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Mindfulness 101: Mindfulness, Emotions, and Peak Mind


By Scott L. Rogers

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In the early 1990s when I began sharing mindfulness with lawyers and judges, there were few scientists interested in the topic and even fewer research studies looking at the effects practicing mindfulness might have on various cognitive, emotional, and physical processes. Research findings were beginning to emerge that suggested that meditating might have beneficial effects, with reports of reductions in anxiety and increases in positive mood.

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In time, the growing popularity of mindfulness coupled with sophisticated brain-measuring technologies opened the door to exploring the role of meditation and, in particular, mindfulness meditation on enduring changes to brain structure and function. One of the first generation of neuroscientists to examine this terrain was Dr. Amishi Jha, a cognitive neuroscientist. In 2007 she published one of the first studies to find that practicing mindfulness can alter or enhance specific aspects of attention.

While the connection between attention and mindfulness has roots going back hundreds, if not thousands of years in various wisdom traditions, this important finding bridged long-standing experiential reports of meditators with brain science. It should come as no surprise to you that attention is important to a lawyer's performance and emotional well-being, and in her new book, *Peak Mind: Find Your Focus, Own Your Attention, Invest 12 Minutes A Day* (HarperOne, 2021), Jha offers readers a thoughtful look at how we can harness the power of attention to meet the demands of life, personally and professionally. In it she reminds us that attention is powerful, vulnerable, and trainable.

I have had the privilege of collaborating with Amishi Jha for more than a decade on research looking into the efficacy of mindfulness practices in the cognitive performance and emotional well-being of high-stress professionals, and, in this month's column, she answers a series of three questions addressing the relevance of attention and mindfulness to the work of legal professionals.

1. As an attention researcher, you research and write a great deal about the importance of attention. What is the relationship between attention and our emotional states?

One of the biggest surprises about *attention* is how deeply it's connected to *emotion*. Think about it this way: When we recall a happy memory or something sad or upsetting, we use our attention to do so. We fill up our present-moment attention with the appropriate imagery, memory, thoughts, and all of this is needed to construct the fullness of our emotional experience. And it goes in the other direction as well—you need attentional bandwidth to regulate emotions as they come along. For example, what do you do when you're overcome by a feeling? You may think through the problem or distract yourself by focusing on some other topic, or you reframe the situation (*maybe it's not as bad as I think . . .*). All these tactics require attention as their fuel. And if your fuel is in short supply (because it's idling on ruminative loops of distressing thoughts), you simply won't have the cognitive resources needed to regulate your emotions effectively. This is one of the reasons we can end up feeling unsteady and dysregulated.

2. Lawyers can bring their work home and not be able to get it off their mind—either during dinner, in the middle of a conversation, or when reading a bedtime story to their children. How can we bring home a peak mind that is focused on what's taking place at home and not stuck on what took place earlier in the day?

Attentional focus, which we can think of as our mind's flashlight, is a powerful capacity we can use to perceive, think, and feel. You direct the flashlight of your attention to the external environment or to your own sensations, thoughts, memories, and feelings. But we can also direct it toward other people to communicate and connect. For example, when you and another person direct your attentional flashlights to the same content, you will be able to co-create and focus on a *shared mental model* so you both have a mutual understanding of what's being communicated. "We're not on the same page," you might say to a colleague or client when you realize that your mental models are misaligned. We often need to be able to see things through someone else's eyes. This is a critical aspect of connection. But when our attention is hijacked away from the present moment when we are with others, we miss out on opportunities to connect in this way. The solution is to notice where your flashlight is, at home as well as at work. Practice focusing your attention where you choose, noticing when it's gone off course, and redirecting it back to what's most important to you so that you can benefit from your attention's peak capacity to connect with your loved ones at home. Remember that paying attention is one of the most compelling ways by which we can show our interest, care, and love for others.

3. The legal system is adversarial by design. And while it is necessary for lawyers to be able to take opposing positions and argue strongly for their client's interests, often this can lead to feeling intense dislike and assuming the worst of others' intentions and actions. Might you suggest a short exercise that can help us not get so caught up in intense and hostile feelings, as they add a lot of unnecessary grief and stress to an already challenging work environment?

When we are in an adversarial context, our minds and bodies can feel as if we are in a dangerous, almost life-threatening situation. The body's stress response will likely be triggered at a level akin to needing to run at maximum speed from a raging fire. Here is a helpful three-step mindfulness exercise for when this occurs. It's called "Stop, Drop, and Roll":

- 1 Stop.** Stop the inner war against the actual circumstances—accept them. It is what it is. Let me be clear: This does not mean that you are "all good" with the situation. It has nothing to do with your judgment about the actual events. It just means that you are accepting the actuality of what is occurring.

- 2 **Drop the story.** Your assessment of this situation is merely one story, one account of the unfolding events and their emotional tone. It may not be true. And perhaps it is not the only story.
- 3 **Roll with it.** Keep going, keep moving, get curious about what the next moment will bring. This approach keeps attention agile, open, and receptive. It also frees up cognitive resources needed for decision-making and complex thought, since you aren't getting hijacked away by destructive and attention-grabbing emotions.

I am grateful to Amishi for taking the time to respond to these questions and hope that you find them helpful. You can learn more about Dr. Amishi Jha and her book *Peak Mind: Find Your Focus, Own Your Attention, Invest 12 Minutes A Day* by visiting <http://amishi.com> as well as by listening to her on some of today's most popular podcasts. You may also enjoy reading "[The Brain Science of Attention and Overwhelm](#)," which she recently published in *Mindful Magazine*, as well as "[The Science of Mindfulness and the Practice of Law](#)," an article she and I penned for *GPSolo's* July/August 2019 issue on "Mindfulness and Lawyer Wellbeing."

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