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PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Mindfulness 101: Getting Down to Basics

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The practice of mindfulness, and the growing body of mindfulness training programs, are of increasing interest to members of the legal profession. With so many offerings from so many different sources, some fundamentals can be lost or diluted. This month, we'll touch on a few mindfulness basics to offer a broader framework for understanding and exploring mindfulness.

The Difference Between “Mindfulness” and “Mindfulness Practice”

“Mindfulness” can be thought of as the *awareness* that arises when we are present, engaged, and open to the unfolding of life, moment by moment. Each of us can draw on our own experience to identify the qualities that emerge when we are mindfully engaged. These might include: focus, patience, openness, ease, comfort amid uncertainty, less reactivity, non-judgmental awareness, compassion, and the list goes on. Importantly, these qualities are inherent in what it means to be a human being; they often arise without trying, and though they can be elusive, they are always accessible.

Confusion arises when the term “mindfulness” is used to refer to what are more properly termed “mindfulness practices.” These are the practices of breath awareness, concentration, body awareness, open monitoring, mindful walking, mindfulness listening, mindful eating, and so on, that are taught in mindfulness seminars, workshops, and training programs and found on websites and apps. In contrast to “mindfulness,” as an awareness that arises, these are exercises that are deliberately practiced. People who says they are “interested in mindfulness” are likely referring to the fact that they practice one or more mindfulness exercises.

Why is this distinction important? Many regard mindfulness as something special. When viewed from the lens of being aware, open, patient, and compassionate, it becomes clear that these are qualities that we all experience, and most would agree that they are beneficial and worthy of cultivating. Also, one need not engage in mindfulness practices to develop these qualities. When we get enough sleep, eat well, exercise, engage in periods of reflection, and spend time in

supportive relationships, we are more likely to experience these states and live a more mindful life. At the same time, just as with sleep, nutrition, and exercise, things we know are good for us that we “do,” so, too, mindfulness practices can serve a related end, and we can add them to the list of things we “do” that are good for us. The word “do” can get a little sticky, as really we are practicing “being” present. But just as with sleep, exercise, eating well, and spending time in supportive relationships, the more we practice mindfulness, the more likely we are to benefit.

The Difference Between “Mindfulness Practices” and “Relaxation Practices”

Many believe that mindfulness practices are intended to help us feel less stressed and more relaxed. This may be the main reason that “mindfulness” has entered the legal landscape. And, indeed, most of us can benefit from feeling calmer and less overwhelmed given the high-stress, high-stakes, and fast-paced world in which we live and work. When we feel more relaxed, our mental health and well-being benefit, as does our performance. But as important as relaxation is, it is not the primary objective of mindfulness practice. Rather, relaxation is secondary to the aspiration of “seeing things more clearly.” As mindfulness teacher Sharon Salzberg explains, “mindfulness is being able to tell the difference between what is taking place and the story we tell ourselves about what is taking place.” A great deal of stress comes from the stories we tell ourselves and believe.

A relaxation practice is one that brings about a shift to a more relaxed and calm state. Many meditations, visualizations, deep breathing, and muscle relaxation exercises all can serve this desirable end. Greater awareness and stability of mind may follow, but as a general rule, that is not top of mind when people sit down to meditate; rather, they want to “feel better.”

A key component to many mindfulness practices also is a key component to many relaxation practices: the breath. In the relaxation realm, taking a series of slower, deeper breaths reliably leads to feeling more relaxed. In the mindfulness realm, the practice of bringing awareness to the breath (not altering it) calls for concentrating the mind and leads to greater awareness. Confusion can arise in the complementary aspects of the breath across different practices. For example, many mindfulness practices begin with the instruction to take a series of “slower, deeper breaths.” While this is not necessary to cultivate greater awareness, when we feel more relaxed it is easier to sustain attention on an object. This can be especially helpful because the mindfulness practice—as distinct from a relaxation practice—invites us to observe the arising of challenging states of mind and body, such as judgmental thoughts, agitated emotions, and tension in the body. Why subject ourselves to these unpleasant moments? Among the many reasons, is (1) they inevitably pass, (2) we develop resilience in learning to ride through the cycle of these all-to-human experiences, (3) we become

more self-aware, and (4) we may experience greater insight. The relationship between a relaxation practice and a mindfulness practice can be understood as one in which a more relaxed state facilitates a more mindful state. And a more mindful state tends to lead to a more relaxed state.

The above review of the differences between mindfulness and mindfulness practices, and between mindfulness practices and relaxation practices, may shed some light on the heart of mindfulness and on why it may be worthwhile to take time out of our busy day to engage in mindfulness practices. The primary takeaway is that many discussions of mindfulness are referring to mindfulness practices, and mindfulness practices are not merely practiced to reduce stress—to feel better—but to become more aware.

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