

# For The Defense™

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*DRI for Life*

## Three Mindfulness Tools to Help You Care for Your Brilliant Legal Mind

By Claire E. Parsons

Lawyers today are constantly inundated with tools intended to help us stay at the top of our game. There are always new devices and software to make our practices mobile and nimble, and there are high-caliber seminars to stay on top of cutting-edge legal issues. These tools may be necessary, but they can also be expensive. Yet the most important tool for any lawyer is something we can't trade in or upgrade: our minds. Everything you do as a lawyer, from the assessment of facts to the development of brilliant legal strategies, flows from and through your mind. But how many of us know how to take care of our minds? There is a way and it is free: mindfulness.

Mindfulness meditation is one of the fastest growing trends in the United States. In the last five years, the number of people who reported regularly meditating has increased 300 percent. Studies indicate that regular meditation improves focus, reduces stress, and has been associated with improved immune functioning and other physical benefits. As a result, many top performers and companies (such as Apple, Google, and P&G) have adopted meditation as part of their daily practice. "Meditation," however, isn't easy to define because there are numerous schools and methods derived from a variety of traditions. Three of the most common and effective styles of meditation derived from Buddhist thought are (1) breath practice; (2) body scan; and (3) loving kindness (metta).

Each of these styles offers unique benefits



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for lawyers, so this article will briefly introduce each practice to help you consider whether meditation is right for you.

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### Breath Practice

Breath practice is what many people think of when they think of meditation. The instructions are simple: you focus on the feeling of your breath going in and out, and nonjudgmentally return to the breath when you notice your mind drift. Though simple, this exercise can, at first, be maddening. Many people get discouraged early on because they worry that something is "wrong" with them if they can't "quiet" their mind. After a while, though, you will see that it is the nature of the mind to wander. In other words, meditation exists because humanity struggles with focusing and is naturally unsuited to being in the present moment. It's not just you. As you continue to practice meditation, your body and mind will

associate relaxation and focus with the breath more readily. Thus, over time, the simple act of sitting and breathing will help you build calm even on tough days.

Breath work is an excellent place to start a regular meditation practice. You can start with sessions as short as one to two minutes and grow to lengthier sessions over time. The breath is an ideal focal point, too, because it is always "with" you. Lawyers today lead busy, active, and mobile lives; but no matter where you are or what you are doing, you can pause for a bit of mindfulness during your day to calm yourself and refocus on the most important issues in any given moment. Once you have developed a comfort level with breath practice, you can use it to begin exploring other types of mindfulness practices that can help you in your practice and in your life.

### Body Scan

If breath practice seems difficult, another good option is the body scan. With this practice, you focus on the sensations in your body in a systematic way, rather than focusing on the breath. Generally, body scan meditations start at the crown of the head and proceed down the neck and torso to the extremities. There are, however, many potential methods and starting points for body scans. Regardless, the object of this style of meditation is to feel the sensations in the body and notice what you feel, rather than thinking about the body. Body scan meditations may feel less intimidating for new meditators because the practice is more

active than breath practice. Because your mind must work a bit more to stay focused on the sensations in the body, it may be a bit easier to keep the mind engaged with the focal point. In addition, because you are paying attention to the physical condition of the body, you may notice areas of tension and learn to relax them during the meditation. In this way, body scan meditations can be deeply relaxing in a short period of time.

For attorneys, body scan meditations are useful because they remind us to attend to and take care of our bodies. In law school, we learn to isolate fact from emotion, but still, we remain human beings. To do our best for our clients, we must understand and respect the limitations of our own bodies. Some of the most common bodily issues that can impede people, including lawyers, from doing our best work are represented in the acronym “HALT,” which stands for “hungry, angry, lonely, tired.” These symptoms, fundamental to the human condition, arise frequently as we practice law. It is common for us to skip lunch, ignore emotions, miss social opportunities, and lose sleep. Body scan meditations are excellent because they remind us that we are not merely brains filled with legal strategy but people who must be cared for, rested, and fed. Practicing body scan meditations can help you notice the symptoms of conditions and emotions in your body in the early, and subtler, stages before they affect your performance, outlook, or demeanor. These skills are necessary for any lawyer who wants to lead a happy life and be a top performer.

**Loving Kindness (Metta)**

Loving kindness (or “metta,” as it is traditionally referred to), is the style of meditation that lawyers may find the most difficult. But we likely can gain the most from this style. Quite literally, it is a practice intended to help us open our hearts. Loving-kindness practice is a blend of mantra-style practices and the practices already discussed. With this practice, you bring to mind different people or groups of people, and while

focusing attention on your own body (usually in the area of the heart), send kind wishes to each one. The most traditional method is to begin with oneself, call to mind a loved one, then a benefactor (a teacher, mentor, or friend), a neutral person, and a difficult person. Most practices conclude with sending these same wishes to your local household, local community, region, nation, and the entire world.

Americans often report struggling with this practice because they feel it is unnatural to send love to themselves. Over time, however, this practice can transform how we relate to ourselves and our communities. Loving-kindness practice is premised on the idea that all humans must deal with suffering as a part of life. This acknowledgement can be particularly beneficial for defense lawyers since we are often in the position to help people through harrowing civil litigation. Loving-kindness practice helps lawyers to keep the value of our work to others in the front of our minds because the object for all of us is to reduce suffering where we can. In addition, loving kindness can help lawyers remember that it is critical to care for ourselves first. If we focus our practice on helping others, it is easy to forget ourselves. In the end, this is self-defeating; practices that can help us remember to honor our own hearts, minds, and bodies can contribute to a happier, more ethical, and more sustainable law practice.

If you are curious about any of these practices, you can easily find books, podcasts, apps, videos, and websites that can help you get started for free or a nominal fee. In fact, some of these tools, such as Jeena Cho’s book, *The Anxious Lawyer*, are developed specifically with lawyers in mind. As someone who started with one-minute sessions several years ago, meditation can make a huge difference in your life and law practice if you establish a routine and give it time to grow. So if you want to start taking care of that brilliant legal mind of yours, give the mindfulness tools discussed in this article a try. 



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