NU Law: Mindfully Oriented Toward the Future

At a recent mindfulness workshop at Northwestern Law school, which was mostly attended by 1L’s and LLM’s who had just been introduced to mindfulness at a mandatory orientation session on wellbeing and success in law school, I posed the following questions:

- Are you “present” with the people in your life?
- Do you notice a tendency to get distracted or overwhelmed?
- Have you ever noticed that when you are doing familiar, repetitive tasks for school or work, like completing paperwork or reading, that your mind is often miles away thinking about something else?
- Do you find it difficult to listen?
- Do you slip into old habits rather than choosing the most appropriate course of action?
- Do you get interrupted a lot, making it hard to complete a task?
- Is it hard to find downtime?
- Have you noticed feeling like you always have to be “on”?
- Does the amount of information coming in routinely feel overwhelming?
- Are you locked in automatic pilot in how you work with and respond to stressors?

The overwhelming response from the students was, Yes! This pre-packaged 2 or 4-part one and a half hour “Introduction to Mindfulness for Legal Professionals” workshop is just one of a variety of ways Northwestern Law students are being introduced to mindfulness meditation and its potential benefits for legal practice as part of the **NU Mindful Lawyer Program**.

The Mindful Lawyer Program is part of a larger initiative at NU Law to develop “whole lawyers”, grads who are “client-ready”, self-aware professionals who know their story in the law, demonstrate advanced “soft skills”, and are ready for the myriad of situations their legal practice may put them in immediately upon graduation. This larger initiative, frequently referred to at NU Law as “The Wellness and Performance Enhancement Programs”, was introduced three years ago and has continued to grow in popularity. These programs are just a slice of the innovative programs being offered at the law school to prepare resilient lawyer leaders ready to adapt to the changing legal market. This initiative is also part of NU Law’s value in equipping students with the wellness tools needed to prevent the pitfalls of previous generations of lawyers who experienced low career satisfaction and a rise in mental health issues. The programs capitalize on what psychology subfields like affective neuroscience and positive psychology can offer for developing lawyer leaders, as well as a response to the call from firms who report wanting “client-ready”, mature, savvy lawyers who are ready to hit the ground running at graduation. We are training the next generation of lawyers to be as mentally tough and resilient as they are smart so they can manage the work load, key relationships in both their personal and professional life, and the regular barrage of stressors in the legal life in ways that allow them to flourish while also staying healthy. Something that we refer to as the Northwestern Difference.
Both law school and the practice of law involve demanding work, long hours, a need to balance competing attentional demands at the same time, difficult clients, colleagues and/or co-workers, and emotionally-charged, high stakes, pressure-filled situations that often feels like “win-at-all-costs”.

Though the work is prestigious and incredibly rewarding it can feel dire. Ask any law student or lawyer and they are quick to agree that at times the legal world can feel adversarial, competitive, and even hostile. The conflict and hostility surrounding legal work can take a toll on the resilience and wellbeing of lawyers and ultimately impact their performance. Now I probably have a slightly skewed perspective given that I work specifically with students and lawyers who may be going through a particularly challenging time in their legal career, but if you ask most 1L’s or recent alums doing typical legal work out of law school, it does not take long before the themes of feeling overworked, unhealthy, out-of-balance, and/or struggling to stay focused start to surface. Northwestern Law has rolled out the NU Mindful Lawyer Program as part of a series of innovative new programs outside the traditional legal curriculum to introduce and train law students in the practice of mindfulness meditation as a means to meet these 21st century challenges of legal practice.

One of the greatest challenges in today’s fast-paced, technology-driven world is staying present in life’s sacred moments. The overwhelming pace of communication, keeping up with inboxes and texts, the sea of information at our fingertips, and efficiency expectations at work has led to widespread attention and engagement issues and increased stress. It is very easy to get caught up in a sort of auto pilot, constantly thinking about the past and future, mindlessly going through life. One of the best ways to overcome these challenges and effectively manage the stress inherent in the pace of life today is to develop a mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness is quite simply being present with our experience, non-judgmentally. It’s about paying attention in a particular way to the story lines, bodily sensations, and emotions that are present throughout and greatly impact our life. That particular way is with a curiosity, openness, and acceptance of our experience without needing it to be something other than it is. There is a large and growing body of research in a variety of medical subfields on the potential benefits of mindfulness including; reduced anxiety and depression, enhanced concentration and attention, improved memory, improved immune function, reduced blood pressure and cortisol levels among a reduction of many other psychological and medical symptoms. In one study, for example, Dr. Sara Lazar, Ph.D. (2005), an instructor at Harvard Medical School, used neuroimaging techniques to discover thicker regions of the frontal cortex, regions responsible for reasoning and decision-making, in those who had a consistent mindfulness practice compared to those who did not. She also found a thicker insula, which is considered to be central in coordinating thoughts and emotions.

Many of these benefits are thought to be partly the result of neuroplasticity. If you haven’t heard the term neuroplasticity before, it basically means that throughout our lives we have the ability to rewire our brains. For a majority of the past century researchers assumed a static view of the brain. That is, we start with nearly 100 billion neurons that die and are not replaced. The structures and functions of the brain are locked or hard wired. We now know that we can rewire our brains (i.e., strengthen or weaken nerve connections) throughout our lives which results in the ability to develop new thinking, coping, and relating patterns. By using certain key brain regions during mindfulness, such as the Anterior Cingulate...
Cortex (ACC), which plays a key role in attention, more cortical space is devoted to those regions and our performance in that executive function improves.

Neuroscientists (Holzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago, & Ott, 2011) have also outlined four distinct but interacting mechanisms that produce the benefits of mindfulness: 1. Attention regulation, 2. Body awareness, 3. Emotion regulation, and 4. Change in self-perspective. Each of these components hold the potential to significantly boost legal practice. For example, during mindfulness, attention typically rests on a single object, such as the breath. The exercise of focusing the mind repeatedly on one thing at a time during mindfulness practice leads to an activation of the brain region responsible for attention (the ACC), and it is therefore strengthened. It makes sense that as we learn which brain regions are vital for certain functions essential in certain professions; we focus on the enhancement of those regions, such as the ACC for attention. And let’s face it; we need a robust ACC to stay engaged in the fast-paced world stocked with competing technological demands. ADHD has been on the rise for many years and remains widespread. Our ability to focus is power and mindfulness is a key tool to overcome the ADHD epidemic.

Mindfulness practice is also a key way to develop emotional intelligence (EI), which has been linked to leadership, academic and work performance, teamwork, and wellbeing, because as one practices meditation they become more self- and other-aware. Self-awareness is the heart of EI. When we are self-aware we are tuned in to what we are thinking and feeling and know what triggered these thoughts or feelings. We are more likely to be able to manage our emotions in any moment and choose to respond wisely instead of falling back on out dated habits. Imagine the unaware lawyer whose client evokes a hostile response in him and then his anger sweeps him into conflict with the client. Mindfulness helps us be more self-aware by helping us slow down the momentum of our thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, so we are less likely to be swept up in some emotion that may cloud our judgment or decision-making. The self-awareness that comes with a mindfulness practice also can bring about a positive outlook, enhanced empathy, and social awareness, all vital competencies for sustainable, balanced legal practice. This is not about feeling better alone, these competencies are what has been referred to as “distinguishing characteristics”, those skills or abilities that separate typical from outstanding lawyers. As we become more mindful of thinking, relating, and coping patterns we start to understand how they play out for us either positively or negatively in our work and can relearn more adaptive habits.

**Benefits for Lawyers**

You may be thinking at this point, what does this have to do with lawyers? Well, think about the implications of greater attention, concentration, or awareness in legal work, enhanced emotion regulation (being able to stay poised under pressure), and more effective relationship building. There are several versions of mindfulness but each provide – MORE here

NU Law is not the only law program or group ramping up their mindfulness program. I recently gave a talk on the benefits of mindfulness for lawyers through the Practicing lawyer institute (PLI) and over 300 practicing lawyers signed up over their noon-hour without continuing education credit. Over 40 law
schools including UC-Berkeley, Georgetown, NYU, and University of Miami, to name a few, all have strong mindfulness programs.

**NU Mindful Lawyer Program**

The **NU Mindful Lawyer Program** is a unique blend of classes, workshops, groups, special events, and spaces for students to learn about the practice of mindfulness and ways to use the skill develop an effective, sustainable practice of law that is grounded in balance, self-awareness, and emotion regulation. The NU Mindful Lawyer Program teaches the essential skills of mindfulness and emotional intelligence typically not introduced in the traditional classroom but have great potential for leading balanced, sustainable life as a student and eventually lawyer.

**Introduction to Mindfulness Workshops** – a 1 hour workshop offered 3 times per semester to introduce the concept of mindfulness, provide an overview of the research support for the use of mindfulness as a stress management and performance enhancement technique, and participate in a brief experiential meditation exercise.

**Mindfulness Meditation Stations** – 2 per week: one run by Law school Psychologist and other student run by member of NU Mindful Lawyer Student Association.

**NU Mindful Lawyer Student Association/Club** – a student group comprised of student ambassadors who promote building mindfulness in to the philosophy of the law and as a way of being in personal life.

**Special Events or Guest Lectures** – one guest lecture per semester

**Mindfulness based Emotional Intelligence Course: Developing the Whole Lawyer** – a for credit course offered

**Media & Marketing** – website linked to NU Law webpage (housed in student services) with blog and listserv.

**Curriculum** – incorporated into existing classes

*Highlight Prof Riskin’s work

- Clinic
- Classes
- **Mindful Lawyer Class** –

Learn how to develop your own mindfulness practice with Dr. Durr in this brief introduction to the basic breath mediation [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o__uzjRs-L8&list=PL6ijulQC67YFn8w2Pxe-gfprh7U3tYURt&index=2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o__uzjRs-L8&list=PL6ijulQC67YFn8w2Pxe-gfprh7U3tYURt&index=2)