

Just Breathe

By Suzanne Craig Robertson

How Mindfulness & Meditation Can Ease Stress in Your Life and Law Practice

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“The practice of law is stressful,” writes Murfreesboro lawyer Pat Blankenship. “Lawyers get paid to enter into the fray of conflict, to expect and prepare for the worst case scenario. We are under great pressure to bill more hours, to work more, relax less. Technology keeps us constantly tuned in. There are myriad ways to mess it up, break a rule, miss a deadline, or fail to be as persuasive as we must. We seek and expect perfection of ourselves, and so do our clients. We work in a full-on state of ‘defensive’ lawyering all day long, every day, dropping down into survival mode and staying there.”¹

You know this because you are likely living it, but a recent study has validated that lawyers are responding to this high-stress atmosphere by hurting themselves in great numbers with the way they cope. Problem drinking and mental health issues are at higher levels than indicated by previous studies — and the statistics show that younger lawyers are particularly at risk.

Lawyers Have More Issues Than Other Professions

In their recently released joint study, the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation and the American Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs² found that 20.6 percent of the lawyers and judges surveyed — one-fifth! — reported problematic alcohol use. The study also found, using a variation of the questionnaire that focuses solely on the frequency of alcohol consumption, that 36.4 percent of the respondents qualified as problem drinkers — *that's more than a third*.

The study results also indicate that

- 28 percent of the lawyers responding experience depression,
- 19 percent experience anxiety and
- 23 percent experience stress.

All of the rates are higher than reported in earlier studies, and the alcohol use disorders and mental health problems are occurring at higher rates than in other professions and the general population, said Patrick R. Krill, director of the legal professionals program at Hazelden Betty Ford and a co-author of the study. But he added there is not one clear answer to the question of why legal professionals appear to be more susceptible to these problems than people in other careers.

“This long-overdue study clearly validates the widely held but empirically under-supported view that our profession faces truly significant challenges related to attorney well-being,” he said. “Any way you look at it, this data is very alarming and paints the picture of an unsustainable professional culture that's harming too many people. Attorney impairment poses risks to the struggling individuals themselves and to our communities, government, economy and society.”³

The Hazelden-ABA study should be a wake-up call, to be sure. Your profession is stressful, but what can YOU do about it? Take a look at findings by researchers at Johns Hopkins University, which suggest that mindfulness meditation can help ease psychological stresses like

anxiety, depression and pain. Dr. Elizabeth Hoge, a psychiatrist at the Center for Anxiety and Traumatic Stress Disorders at Massachusetts General Hospital and an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, says in the Harvard Health Blog⁴ that mindfulness

How to Meditate

One way to cultivate mindfulness, according to Mindful.org,* is to meditate. In just five minutes you can learn to reduce stress, anxiety and negative emotions.

- Find a relaxed, comfortable position.
- Notice and relax your body.
- Tune into your breath. Feel the natural flow, in and out.
- Be kind to your wandering mind. If you notice that you are thinking of other things, gently redirect your attention back to your breathing.
- Stay there for five to seven minutes.
- Notice your whole body. Relax more deeply.
- Appreciate yourself for doing this practice today.

* “A 5-Minute Breathing Meditation to Cultivate Mindfulness,” *Mindful*, Feb. 26, 2016, www.mindful.org/a-five-minute-breathing-meditation/

meditation makes perfect sense for treating anxiety. “People with anxiety have a problem dealing with distracting thoughts that have too much power,” she explains. “They can't distinguish between a problem-solving thought and a nagging worry that has no benefit.”

But you don't have time to wedge in a class to help to you relax — *what a joke*, that would stress you out even more to be there when you should be working. Don't you wish people would stop talking to you about work-life balance? *You will get to it one day when you have time.*

Calm Down, There Is Help

There are many ways to deal with the

demands of law practice, to take steps to continue your life and law practice in a more sustainable manner. Many involve using techniques that can reduce stress and benefit you in the long run. You might not even have to give up the crazy hours or sacrifice the adversarial nature of your work to approach your job in a healthier way.

Laura McClendon sees this a lot. She is the executive director of the Tennessee Lawyers Assistance Program (TLAP), which not only helps lawyers, judges, bar applicants and law students with a variety of addiction issues, but also with stress-related and emotional health issues.

“We often meet with attorneys who want help transitioning into a more healthy lifestyle,” McClendon says. “We'll introduce mindfulness ideas, and then direct them toward community support and resources. We then try to set up some sort of accountability piece — for instance, if you come in here with a specific mental or physical health goal, I will call, email, text or meet with you every couple of weeks to see what kind of progress you're making.”

TLAP can help you decide what's most important, too. “Lots of times individuals have TOO many goals, and the magnitude can be paralyzing,” McClendon says. “We will help you decide your priorities and then break your goal(s) into manageable, bite-size pieces.”

What Are Mindfulness and Meditation?

To allow mindfulness and meditation to help you with stress-reduction in your daily life, you need to know what they are.

“Mindfulness is a simple concept,” writes Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn in his landmark work, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*.⁵ “[It] means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity and acceptance of present-moment reality. It wakes us up

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to the fact that our lives unfold only in moments. If we are not fully present for many of these moments, we may not only miss what is most valuable in our lives but also fail to realize the richness and the depth of our possibilities for growth and transformation.” Kabat-Zinn is known as the founder of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR).

Meditation, then, is a technique used, along with mindfulness, to rest the mind, to try “experiencing the center of consciousness within,” wrote Swami Rama.⁶ “In meditation, the mind is clear, relaxed and inwardly focused. When you meditate, you are fully awake and alert, but your mind is not focused on the external world or on the events taking place around you. Meditation requires an inner state that is still and one-pointed so that the mind becomes silent.”

If you are thinking you don’t have time for any of that, you might be surprised to know about some Tennessee lawyers who practice mindfulness and meditation during the work day. In fact, they say because of the benefits they gain, they don’t have time NOT to do it.

Some people come to the point of incorporating meditation and other stress-reduction techniques into their lives after a scare, often a health or personal crisis. Others catch on sooner and start before there is a crisis. That is the hope of these stories.

Learning the Hard Way

Ten years out of Vanderbilt Law School, Heather Hubbard was a partner and practice group leader in the Nashville office of Waller, working in intellectual property litigation about 50 to 60 hours a week. She began on the law firm path because that is what she thought she was supposed to do.

“I was always so driven, hard-wired to be a workaholic. I was a litigator. Everything was adversarial and that would carry over. It didn’t matter if I was on the phone with opposing counsel or at

home. I would get defensive about anything perceived as a threat.” Her life was this way until she finally realized something had to change.

“The truth is I had several personal disasters, crises,” Hubbard, 36, says. These events made her “take stock” of her life. “I didn’t feel like I had any control over my life. From the moment I woke up until I went to bed I was tense and constantly worried about what was going to be the next emergency. It was like being on call 24/7. I was constantly having to cancel plans with family and

But I Don’t Have Time to Practice Mindfulness!

“One of the many things cancer taught me was to commit to my health, to make that one of my primary concerns,” says Mary Griffin. After her breast cancer diagnosis she took an eight-week course on meditating “for people who have been through a health scare, because I didn’t have a way to relieve stress” and because she found it difficult to start a practice on her own.

“I have high-energy border collie personality,” Griffin laughs. “Meditative mindfulness is the only thing that holds me in my seat sometimes. Everybody can do it. It’s easy.” She even meditates walking from her car to her office.

“You can do it anytime, even in middle of the workday.” To do this, she may plant her feet on the ground and breathe deeply or take a body scan (she explains this is being mindful of the state each part of your body is in). She tries to get out of her office at lunch every day, walking and meditating, “paying attention to those details that normally would pass me by. This is meandering,” she stresses, “not exercise.”

Some meditations are as quick as a minute, Griffin says, “and everyone has a minute!” She suggests starting with guided meditation, although that may be the “hardest part for attorneys — listening to someone else tell you what to do.”

Pat Blankenship also recommends working in short periods of meditation throughout the day — even just 10 minutes. “It gives you a break, a vacation,” she says. “You can drop out of any stressful situation — you can change your physiology and your psychology about what’s happening as well. . . . It becomes a tool you can use at any given moment as the need arises,” she says.

“The busier you are the more you need it and the more you’ll benefit from it,” Blankenship says. “It’s becoming critical. The statistics about how we are suffering bears that out. You’ve got to slow it down for a moment.”



Mary Griffin

friends, always letting the clients' demands come first. It didn't matter how people treated me.

"I literally let my career consume my life, to the detriment of everyone around me." Hubbard says she felt frustrated but couldn't explain why, so she began a journey to find more meaning and happiness. It was in this search that she found mindfulness and meditation, which she began practicing while she was working at Waller.

"It completely changed my life," she says, noting that people had begun asking her what was different about her. "I started noticing over time the things that used to trigger, cause me to over-react or get me really worked up, didn't any more. Didn't even bother me."

As she noticed this change in herself, she says she realized her passion was to teach what she had learned to others. In October 2014 she left Waller to start The Language of Joy, a company for coaching, retreats and other services to

help professionals "figure out how to embrace their ambitions while not losing their sense of self and what's important in life."

One of the ways she does this for herself is keeping her routine of meditating every morning for 15 to 30 minutes, and staying mindful all the time.

"For me, mindfulness is not something you sit down and do," she says. "It's a way of living, a different way of looking at life."

"Law schools teach us to be skeptical, critical and negative, which is not a good combination from a mental health standpoint," she says. "We start making all these excuses as to how we can't change anything. Generally, there is a lot you can change."

She emphasizes that although she left the law firm track (but she does maintain her law license), that choice is not for everyone. For most people she coaches, she says, it's about "how to be

successful in their current situation, not to make a change. There is a lot of talk about work-life balance, but I actually think it's less about balance and more about priorities. It's not about working less, it's about having boundaries and knowing what's important to you and making that a priority."

Noting the standard long hours of the law firm work week, Hubbard says, "The culture sets you up where you can turn to a lot of addictions. That can be alcohol or drugs or work, which I do think is an addiction, if you don't know how to manage. It can be a very unhealthy profession. But you can manage. You can even thrive."

Cancer Changed How She Looked at Life and Work

Mary Griffin is looking at life a lot differently than she did a few years ago, too. After she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2012, underwent

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chemotherapy and a double mastectomy she learned some hard lessons.

“As an attorney, wife and mother, I am used to taking care of people and things. It was hard at first asking for help, but I have come to see it as a gift,” she wrote in a 2013 article.⁷ “Attorneys are sometimes seen as arrogant or know-it-alls; but I couldn’t be more vulnerable now. I have reached out to my supervisors, co-workers and the bar in general, and I have gotten help.”

She is now “cleared of cancer as best as you can be” but was left with side effects from the medication after the chemo, causing ongoing neuropathic pain.

“A lot of attorneys have trouble dealing with pain management. The medicine and chemo caused this neuropathic pain, and it may never go away,” she says. She currently walks with a cane when she goes outside because of damage in one of her knees.

Fortunately, she has found practices that help: pilates for strengthening her quads, changing the way she eats, her faith, proper support — and “counseling when I need it. All these

different things enable me to come to work full-time, support my daughter and spouse, be a daughter to my parents, and enjoy each day,” she says. She chose pilates because with the double mastectomy she was able to work with equipment to get back her range of motion in her arms.

“If I didn’t have this separate practice



Heather Hubbard. Photo by Photographix.

of pilates, of stretching my muscles and mindfulness, it would be very easy to become depressed,” she says. “You have to find your own way, what works for you. For me it’s about taking each day and thinking, ‘How am I going to have the best day today?’ It’s not believing you are going to be happy or pain free all the time — there is nothing depressing about that. That’s called life.”

Griffin, 50, is the state Social Security administrator for the Tennessee Department of Treasury in Nashville, and is chair of the Tennessee Bar Association’s Attorney Well-Being Committee. “All of us want better health for ourselves. We want better health for other attorneys and other people in general. We want that for everybody.”

Griffin was still wearing a wig from the chemotherapy’s hair loss as she was helping plan a program called “Better Next Year” in 2013. The Attorney Well-Being Committee has hosted the continuing legal education event for several years during the TBA’s annual convention.

She explains that the committee wanted Better Next Year to have a focus on health care and anxiety issues and ask questions like: How do you function when you have a debilitating thing happen to you? How do attorneys keep going? How do you bounce back from job loss, a diagnosis of cancer, other illnesses or the death of a spouse?

“Resilience,” she answers herself. “We are aggressive, but are we resilient?” she asks. “We take care of other people, but do we take care of ourselves? The studies show that, no, we do not.”

The CLE has also covered topics such as stress, laughter, yoga, technology, game-play, exercise and more. Griffin has seen an increase in participation in the program, especially among lawyers between 40 and 60 years old who want to hear more about work-life balance. “But we have work to do in our profession. Lawyers don’t want to be seen as needing any kind of help. Attorneys are crappy at getting help and admitting any vulnerability. I would put myself in that category,” she says.

“But cancer will whack you upside

the head. Before that I helped people. I didn't need help. I am just a much happier person today, probably because of the illness," she admits. "I got to rethink how I want to live the rest of my life — I got an appreciation for it — and you never know how long that will be."

You Don't Have to Quit to Find Balance: Work It In

Now a yoga teacher at Middle Tennessee State University, Pat Blankenship practiced law for many years while serving as the managing partner for Blankenship & Blankenship, Attorneys at Law, in Murfreesboro. She says she felt fortunate to have an office practice while raising four children.

"I was practicing exactly the way I wanted to practice, but I can see how law practice freaks people out, and I understand being under a tremendous amount of pressure."

It was not her law practice that drove her to yoga and meditation: instead, in a quest to find ways to thrive in a demanding and stressful world, she read a book that changed her life. It was Kabat-Zinn's *Full Catastrophe Living*, and around 2004 she began practicing mindfulness, meditation and yoga. She embraced it, now is certified to teach it, and has since retired her law license.

"Everybody is looking for [more of a stress-free life]," Blankenship, 64, says. "Quality of life is critical to our good health. Stress does in fact hurt us, if not kill us. All of my lawyer friends, regular-world friends, students, when I ask what brings you to yoga, they say, 'I have got to learn to manage my stress. I need to know how to settle down.' I teach theories on how to use yoga to manage depression and anxiety using meditation as a tool. The movement is toward recognizing the kind of world we are living in and how best to manage and navigate that world."

Blankenship is aware that to manage this stress in this faster-spinning world, the answer for some is to reduce work hours, or even as in her case, to change professions away from such a stressful one. But "work-life balance" doesn't



Pat Blankenship

always mean that.

"When I hear 'work-life balance,' I hear 'work fewer hours, spend time with friends, don't take your phone.' Lawyers find that extremely difficult to do," she knows. "There's no easy way to bill all the hours we need to bill all the hours we need to. But mindful meditation is something they can do between phone calls and appointments. It can be integrated in a long and busy day to manage your stress."

The Physiology of Stress

"Fight or flight" is a concept that has been around since the beginning of time

— when something stressful happens, the body's instinctual reaction is to either fight or flee.

"When that instinct kicks in, a lot of adrenaline and cortisol flow," Blankenship explains. "Those work to change the digestive system, heart rate, brain, and cause the muscles to tense up and grab the bones. That was great when the stress was the presence of the saber-tooth tiger. But we now live our lives in such a way that we are always under stress and our bodies get stuck in the fight-or-flight mode — and it's detrimental to our health and our well-being." She points out that too much adrenaline and cortisol can cause weight gain and heart disease, anxiety and other physical and emotional maladies.

"Mindful meditation allows you to reduce the levels of cortisol and adrenaline in the body — it's like taking a brief vacation from the fight-or-flight mechanism," Blankenship says. This is one of the things she teaches to her MTSU students, that "your stress is killing you because you are producing so much more adrenaline and cortisol than your body needs, but you can learn to manage it."

There is more science behind the changes that occur in the body, too. In studies, MRI scans have shown that after an eight-week course of mindfulness practice, the brain's "fight or flight" center, the amygdala, appears to shrink, writes Tom Ireland in an article in *Scien-*

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tific American.⁸ “As the amygdala shrinks, the pre-frontal cortex — associated with higher order brain functions such as awareness, concentration and decision-making — becomes thicker. The connection between the amygdala and the rest of the brain gets weaker, while the connections between areas associated with attention and concentration get stronger.”

“The scale of these changes correlates with the number of hours of meditation practice a person has done,” says Adrienne Taren, a researcher studying mindfulness at the University of Pittsburgh.

“In other words,” Ireland writes, “our more primal responses to stress seem to be superseded by more thoughtful ones.”⁹

All Stress Is Not Bad

Pat Blankenship has seen up close this stress-response and how meditation practices can help — her daughter Katie Blankenship, 35, is a civil litigation attorney focusing on health care issues

with Waller in Nashville. Pat says Katie has used mindfulness and meditation for many years to manage a high-stress life. Currently, Katie works “50ish hours” per week or “60 in a really long week.” She’s quick to say she enjoys the work and appreciates how the firm lets its lawyers set their hours based on what work needs to get done.

Waller has a billable hour goal for associates of 1,800 hours per year. As if that is not enough, she is also planning an Oct. 9 wedding.

“Waller is great about how you build your schedule,” she says, explaining that the morning of this interview she had a meeting at 8:15 so she went in early, but other days she can go in a little later. “I can vary my schedule; that works for me.”

The group she is in, litigation, has been a great fit for her, she says. There is “not an expectation that you are at your desk 13 hours a day — it’s not



Katie Blankenship

about face time — we are hard-charging litigators. You go to work and get the work done. We are not doing it just for the sake of doing it. It’s not this other

Recommended Reading, Links and Apps

Books

Wherever You Go, There You Are, by Jon Kabot-Zinn, Hyperion, 2005 (originally published in 1994).

Full Catastrophe Living, by Jon Kabot-Zinn, Bantam Dell (1990).

The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali by Swami Satchidananda

The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary by Edwin F. Bryant.

Light on Life: The Yoga Journey to Wholeness, Inner Peace, and Ultimate Freedom by B.K.S. Iyengar, John J. Evans and Douglas Abrams (2006).

Articles

“The Heart and Soul of Health and Wellness” series by Pat Blankenship, 2016, www.tba.org/journal/the-heart-and-soul-of-health-and-wellness

- Three Steps to Mindful Meditation
- Seven Choices for Balance in Chaos
- Breathing Through Mindful Transition

“Younger lawyers are most at risk for substance abuse and mental health problems, a new study reports,” by James Podgers,

ABA Journal, Feb. 7, 2016, www.abajournal.com/news/article/younger_lawyers_are_most_at_risk_for_substance_abuse_and_mental_health_prob

“How lawyers can avoid burnout and debilitating anxiety,” by Leslie A. Gordon, *ABA Journal*, July 2015, www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/how_lawyers_can_avoid_burnout_and_debilitating_anxiety

Links

Tennessee Lawyers Assistance Program, www.tlap.org
Tennessee Bar Association Attorney Well-Being Committee, www.tba.org/committee/attorney-well-being-committee

Apps

The Mindfulness App: 5-day guided practice and introduction to mindfulness

Calm: Relaxing sounds and scenes

Left vs Right: A brain training game

Stop, Breathe & Think: Creating a personal forcefield of calm and peace

Gratitude Journal: Writing down life’s best moments

layer of stress of making sure the partner sees you there.”

She says the partners are interested and invested in her life because they want her to be healthy. The philosophy is “let’s go as hard as we can to do the best job we can and take care of yourself.”

She describes her job as stressful, but notes that all stress is not bad stress.

“You’re engaged and interested,” she says of positive stress. “I enjoy it. Sometimes it’s a trick of making myself stop working, which can be hard. I will try to take all of Saturday off if I can.”

On regular work days, she deals with the stress a lot of different ways. “Every day I build in 30 to 45 minutes to exercise: I stretch, do yoga, run, walk and usually try to meditate for five or 10 minutes to start the day with a clear head.” In the evening on an average day she will get home around 7 or 8 p.m., have dinner and relax, enjoy a glass of wine on the couch, decompress and try to get away from all the screens as much as she can.

“Everybody has to find what works for them. Some people are not going to like yoga or meditation — it might not be for them. Find what speaks to you to keep a balance,” she advises.

She has been doing yoga and meditation for at least 10 years, having taken a yoga class at MTSU when she was a

A Trend Toward a Mental Health Requirement?

There is a trend in considering requiring specific education on substance abuse and mental health. The ABA Standing Committee on Continuing Legal Education, through its MCLE Model Rule Review Project, is looking at the current ABA Model Rule for Minimum Continuing Legal Education, says TBA Director of CLE Mindy Thomas Fulks.

“They want to make it a requirement to have a separate hour for mental health and one for substance abuse,” she says. Fulks, who is a member of the committee, explains that “when the ABA comes out with model rules, it will trigger the states to look at their own rules to possibly update.”

The group is inviting comments through Nov. 1. For more details or questions about the proposals, email scocle@americanbar.org.

Check Out These Courses

- *Mindfulness in the Practice of Law*. What is mindfulness? What are its benefits? And how are lawyers and law schools across the country using mindfulness to enhance decision-making skills and promote greater overall satisfaction with the practice of law.

TBA CLE webcast Sept. 20 at Noon Central, <https://cle.tba.org/>

- *Lifeguard Training for the Legal Profession (Ethics)*. Why are members of the legal profession particularly susceptible to depression and suicide? How can you help someone you think might be experiencing depression, stress, etc.? In this program, you will learn about practical strategies and available resources that may save a life. Archived webcast <https://cle.tba.org/catalog/course/3601>

student there — and she never stopped.

“It is a crucial part of my day-to-day living and existence,” Katie says. “I make time for it. I get up earlier. Somedays it doesn’t happen and you have to give yourself grace for that. [Schedule it] the same way you make time for spending

time with family and friends.”

“What I notice is that I’m keeping my stress level down and I’m in a good mood. I’m happier and more engaged. I see myself doing better, feeling better throughout the day. Once I’m in my

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day, I'm barreling through it. [That makes it] even more important to keep me anchored."

Katie was in law school just a little over two years ago, having graduated from Belmont in 2014. She doesn't recall much addressed in school about achieving balance or health.

"Law schools try to 'weed out' those who are not going to make it," she says. "It is purposefully a pressure cooker, and there is a benefit to that. You do need to be thrown into the deep end. We are adults, and you need to be responsible for our schedules. But once you get into your second and third years ... I would applaud a school trying to teach [something like that]."

That "random" yoga class she took at MTSU so many years ago is still paying dividends. Katie liked it so much she took her mother, Pat, with her to try it for the first time and she liked it, too.

"Now mom is teaching that class," Katie laughs.

When the Wrong Path Turns into the Right Path

When Jerry Farmer finished at Washington and Lee School of Law in 1985, with a finance undergraduate degree no less, he was primed for the Big Law fast track.

"I thought it's all about money so *I need to make as much as I can*. That was my philosophy of life," he says. "Then, I thought, when I had enough *I could do whatever I wanted to do*."

His big banking law firm job in Florida was rough. "I was miserably unhappy — it was not for me." But slow to learn the lesson, he moved to Birmingham and got another large firm job, this time in litigation.

"The pressure of big firm practice and the demands were tough," he says. "Anyone will tell you that." He was so unhappy he quit that job and "kind of took a spacer in life."

Farmer had taken a break from a narrow career path a couple of times before — both as an undergrad and



Jerry Farmer

before entering law school, including driving a truck and working in a factory — and after taking a stab at fiction writing he again looked to the law, but this time with the focus of helping people instead of trying to make lots of money.

"It took me around five years of struggling with the 'standard model' of trying to follow that career path of a big-time lawyer," he says.

He took an IOLTA-funded job at Legal Services in Huntsville, Alabama, working with domestic violence victims on things like divorces and orders of protection. This job was a winner, he thought, because he found more fulfillment in seeing the direct results of helping people. But when he fell in love and planned to marry a tenured professor at MTSU in Murfreesboro two hours away, he was ready to pack up and move. So he found himself in the job market again.

His timing was fortuitous — his resumé landed on then-City Attorney Thomas L. Reed Jr.'s desk on the day the staff attorney had resigned. Farmer got that job, working there for eight and a half years until he started his own firm in 2003.

All this time he was working his way

toward the life he wanted, but he didn't realize it. He recalls some advice he heard while in law school that a person has a choice of being a "big firm/tall building lawyer" or a that a small town might be a better fit. "You won't make as much money, but you might be successful and have a happy life," they told him. "That is not what I chose coming out of law school, but that's where I wound up — and where I'm most happy and moderately successful." He did not always meditate, but in 2005 he discovered yoga and began paying more attention.

"I've learned for me it's important to live a balanced life," Farmer says. He does this in part by practicing Yoga asanas (poses) every morning and evening, going to a yoga class twice a week: once on Thursday evenings and another for two hours on Saturday. He also reads ancient scriptures, the Yoga Sutras, explaining that "sutras" is a derivation of our word for sutures or thread, so the sutras are threads of wisdom. He also recommends and finds wisdom in the poetry of John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Wordsworth — particularly Wordsworth's poem, "The World Is Too Much with Us Late and Soon."

Now when Farmer finishes a task, he makes a point to “process it” instead of jumping right on to the next task. “Lawyers throughout the day have a lot of short intense interactions — reading a case but the phone rings — and you turn your mind from one thing to another. After each brief period of intensity, of focus and concentration, I’ll make it a point to let go of that and breathe and process. I breathe before I move on to the next thing. I do that every time I work on solving a client’s problem,” he says.

At 62, he also practices yoga and other types of physical fitness every morning, then goes to work in his office surrounded by original works of art that he created himself. He took art classes, he says, “in an effort to develop the right hemisphere in my brain.”

That was part of finding balance for his life. “If you don’t [find balance], you’re going to burn yourself out,” he

says. “There are people who resort to alcohol and drugs to cope with the stress. They are looking for something to alter their moods. But there are other ways to mood-alter that are healthful, like meditation, like yoga — but they take time and effort to learn.”

Before yoga, when Farmer was a new, impressionable lawyer who had not landed on his right path, a partner at the first law firm where he worked told him a story about the Golden Handcuffs. The Golden Handcuffs represented the lure of the big law firms with high starting salaries with their long hours and stressful conditions. “When you put on the Golden Handcuffs, that means you find yourself making more money than you ever imagined and have a lifestyle beyond what you dreamed — and a level of stress that you could not dream of. You find you can’t let it go because if you do the money won’t be there.”

Farmer had them on for a while,

but when he took them off he never looked back.

Calm Your Body, Calm Your Mind

Sharon Lusk did not come to yoga late or start because of a high-stress job crisis, although she is both a lawyer and a certified public accountant so she probably had every opportunity. She started yoga when she was 12 after her pediatrician suggested it to her mother because her daughter was so highly competitive and self-critical.

“I wanted to excel at everything I did,” she says. It was no easy feat to find a yoga class back in 1968, much less for a preteen. “I was the only kid and had to have special permission to go.” Her mother went with her, starting a lifelong habit for both of them.

Most people begin yoga as a physical practice, she says, but “if you go back to real roots of yoga, the yoga sutras are all about calming your body so you can

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calm your mind. The yoga philosophy is that your body is a reflection of what's going on in your mind. If you calm your body, you can calm your mind."

Lusk is executive vice president at KLA Healthcare Consultants in Memphis while also maintaining a private mediation practice. She incorporates meditation in her work day all the time, she says, especially in her mediation practice. "Mediation is my real love — and it goes hand in hand with mindful practice." She does some family mediation, but mostly it is for health care partnerships that are breaking up or merging on the front end, she explains. "This often helps them do that in more amicable manner."

She uses "meditation quite a bit with clients to help them reframe looking at a situation if I am dealing with somebody who can only look at what they are facing in the direst of circumstances. Instead of worst case scenarios, I say let's look at the positive, what opportunities would this present? If you go through this practice breakup, what opportunities would this present to you? What would you be able to do instead? They are able to look at other choices and they can get excited."

Lusk stresses that the "breath work" is very important. "Teaching someone to slow their breath also slows their mind and will allow them to become calmer if they are anxious." As you do this, she cautions that the most important thing is "recognizing when your mind is getting away from you. You have that little monkey chatter in your mind all the time," she points out. "[Meditation] helps you remain calm. How you breathe is a large part of how to raise energy levels and to calm you."

To clear up a common misconception, yoga and meditation are not associ-

ated with a particular religion, she says. "I am Christian and I do meditation and follow Buddhist practices and modify them to my own beliefs."

In addition to her professional jobs, she teaches one yoga class every week for a senior group. Every day Lusk gets up at 4:30 for her meditation practice at home, then usually goes for a walk



Sharon Lusk

outside. At least four days a week she will go to a class of some type of yoga practice. She says she is glad to be back in the swing of yoga and meditation — she says she had stopped meditating for 15 years earlier in her life, but when she found the original problems coming back, she returned to what worked earlier in her life.

To people who say they don't have time for all of that, she says *she doesn't have time not to*.

"I find I'm much more effective when I can calm my mind and I can focus on what I am doing. I am able to prioritize and get things done in the proper order. Look at how much time we spend worrying about things. If we could get

rid of that and get in the present moment, we would have so much more time to do what we need to do." ⁴¹

Suzanne Craig Robertson is editor of the *Tennessee Bar Journal*.

Notes

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