

Back to the Basics: Finding Balance

By Elizabeth Stegeman

Rarely can you open a legal newsletter or magazine without seeing an article specifically geared toward work/life balance and/or tips for maintaining sanity in the ever-demanding legal environment. I've read these articles, participated in the corresponding seminars and discussions, and it's made me reflect on this topic and its presence in the legal field. Why does this discussion reoccur frequently amongst attorneys? My honest thought — because lawyers aren't that good at it.

But I think we really want to be.

You can't entirely blame us, we have demanding careers where day-in and day-out it's difficult to maintain a work balance, let alone a balance of life outside of work. So what can attorneys do to cultivate a sense of calm amidst days, weeks, and years of deadlines, emergencies, and fighting client fires? Well, we can... breathe. Yes, I know, simple sounding yet profoundly impactful. I promise if you stick with me, I'll explain what I mean.

First, a brief background on myself and why I'm in any way qualified to write an article on maintaining health and balance. Long before I ever became an attorney, I was a yogi. I started practicing yoga in 2010 during two years I spent living in rural Alaska. As you can imagine, it's crazy cold there 80 percent of the year, and I needed to find some type of physical activity I could do year-round. Little did I know that a Jillian Michaels' yoga DVD shipped to me by my mom would result in the adoption of a life-changing practice.

I've been practicing yoga consistently since then, even becoming a certified yoga teacher in 2016. And throughout the different stages of my life since 2010 — rural Alaska for two years, followed by law school in LA, a clerkship in West Virginia, and now living and working as a labor and employment attorney in Cincinnati — yoga has been with me and taught me different lessons along the way.

When I first began practicing, yoga was all about the workout. However, particularly since beginning my career as a lawyer, I've focused much more on the quiet side of the practice — meditation, presence, reflection, and breath. These tools are my biggest allies for maintaining a healthy life both inside and outside of my career. So what are my recommendations for fellow attorneys attempting to maintain a sense of balance and a healthy outlook?

Meditate

I began meditating in 2014, about three years after I began practicing yoga. I've maintained the practice at varying degrees of dedication since then. There are hundreds of ways to meditate and I encourage anyone interested to experiment with the different types of meditation until you find a practice that works for you. Personally, I practice mantra meditation. Repeating a mantra over and over helps me quiet my mind and find a sense of physical and mental stillness. In a world of constant motion,

these moments of stillness have become increasingly important. Medical studies continue to herald the mental benefits associated with the practice. These benefits include managing and handling stress and anxiety, improving sleep and concentration, increasing patience, and enhancing creativity and memory. For being so simple, the benefits of this practice are incredible.

Breathe

Although meditation is tied hand-in-hand with breath, breathing is its own nuanced skill. Many individuals, particularly those with stressful day-to-day lives, have perfected the practice of shallow chest breathing. Take a moment as you read this to focus on your own breath. Are you breathing in through your nose, filling up your lungs, and allowing the breath to reach your belly before you exhale? Probably not. I can say that personally, I'm a pretty poor breather. But your breathing habits are, surprisingly, very important. When we breathe so shallowly, we can negatively disrupt our sleep, mood, diges-

tion, heart, and nervous system. And interestingly enough, the benefits associated with proper, conscious breathing are pretty powerful. They include more energy, improved health, less anxiety, less fear, a balanced nervous system, and a faster-working brain. Proper breathing is also a tool that can help manage the fight or flight response, a response frequently triggered in high-pressure, high-stress environments.

Remain Present and Reflect Daily

This final recommendation is important because of its ability to shift attitudes, moods and perspectives. Busy individuals, particularly attorneys, can get so caught up in surviving the day that it's easy to forget to remain in the moment and reflect. Maintaining a sense of presence throughout the day can be a powerful tool in combating stress, anxiety, and depression. This requires a dedicated practice of finding gratitude and concentration in the here and now, instead of dwelling on the past and planning for the future (in both

personal lives and careers). This practice cultivates happiness by focusing on the present moment.

Similarly, reflection allows us to learn and grow from our own shortcomings and triumphs, both in our personal lives and careers. If we sell ourselves short of reflection, we sell ourselves short of some of the best lessons only we can teach ourselves. Finding a method or mechanism that helps you reflect is incredibly important, whether that be simply sitting in silence focusing on your day, journaling, listening to music, or going for a walk.

These recommendations are several of the tools I use to maintain a balanced, healthy outlook in both my career and personal life. They require little time, but promise big rewards. These practices have taught me that cultivating balance sometimes comes from reverting back to the basics, purposefully living in the present, and making time for stillness.

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