



Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program

How to Manage Your Attention

"Learning to ignore things is one of the great paths to inner peace" ~ Linus Van Pelt

In research and articles about the habits of successful people, good time management practices are always mentioned as a factor in success. Part of good time management, however, is attention management. What catches and holds your attention during the day? Take a moment and think about what you focus on at different times of the day: when you wake up, as you get ready for class or work, as you drive to school or as you drop the kids off at school, while you are in class or working at a clinic/externship, during lunch, etc. Do you think about the past or the potential future? Do you worry about mistakes or watch for other people making mistakes? Do you look for problems to be solved? Are you focusing on what is going on with people around you rather than what you are doing or feeling?

Life is full of distractions. As if the daily "to-do list" in your personal lives isn't enough, as law students, you focus on large amounts of content and information that deals with other people's problems, thereby inheriting the grievances of others. In addition, whether you watch the news or reality television shows that highlight other people's lives, you are still focusing on other people's problems during your "down" time. The body and brain have only so much energy that can be expended in a day. Attempting to focus on multiple things at once, or focusing more on other people's issues than your own, drains you physically, cognitively, and emotionally.

It's no surprise that the legal profession, including law students, have high rates of depression, anxiety, and substance use; all of these can be symptoms of being worn-out and not managing attention or focus very well. Even though you get to choose what you focus on in any given moment, all humans get into mental "ruts" because the brain likes to repeat the same

type of thought patterns from day-to-day in order to conserve energy. Ask yourself what types of thoughts you repeat daily. Do you focus on other people's lives rather than your own? Are you focusing on the past or potential future more than the present moment? Both of these are occupational hazards for both law students and attorneys. Your job as a student is to focus on content involving people and their problems, and the study of law is based on the past in order to mitigate problems in the future. How can you, as a law student, focus on the present and your own experience while still being effective and succeeding in law school (and as a lawyer in the years to come)?

There are several adages that apply to attention management: "pick your battles," "not my monkeys, not my circus," "successful people don't worry about what others are doing," "what you think of me is none of my business," "don't let people live rent free in your mind," "focus on what matters," "less is more," etc. What mantra could you use as a reminder to narrow your focus and manage your attention while spending your day either at school, at work, or at a clinic/externship? Maybe it's during a lunch break, or before you leave for the day. Certainly as you head home, try a mantra that helps you refocus your thoughts and attention away from litigants and their problems.

As Lao Tzu said, "If you correct your mind, the rest of your life will fall into place." In order to correct the mind, you have to focus and manage your attention mindfully and thoughtfully. When you are feeling mentally scattered, stressed, angry, frustrated, or depressed, take a moment to examine what you are focusing on. Is that something that you should be giving your attention to, or is it something you could ignore? Are there other things to place your focus on that would instead lead to more inner peace? Start tracking where your attention goes today; you'll be surprised at where your focus is going, and you'll see the alternatives immediately!

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