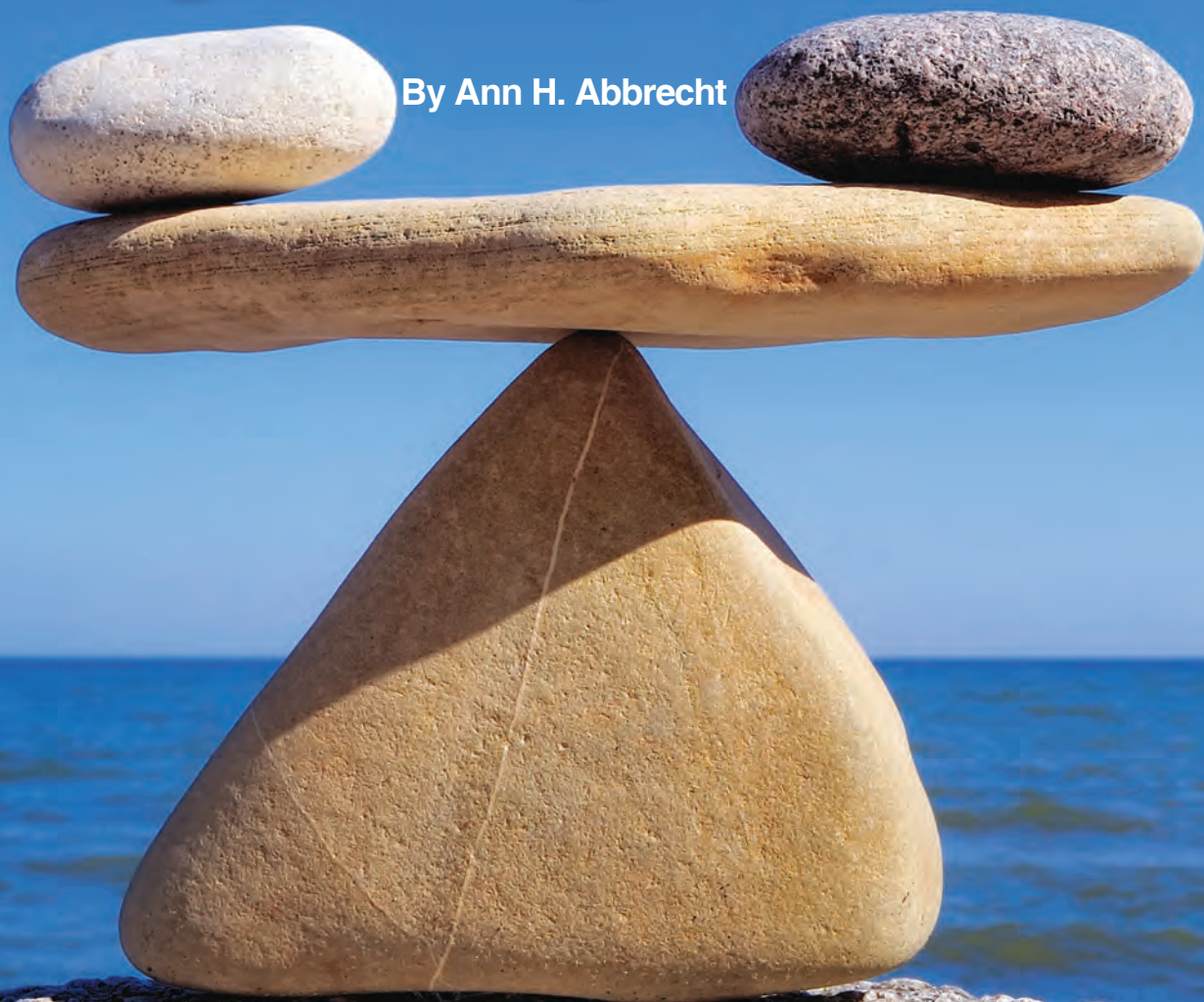


Establish Mindfulness and Reduce Your Stress:

*Be Pro Active
and
Create Balance*

By Ann H. Abbrecht



Do you know how to reacquaint yourself with the positives in your life? Do you take responsibility? Do you accept who you are? Do you create a balance of all things in your life by giving back and taking time to live and laugh? If you do not, you can! Being a person who can live a healthy, well-balanced life should be top priority.

A well-balanced life — where you are of service to your profession, family, friends and community — can be attained by becoming aware (or *mindful*) of yourself, your emotions, your goals and your stress. To do so, you are essentially establishing **mindfulness**, a mind-body medicine practice and an internal resource we already have. Mindfulness is being aware of your thoughts and emotions and using this awareness to transform your relationships with stress, emotions, pain and illness. Mindfulness interventions have been shown to promote greater conscious control over emotion. There are several *mindful* things you can do to proactively change your stress.

Meditate. Practice mindfulness meditation. In mindfulness meditation, one sits quietly, paying attention to breath, while watching thoughts float by in a stream of consciousness. Normally, we would immediately react to our thoughts, but, through mindfulness meditation, we learn — slowly — to let the thoughts and feelings float by without reacting to them.

Take responsibility. Where does the respect for yourself, life, behavior and stress lie? If you don't take responsibility, you effectively delegate it to someone or something else (consciously or not). By doing this, you effectively delegate control over your life — and your stress level — to someone or something else.

List your principles, values and goals. Make a list of what you want out of life and behave consistently. This process alone helps relieve distress in your life. The more your behavior matches your values and principles, the less distress you will experience. Make sure your principles, values and goals apply to you and your behavior. If a strong family life is most important to you, yet you repeatedly take on tasks that make it impossible for you to be with your family, you will feel distress. If your values are centered on everyone else in your life acting fairly and appropriately, you set yourself up to be distressed because people don't always act

the way we want. Finally, make sure your principles, values and goals are flexible and account for your being human. If it is important to you to be perfect and never make mistakes, you will live your life in a constant state of distress.

Acknowledge who you are. Take an inventory of yourself. Identify your own personal internal stressors. Are you a “people-pleaser?” Do you have a hard time saying “no”? Are you a perfectionist? Does every mistake negatively affect your self-worth? Identification is half the battle of resolution. If you need help dealing with these issues, get it. Identify your own personal cues for when you are distressed. Do you tense up? Do you get headaches? Are you irritable, angry or defensive? Are you confused or having a more difficult time than usual making decisions?

Talk to someone. Sharing your life, thoughts, emotions, hopes, fears, highs and lows with someone else is important. Learn how to interact with others, particularly your family and close friends, as a genuinely present human being. Connect with them by conversing *with* them. Try not to practice interrogating cross-examination techniques. Practice listening to someone else and really try to understand what they are saying. Find a few people whom you trust enough to share the intimate details of your failures as well as your victories. You can't handle this by yourself. It's not your fault. It is a problem bigger than any individual person.

Get help. Seek professional assistance. Initially, psychotherapy may seem difficult. Just relax and, with energy and insight, you can work on your problems. Prescribed medications may help and that's okay. You may have a chemical imbalance that needs to be addressed. Medications do not solve problems; they simply level the playing field. With or without medication, you will need to confront your negative thinking with a therapist. You really can't do this effectively with friends or family alone. A lot of research suggests that cognitive behavioral therapy is a particularly effective form of treatment for depression. Interview a couple of therapists before you settle on one, and re-evaluate your therapy after three or four sessions to see whether it is a good match. There should be empathy, trust and a feeling of emotional safety. If those are not apparent, discuss it with the therapist and consider changing clinicians.

Be kind to yourself. It sounds so simple, and yet lawyers are not trained to do this. They have rarely, if ever, thought about it and don't know how to start. It begins with a conscious intention — “Today I am treating myself kindly.” Such a simple refrain can help. Depression is often built on poor mental/emotional and physical habits. We must learn to acknowledge that we are worthy of love from ourselves and others and that part of such love involves taking care of ourselves.

Practice acceptance and gratitude. Things won't always go your way. Focus more of your attention where you have influence. At the beginning of the week, create a list of five things for which you are grateful. Do this on the same day, at the same time, each week. At the end of the day, recognize three things that went well. By doing this, you focus on the positive rather than the negative things. This process will serve as a guide toward your kindness and concern for others, thus bringing you closer to those around you and increasing your level of well-being.

If you have a spiritual practice, do it. If you don't, think about starting one. Spirituality doesn't necessarily mean religion. This could include anything from a formal meditation practice, going to traditional religious rites, or walking in the park. Research suggests that those who have a spiritual practice handle depression better. If you believe in God or a higher power, you can avail yourself of help and support from someone who is bigger than your depression. If you do not believe in God, maybe you believe in some other form of spirituality you can tap into. Spiritual growth and development are important to a healthy lifestyle. Look inward and find what works for you, then pay attention to what you find. Whatever you choose, do it regularly and let it give you some perspective on your life by allowing it to help reduce anxiety, worry and guilt.

Restructure your legal practice. Nobody likes changes. Yet we all have choices around what we are willing to change. Maybe you will have to leave your job. Stressful? Yes. The end of the world? No. Maybe you will have to change careers. There are a number of lawyers who haven't been particularly happy with lawyering since day one. But they continue to do it because they don't know what else to do — it pays well, it appears

prestigious, they are in debt, etc. These are very real concerns. However, good health has to re-establish itself as a top priority in your life. Change the nature and variety of your practice. Perhaps that means doing less litigation, or handing some clients off to someone else. The idea here is to reduce stress, long known to be a powerful trigger for depression, anxiety, substance abuse and physical problems.

Take control of your physical self. The practice of law is a strenuous endeavor. It is physically demanding and it requires endurance, strength, stamina, perseverance and physical health. You need to train for the staggering physical toll that the practice of law places upon you. In short, you will become your own personal trainer when you . . .

► **Eat well.** Treat your body like a friend. Eat breakfast and lunch. Avoid excessive fatty and sugared food. Eat vegetables and fruits. Think about the amount of caffeine and alcohol you consume. Find and keep to a diet or way of eating that fuels the processes of your body and does not result in hurt or harm.

► **Get enough sleep on a daily basis.** Make it a priority because increased stress levels can affect sleep patterns. Trouble sleeping at night because your mind will not stop mulling over the day's events? If so, you probably suffer from a pattern of being sleepy in the day and not at night. Why is sleep so important? As your body sleeps, your brain is actively playing the part of mental janitor. It is clearing out the junk that has accumulated as a result of your daily thinking. When sleep is disturbed, the cleaning system breaks down. At the extreme end, the result could be the acceleration of neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. While we do not know whether sleep loss causes the disease, or if the disease itself leads to sleep loss, we know that the two are closely connected. Along with the sleep disturbances that characterize neurodegenerative diseases, there is a buildup of proteins (like beta-amyloids and tau) that the glymphatic system normally clears out during regular sleep; both are associated with Alzheimer's and dementia. Sleep loss may allow the things that cause neural degeneration to pile up unchecked. Regardless, we know the result of sleep deprivation is an inability to integrate facts, a key component of the practice of law.

► **Exercise.** If you don't already have an exercise routine, *get one in your daily*

schedule. Minute for minute, the benefits of exercise far outweigh any time spent away from your practice. It helps clear your mind for the times when you are in the thick of that discussion, negotiation, trial or dispute. The value of exercise is widely known. It is simply good for everybody. For a person with depression, it becomes not just about a healthy habit, but about a critical choice. It can be as simple as walking 30 minutes four to five times per week or as much as training for a triathlon. Find something you like to do, and do it to reduce and alleviate the daily accumulation of stress. Run. Walk. Play tennis, handball, racquetball or soccer. Take a yoga or Tai Chi class and get twice the bang for your buck (exercise and meditation). **JUST MOVE!**

► **Quit smoking.** Enough said!

Create balance. It is crucial to create and maintain a sense of balance and perspective in a stressful life like yours. Because the practice of law is such a physical and mental endeavor, it is essential that you pay attention to the other more intangible, but not less important, aspects of your life. This is not only necessary to be a good lawyer, but also to be a whole person, a kind person, a successful person, a healthy person, a well-liked and respected person and a stress-resilient person. Here are a few things to remember . . .

► **Spend some time alone.** All of us need some time alone. Take time to refill your emotional reserves and to give your mind a chance to quiet down and rest. The better you can learn (through meditation, relaxation, restful activity or recreation) to quiet your mind about deadlines, delays, court dates, briefs, finances, what you said (or didn't say), what you did, should have done, have yet to do or should do, the more effective your solitude will be. Take some time to shut your office door, turn off the pager and the cell phone. Go fishing. Go for a walk. Watch the clouds, the rain, the birds, other people or the stars. Breathe deeply. Meditate. Let go. Enjoy the time by yourself.

► **Develop outside interests.** Try to develop, or maintain, interests completely unrelated to the practice of law. This allows you an opportunity to take a well-deserved break and helps to make you a far more emotionally well-developed and interesting person. It helps you find a place within your community and provides you with a sense of commitment and responsibility. You will meet new friends and contacts that

will help give perspective on your own life and choices.

► **Build pleasure into your schedule.**

Busy lawyers tend to have an "I will get to it later" mentality — especially when it comes to things that are healthy for them. Discard that approach and begin to take time — *now* — to enjoy pleasurable things. Create a space where you experience and relish such feelings.

► **Give back.** Try to do something kind for someone at least once a week. The more anonymous you can be about it, the better. Start small. If you have the time, volunteer. Develop compassion and take action. Helping others builds your self-esteem, helps you put your own life in perspective, and serves to develop and maintain a vital connection with the community as a whole.

► **Laugh.** Don't take yourself so seriously! It doesn't matter how big and important you are, how successful, or what case you just won. If you can't laugh at yourself, you're a heart attack waiting to happen. At least once a week, do something fun that involves no competition. Try something new and get out of your "comfort zone."

Schedule stress management items into your week. Try to make these suggestions a habit in your life. Structure time to do all of the above. Schedule solitude. Structure in silliness. Schedule exercise. Try some or all: exercise, meditation, relaxation techniques, recreation, music, church or other spiritual practice. Use them regularly.

Now, go and be kind to yourself. Reacquaint yourself with the positives in your life. Take responsibility. Accept who you are. Create a balance of all things in your life. Give back. Take time to live and laugh!

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