



Mindfulness, the breath, and well-being

“Take just a few minutes to pay attention to your breath—how you’re breathing can ease the mind.”

Jeena Cho, co-author of
The Anxious Lawyer

“I can’t breathe.”

George Floyd

By Joan Bibelhausen

Special to Minnesota Lawyer

As lawyers, we are bombarded with high expectations, emotional cases, and sometimes a struggle to maintain our jobs or practice, especially in these times. If you are preparing a deposition and remember the aggressive behavior of opposing counsel from a previous encounter, how might you respond? You may become anxious, quickly judge that person and the situation, and form impressions of the worst that can happen. By using your breath, by taking a breath, you can arouse your curiosity and look for options. Why did I react that way last time? What lesson is here for me? Use your conscious mind to counter your unconscious or implicit impressions. You can become the driver, not the passenger along for the ride.

Joan Bibelhausen is the executive director of Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers.

Professor John A. Powell writes that “[t]he unconscious, more than the conscious mind, controls our daily decisions and actions, including how we relate to other people, especially those who look different from us.” This applies to a colleague who questions whether someone who looks different is up to the job as well as the colleague who wonders if someone who looks different will support them in doing their best work. Our unconscious reaction, based on years of living our lives, is connected with our drive to survive. When registering a threat, we retreat to fight, flight, or freeze. Our analytical brain is pushed to the background. Mindfulness can bring it back.

Mindfulness is not new to us. As a child, perhaps you were advised to engage in the mindfulness activity of counting to 10 when angry or distressed. Mindfulness is an in-the-moment awareness of what is around us and how we are responding to it. It can help us with that deposition, it can help us to improve our overall well-being as we face traumatic cases and the pressure of law practice, and it can help us as we think about the role of lawyers in our society. By being aware of our

inner selves, we can feel that we are leading our lives rather than being hijacked by external factors beyond our control. We cannot control opposing counsel’s behavior, but we can govern our reaction to it.

Professor Rhonda McGee writes about mindfulness and reducing bias. She says that in addition to raising awareness in the moment “mindfulness and compassion practices assist in regulating emotional responses and specifically reducing anxiety, increasing empathy and perspective-taking, and increasing overall gratitude and well-being.”

This is important for our profession and for our own well-being. In LCL’s statement following the death of George Floyd, we cited Robert Benham, former chief justice of the Georgia Supreme Court. He noted that the first professions in society were the clergy, who healed the spirit, the doctors, who healed the body, and the lawyers, who healed the community. Lawyers and judges will be involved in every single aspect of the aftermath of George Floyd’s death as we ensure all voices are heard. The community needs us as healers now, but we must also care for ourselves. To help our clients, colleagues and communities, we must be actively mindful of our emotions. We must put our oxygen masks on first, be attentive to our well-being and proactively engage in practices to enhance it.

Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers offers free counseling, support groups, someone to talk to 24/7 and much more. 651-646-5590 or www.mncl.org.