

BE KIND TO A LAWYER DAY SPOTLIGHT

Choosing to Be Kind



By Courtney B. Schulnick

Have you ever noticed just how hard you can be on yourself? It goes without saying that our clients, bosses, and even our family members can sometimes give us a hard time. But at the end of the day, it's often ourselves who are the hardest on us. Imagine if your inner dialogue was transcribed into a booklet for you or perhaps others to read.

If the thought of that mortifies you, rest assured – you are not alone.

From an evolutionary standpoint, we can partly attribute our tendency to be our own worst critic on the “hardwiring,” so-to-speak, of our brain. Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson, Ph.D., explains that our brains have a built-in negativity bias. So, if there are fifty things that went right on any given day, we're more likely to focus on the one thing that went wrong.

For example, one day you could have donated money to a worthy cause, helped an elderly woman carry groceries to her car, successfully argued a legal issue in discovery court, but during deposition, forgot to ask a witness a key question that the case hinged upon. Chances are that before falling asleep that evening, you're not thinking of all the pleasant events of your day. Instead, the more likely scenario is that you're lying in bed beating yourself up over that one question you feel you should have asked the witness during deposition. As renowned mindfulness meditation teacher Aleeze Moss, Ph.D., says, so often we “should on” ourselves -- berating ourselves for something we should have done, should not have done, or maybe feel we should have done better.

At the beginning of a recent guided mindfulness meditation practice, Diane Reibel, Ph.D., cofounder of the Stress Reduction Program at the Marcus Institute of Integrative Health at Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia, began with the following quote: “Be exquisitely kind and gentle with yourself.” When was the last time you were kind and

gentle with yourself, let alone exquisitely so? Given how busy our lives have become, we often fail to notice how habitually critical we are of ourselves, and how little we treat ourselves with kindness and compassion. When we don't allow ourselves to slow down and notice this, that pesky little voice inside our heads gains more and more momentum, becoming louder and louder, leaving us feeling incompetent and closed-off from others.

The good news is that with mindfulness we can become aware of our tendency to be highly judgmental of ourselves, as well as others, and that awareness is what enables us to choose to be kinder. For many of us, we wouldn't think twice about being kind and gentle towards a loved one, such as a grandparent, a young child or perhaps a pet. But, it can feel a bit stilted or artificial to be kind to ourselves. This may hold especially true given the widely-held misconception that kindness doesn't "fit the mold" of what it means to be a successful attorney, or that being kind may make us soft, passive or a pushover.

To the contrary, nourishing the power of kindness actually strengthens our innate capacity to be kind, as well as other inherent qualities, such as resilience, equanimity and joy, which can greatly benefit us in our personal lives, as well as the work that we do as lawyers. As meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg says, "When we fan even the smallest ember of kindness, we begin to overcome our judgments, fears and doubts and tap into an endless source of gentle strength within." Surely, in an environment that can be as contentious and hostile as that of the legal profession, let alone the current state of our world, it could not be any clearer that what is so desperately needed, perhaps now more than ever, is more compassion.

You may be asking yourself, "How do I cultivate greater kindness towards myself?" The answer is practice. With practice, we strengthen our fundamental ability to be kind and compassionate towards ourselves, as well as those around us. As our practice deepens, we can increasingly recognize that we are not alone in our suffering and that like us, others feel fearful, anxious and sad at times. This awareness can promote a feeling of interconnectedness with others, including the difficult people in our lives.

The practice of Loving Kindness involves repeating a set of phrases. With this practice we send well-wishes inwards to ourselves, as well as outwards to others. At first, it may feel forced to send well-wishes to ourselves. But what grows is what we water. And with this practice, rather than watering seeds of that which we may be so conditioned to watering, such as stress and anxiety, we instead water our intrinsic qualities of kindness, & compassion. If any part of the phrases in the guided practice below doesn't appeal to you, you can always adapt them in any way you care to so that they feel more appealing to you.

Remember, this practice is not about forcing yourself to feel any particular way. You may not be feeling particularly kind or compassionate towards yourself or others at any given moment. Despite what you may be feeling, you can simply hold an intention to cultivate loving kindness, while still being with whatever is present in the senses, thoughts,

emotions, without judgment. Over time, you may notice that there exists the possibility of cutting ourselves some slack and simply allowing ourselves to be just as we are, which in and of itself, is the most radical act of kindness.

For more guided mindfulness practices and resources, please visit <http://www.courtneyschulnickmindfulness.com>. In addition, each Thursday at 4 p.m. (EST) Courtney offers a free 15-minute guided mindfulness practice via Zoom. If interested, please email Courtney at cschulnick@mdwgc.com.



Courtney B. Schulnick serves as Special Counsel in Marshall Dennehey's Casualty Department and litigates cases in both the local state and federal courts. Courtney handles lawsuits involving premises liability for homeowners and businesses, personal injury matters and automobile accidents.