



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

How to Manage Your Attention

“Learning to ignore things is one of the great paths to inner peace.” ~ Robert J. Sawyer

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 work, as you drive to the office or court or as you drop the kids off at school, while you are work, 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 our personal lives isn’t enough, in the practice of law, we focus on other people’s problems, thereby inheriting the to-do lists and grievances of others. In addition, our entertainment is full of reality shows that highlight other people’s lives as well. 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 our own, drains us physically, cognitively, and emotionally.

It’s no surprise that attorneys have high rates of depression, anxiety, and substance use; all of these can be symptoms of being worn-out and not managing our attention or our focus very well. Even though we get to choose what we focus on in any given moment, we tend to get into mental “ruts.” Sometimes we focus on what’s going on around us in other people’s lives rather than our own, or we focus on the past or potential future more than the present moment. Sometimes we throw a mental “pity-party” for ourselves and focus on the stressors in our lives instead of focusing on all of the positive things happening in our lives.

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? As Lao Tzu said, “If you correct your mind, the rest of your life will fall into place.” In order to correct the mind, we have to focus and manage our 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!

By Sarah Myers, JD, LMFT, LAC
Clinical Director, Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program
February 2016
© Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program, 2017

Your Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program provides free and confidential services for judges, lawyers, and law students. If you need resources for ANY issue that is compromising your ability to be a productive member of the legal community, or if there is someone you are concerned about, contact COLAP at (303) 986-3345. For more information about COLAP, please visit www.coloradolap.org.