



## FLORIDA BAR NEWS

# THE MINDFUL LAWYER: A LICENSE TO BREATHE

By Scott Rogers ▶ Special to the News ▶ Columns

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It is said that mindfulness practices are simple, but not easy. The same can be said about relaxation practices. The instructions are straightforward enough — for example, take a few slower, deeper breaths — but for a variety of fascinating reasons, they can be difficult to implement. Doing so, especially amid times of high stress, frustration, and a wide range of agitated emotional and physical states can

go a long way.

One reason practice is not easy is that we forget to do so. Reminders can help remedy this — things like a strategically placed sticky note that recites, “Breathe,” “STOP,” or “This too shall pass.” Even these reminders may be to no avail when we are caught in the grips of an agitated emotion. At such time we simply do not have the capacity to turn to a helpful breathing technique or reflect on a useful insight.

In today’s column we’ll learn how the daily commute can serve as a cue to practice one of the simplest relaxation exercises — taking a few slower breaths. Each time you practice, you will offer yourself a little relief in the moment as well as get some practice under your belt for those hectic moments when even taking a few slow breaths becomes elusive.

While merely slowing down the breath can be immensely helpful, there are also many relaxation exercises that involve a breathing count. For example, breathing in and out to the count of four, or breathing in the count of four and breathing out to the count of eight. Take a slower breath now to check in on the subtle and meaningful shift you can reliably bring about with this simple maneuver.

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## AUTO AWARENESS

I’ve done a bit of traveling this summer throughout Florida and there are few cities I have visited where there is not a lot of congested traffic. As most of us know all too well, being in traffic, day in and day out, can elicit a wide range of agitated emotions. At the same time, it is this very experience that can provide

us with the opportunity to practice a relaxation exercise that may help alleviate a little stress. It may also redirect our attention back to the road and to our wellbeing, as opposed to getting caught up in the distracting stories we tell ourselves about other drivers, construction, and the commute.

### THE PRACTICE: A LICENSE TO BREATHE

The practice is simply to take a few purposeful breaths when in traffic. In lieu of a sticky-note, the reminder *is the license plate of the car in front of you*. A quick glance will reveal all the instruction you need to take a few slower, deeper breaths, offering you a variety of options.

At the simplest of levels, seeing the license can remind you to take a few slower, deeper breaths (three usually work well). Taking it a step further, the license numbers themselves can offer you bespoke guidance on the count, *i.e.*, the length of the inhale and exhale.

For example, the first number you see can suggest the number of slower breaths you take, or the length of the breath cycle. Or, because you can generally enhance the level of relaxation by extending the exhaling a little, you might inhale for the length of one of the smaller numbers and exhale for the length of one of the longer numbers. For example if you see the license “23G 47W” you could:

- Simply take two slower, deeper breaths, or
- Breathe in and out to the count of three
- Inhale to the count of four and exhale to the count of seven.

Of course there is no one right way and always seeing a different license plate can keep things interesting. Keep things simple as even glancing at just one license plate during a commute can make a difference. Devoting a little attention to this practice can help you snap out of irritability, boredom, frustration, anger, and the like. You may even find when becoming irritated that you automatically look for a license to inspire a little intentional respiration.

Importantly, for safety’s sake, never close your eyes or turn attention away from what is right in front of you, and it is best practiced when traffic slows down to bumper-to-bumper or when sitting at a traffic light. The breath can be serious business and so it is important to have the count you select be comfortable and never a strain. As a general guideline stay between the count of one and nine, only do a few at a time, and you may find it useful to consult with your physician.

## THE BENEFITS

The benefits of taking a series of slower deeper breaths is well known and we've explored this topic in previous a [previous column](#). James Nestor, in his international best-seller "[Breathe: The New Science of a Lost Art](#)" explores many important breathing practices and discusses the health benefits. You can watch Nestor briefly discuss the benefits of the longer exhalation in this [short video](#). In a short piece in the *New York Times* titled "[Breath. Exhale. Repeat: The Benefits of Controlled Breathing,](#)" Lesley Alderman offers an overview of some of the science and benefits of slowing down the breath. Such benefits include reducing "symptoms associated with anxiety, insomnia, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and attention deficit disorder."

While the science is clear that reliable changes in levels of nervous system arousal accompany a slowing down of the breath — including reduced heart rate, lowering of blood pressure, and reductions in the release of the stress-hormone cortisol — you are the best judge of the ways a few moments of slowing down the breath, especially when practiced regularly, may be of benefit to you.

If this auto-awareness practice is of interest to you, be patient as you begin. At first you might forget. But the reminders are all around you. If in the course of a morning or afternoon commute you avail yourself of a few conscious breaths, that's a win. You'll find that the practice can help you wake up out of mind wandering and establish a more present centered attentiveness. And, it might even feel good. Motion for relief . . . granted.

If you have a question about mindfulness and integrating it into the practice of law that you would like answered in this column, send it to [srogers@law.miami.edu](mailto:srogers@law.miami.edu).



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