

Busy Lawyers: Honor Yourself, Take Time for “Now”

by Susan A. Pauley

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For a year and a half I have been going to a yoga class once a week. It has helped me become more flexible in body and mind, improved my breathing, increased my ability to relax and introduced me to new people. It has helped me negotiate the stress of these exciting changes we've been making. I protect that time and I am often surprised at how challenging that can be. There are many excellent reasons to do something else: unfinished work, personal invitations, unfinished work, projects at home, unfinished work But when I have to miss a class I notice a difference in myself the next week. I experience more tension, have less patience and am more easily distracted.

This experience gives me added appreciation for the importance of honoring ourselves by routinely spending time in activities that decrease the effects of stress and increase our ability to quiet our minds. From conversations with lawyers in the past years, I know that too many of you do not routinely schedule time for this. There is always something else that needs attention at work or at home. Many of you have “driven” personalities and find yourselves feeling uncomfortable or guilty if you are not engaged in the sensation of “busy.” The work ethic in this profession does not reward people who go home at reasonable hours, take real vacations or take breaks during the day to get out of the office for a walk or lunch. Squeezing out time for a visit to the gym feels like a luxury and taking time to participate in something like yoga feels like entering the twilight zone.

Our bodies and minds are not on different planets. For many years, the medical

model in our culture reinforced concepts that led us to think of our intellect and our physical being as totally distinct and independent. Other health care philosophies were looked upon as suspect. But this is changing and western science is validating what many have “known” for a long time. The intellect and the physical are intertwined and we need to nurture our whole being if we want to fully participate in all that this incredible world has to offer. Health or disease in one area of our being contributes to harmony or imbalance in the other.

Science is also making exciting gains in knowledge about addictions and mental health disorders. We know much more about the workings of the brain and what happens when addiction or mental health disorders are present. We are learning that one of the major contributors to depression, anxiety disorders, addiction and relapse is chronic stress. The changes in our brain and body chemistry when we live in a sustained state of stress create biochemical vulnerabilities and cravings. And some observers are hypothesizing that there is a direct correlation between the constant state of stress that lawyers and judges operate within and the higher than average rates of depression and chemical dependency reported in this profession.

Anyone who is in recovery from addiction, depression or other problems is taught the importance of exercise, relaxation, quieting the mind and living in the “now.” Most spiritual practices encourage some form of these activities. The wisdom in the Twelve Steps leads to similar practices. This is not a coincidence.

I invite you to honor yourself. You are more than your finely honed intellect and a source of billable hours . . . Slow down. Breathe. Participate in yoga, tai chi, meditation or any practice that helps you quiet the mind, reconnect with your breath and stay in the “now.” Move those muscles and joints. Walk, run, play tennis, work out, swim, bike, dance, play a round of golf, dig in the garden. Take true breaks from your chosen profession. Give your undivided attention to leisure travel, a hobby, enjoying a cultural experience or simply spending time with people you care about. And do these things often. You are a unique gift to this world and you deserve the benefits from living life in balance.

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