



## COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

### **Get Mindful in Under a Minute**

*Be. Here. Now.*

The term ‘mindfulness’ is all over the news and self-help articles these days. In essence, mindfulness is simply paying attention to what you are doing in the moment. It is a practice suggested for mental health issues because many of us experience racing thoughts that cause negative emotions, or because we are focusing on things that cause us to feel anxious or depressed. The antidote? Direct your thoughts. Controlling stress is mostly a mind game, and who better to play cognitive games than future attorneys? We direct our thoughts to analyze fact patterns, focus on details, communicate a legal argument, and prepare for “worst case scenarios.” These are ways of thinking that we learn in law school and will use on a daily basis in the practice of law. Unfortunately, research shows that these thought patterns do not usually guide us down a positive mental path when we apply them outside of our professional setting. For example, paying too much attention to detail, finding fault, assigning blame, and “looking for problems” contribute to pessimistic and negative thinking that contribute to anxiety and depression. We have a choice when it comes to using these cognitive skills: we can use them to reduce our unhappiness, anxiety, loneliness, and depression, or we can use it to increase our own suffering. Using mindfulness tools can quickly accomplish the former.

Want to practice mindfulness? While you are washing the dishes, say to yourself, “I am washing the dishes, and the water is warm.” When you are driving, say to yourself, “I am driving, and I see the beautiful flowers in bloom this time of year.” It’s basically like playing “I spy” with yourself. Being in the present moment can be as easy as narrating what you are doing while you are doing it, and naming your opinion or the sensations of what you see/hear/etc. This will reduce anxiety and depression as well if practiced when negative thoughts get in the way. Why not try it? Well, what might get in your way is being suspicious of something that is so easy and effective.

Pulling ourselves out of the negative mental tirade and focusing on the “here and now” can be difficult if we are attached to our thoughts (we actually like being on the mental gerbil wheel). Being mindful can also be difficult if we are so used to being angry, grumpy, upset, paranoid, overwhelmed, or stressed that momentary relief from it feels like we are betraying a part of ourselves. Law students have often commented to us that when they start to feel positive or experience a good mood, they get suspicious because they are metaphorically waiting for the other shoe to drop - or they believe that future attorneys

should always be “serious.” Even though most of us might say that we want to be happier in life, when it comes to changing, many of us find it difficult to actually allow ourselves to be happy or joyous for sustained periods of time. In fact, many people would rather complain about what is going on that is wrong than focus on what’s going right. After all, many of us have become internally addicted to chemicals produced with negative thoughts and negative feelings we’ve been feeling if we’ve been stressed or overwhelmed for prolonged periods of time. Since law school can be an environment that is stressful for many, now it the best time to learn how to balance the cognitive requirements of the legal profession with those of being human.

Want to try to change? Take a minute and narrate what you are doing, and do this periodically throughout the day. It will bring you into the present moment and help you notice things you wouldn’t have noticed otherwise. Ever drive down a street on your way to work and think “I never noticed that [house, store, restaurant] before”? That happens because, for a moment, you weren’t so focused on your mental dialogue that you couldn’t notice your surroundings. When we pull ourselves out of our distracting thoughts and into the present moment, we can:

- Quickly improve our mood
- Look at issues with more clarity and objectivity
- Increase resiliency to stress
- Help us remember we have a body (Are you hungry? Thirsty? Need to stretch or move around?)
- Pay more attention to the people around us
- Come up with new solutions to problems we weren’t able think of before
- Remember things for our to-do list that we had forgotten about
- Calm our nervous systems down, which improves our health.

Start now, and periodically narrate what you are doing for the rest of the day and this evening. See what happens when you practice mindfulness. You’ll be pleasantly surprised!

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