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Mindfulness and Lawyer Well-Being



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TO YOUNG LAWYERS ON PRACTICING MINDFULNESS

By Rudhir Krishtel

Despite achieving all the milestones I wanted for my legal career—clerking, making partner, landing a dream in-house job—these successes came with difficulties that compounded over time. Although I did not know it in the moment, the many years of working long hours with conflict-rich challenges and under fast-paced deadlines led to a significant amount of stress, harm to my health, and impact on my family. I’ve also seen it with my peers; in their 40s or 50s, many have suffered from severe health issues, including heart disease, stroke, early-onset diabetes, and addiction. Ultimately, I have seen it all affect workplace relationships and the legal work itself.

These experiences led me to stop practicing law and instead start working to make positive change for legal professionals. Now I work with attorneys, employers, and bar associations to offer new ways to approach their legal practice. And because my meditation practice played the most significant role in helping me counter the challenges of my practice, I share the following three pieces of advice that I wish I had known as a young lawyer.

Don’t normalize fight or flight. We enter into the fight-or-flight response all too often these days—in response to a startling e-mail from a partner, an angry client message, even the possibility of missing a deadline. In a “real” life-threatening event, a fight-or-flight

response can save you. With no “real” threat to life, however, fight or flight should not be the default mode at work. The repeated stress and distress negatively impact your heart and body.

Through regular meditation, I trained to let up on the pedal. Meditation helped me de-couple the challenging circumstances from the reactive feelings that come up. I realized I don’t always have to respond through fight or flight. With ongoing practice, these stress hormones don’t seem to affect my system as they once did. And even if I get stressed, the reactivity doesn’t last as long. Before, a difficult conversation with a boss or a disappointing outcome in a case could bother me for hours, days, or weeks. After investing in meditation, although the initial peak may be similar, the long tail of reactivity is gone. Angry thoughts evaporate, and my attention moves to something more positive. All in all, meditation has reprogrammed my nervous system, allowing me to work outside of fight or flight and “wisely respond”—rather than “react”—to challenges.

Protect your mind-set. Your mind-set changes over time as you practice law, and not always for the better. Lawyering can normalize stress and problematic critical thinking and perfectionism. After years of baking issue-spotting into the mind, we become adept at identifying problems to protect clients, but our lawyer mind-set leads to constantly seeing problems

in colleagues and friends, and ultimately heavy judgment on ourselves.

I believe you can protect your mind-set with a mindfulness practice. Through regular meditation, you can become more aware with your judgmental thinking and when to switch it off. When you practice meditation, you learn to stay present with the difficulties you face in your legal practice rather than just avoiding or learning to fight through them. So, instead of weathering fatigue from facing these challenges, a regular meditation practice will increase your resilience to these situations.

Track your health like it’s your job. Finally, treat your personal health as part of your job. I recommend tracking mental and physical health in the way we measure work performance. We regularly track hours, submit reports on progress, and check in with core practice competencies. Do the same with your health, including your meditation practice.

For example, with my coaching clients, we track personal mental and physical health as part of business development strategy. I ask my clients, “How much better are you at business development when your health and mind are right?” Take a daily measure of your physical and mental health (simple scoring 1–10). Anything below a 7 should have you paying attention. Also, track daily meditation, and keep a monthly minutes goal. In the same way you measure your professional goals, keep long-, medium-, and short-term health goals, and track outcomes. Both your practice and well-being will benefit.

In closing. As lawyers, we will drop everything to service our clients. Do we do the same for ourselves? My advice: Put the oxygen mask on yourself before others. It could save your life—and it will definitely make you a happier and more successful lawyer. ■



Rudhir Krishtel (rudhir@krishtel.com, www.krishtel.com) is an executive coach for lawyers. He practiced law for 15 years as a litigation partner at Fish & Richardson and then as senior counsel at Apple. Through his career he identified that many lawyers struggle with stress and lack of purpose in their practice. This led him to train as a yoga and mindfulness meditation teacher and as a professional coach to serve as a much-needed support for the legal community. Rudhir now coaches clients to identify the issues that hold them back from advancing in their career with clarity and fulfillment.