, foster work-life balance, and prevent professional burnout. Contact Laura at laura@consciouslegalminds.com; find out more about her practice at consciouslegalminds.com.

The North Carolina Lawyer Assistance Program is a confidential program of assistance for all North Carolina lawyers, judges, and law students, which helps address problems of stress, depression, alcoholism, addiction, or other problems that may impair a lawyer’s ability to practice. If you would like more information, go to nclap.org or call: Cathy Killian (for Charlotte and areas west) at 704-910-2310, Towanda Garner (in the Piedmont area) at 919-719-9290, or Nicole Ellington (for Raleigh and down east) at 919-719-9267.

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