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Positively Legal: Taming the Monkey Mind with Meditation

Skills and Professional Development



Welcome to **Positively Legal**, the *Docket's* new column discussing well-being issues in-house professionals face and offering science-based positive suggestions (tried out by our columnist Caterina Cavallaro) to help us all be more productive, happier, and healthier.

"I'm late, I'm late! For a very important date! No time to say 'hello, goodbye,' I'm late, I'm late, I'm late!"

- The White Rabbit in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*

Our inboxes overflow, our calendars can't accommodate back to back meetings and triple bookings, and we are always late to something — running to meetings, stuck in traffic, trying to meet deadlines, often clinging to the myth of multi-tasking.

Entertainer Ruby Wax makes a sharp observation in his book *A Mindfulness Guide for the Frazzled* that, while we pride ourselves on our ability to multitask, it is “not only what keeps us from being in the present but also what burns us out.” Author Daniel Goleman considers multitasking the “bane of efficiency,” and describes in his book *The Science Behind Meditation* that when our attention returns to the original task after switching, its strength has been appreciably diminished and can take several

minutes to ram up again to full concentration.

We are constantly feeling that we have no time for anything. While short bursts of stress can make us stronger, happier, and healthier, unfortunately, chronic stress is preventing our stress response from switching off and is leading to fatigue and burnout. What scientists have only discovered in recent years is that cortisol needs to be quickly dissipated. And what they've found is that we live in a world in which, for many of us, the cortisol stays in our system constantly. Long after you have been "stressed," your body keeps pumping out adrenaline, according to *The Neuroscience of Mindfulness*.

We are left stressed and burned out. A recent [Gallup study](#) of nearly 7,500 full-time employees found that "23 percent of employees reported feeling burned out at work very often or always, while an additional 44 percent reported feeling burned out sometimes."

Stress — The white rabbit syndrome

According to the [World Economic Forum](#) "stress," from the Latin *stringere*, meaning to squeeze, touch, or injure, is "not bad per se." After all, our stress response has helped us survive immediate dangers like being eaten by a sabre tooth tiger so we can pass on our genes. However, our stress response to a full inbox is triggered in the same way as it was if we were being chased by a sabre-toothed tiger.

The stress response begins in the brain. Our limbic systems are useful for recording behaviors, attaching a positive or negative response that we can use to respond to later. If we identify a threat (a negative response), we know to avoid it. The amygdala (part of the limbic system and the emotional part of the brain) senses danger and signals the hypothalamus, which then communicates the distress to the body activating the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), giving us that burst of energy we need to respond to the perceived danger — our fight or flight response. We would then activate the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), our "rest and digest" response that calms down the body, flooding it with hormones like oxytocin, slowing the heart rate and letting you know danger has passed.

Unfortunately, the amygdala isn't that smart. While the conscious mind may know the difference between real danger (an oncoming bus) and perceived danger (a full inbox), our unconscious minds do not. We need that rush of energy to avoid danger, but we are no longer switching it off. We become stuck in the limbic system with our fight or flight response becoming more emotional and irrational, feeling so stressed we fail to remember things and overreact — none of which is useful.

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While activating the PNS is useful, it would be even better not to unnecessarily activate the SNS. We can do both by strengthening our prefrontal cortex (PFC), often referred to as the CEO of the brain — it is in charge of problem solving, strategizing, self-regulation, impulse control, attention, and empathy. The PFC can override and stop the amygdala from overreacting.

How can we both activate the PNS to manage stress and grow the PFC? Through meditation.

The art of meditation

Simply put, when we meditate, we choose an object of meditation and try to focus on it. This may be the breath, an object, or a mantra we repeat. Regular meditation has been shown to:

- Promote feelings of calm and contentment; as well as heightened awareness and empathy, raising our levels of happiness;
- Grow the PFC;
- Move us from higher brain wave frequencies to lower frequencies and into deeper states of awareness;
- Increase cortical thickness in the hippocampus (which governs learning and memory), and in certain areas of the brain that play roles in emotion regulation and self-referential processing. There were also [decreases in brain cell volume in the amygdala](#) (responsible for fear, anxiety and stress);
- Slow the usual shrinkage of our brain as we age: At age 50, long time meditators' brains are "[younger](#)" by 7.5 years compared to brains of no meditators of the same age";
- Enhance [creativity, problem-solving, and decision-making](#);
- Improve the immune system; and
- Decrease activity in the default mode network (DMN), the brain network responsible for mind-wandering and self-referential thoughts — also known as the "[monkey mind](#)" or snap back when the mind wanders.

For an interesting article that discusses the lack of definition for meditation and mindfulness, among other things, read "[Mind the Hype: A Critical Evaluation and Prescriptive Agenda for Research on Mindfulness and Meditation.](#)"

The many types of meditation

Meditation is very personal. What works (or even appeals to one person) may not for another. There are purists who say meditation only works if you do it twice a day for 20 minutes. I believe any time taken out of the day to meditate and start a practice is a step in the right direction. Here are some suggestions of meditations and courses to try:

- **Breath-based meditation**, for example [Thich Nhat Hanh](#) suggests a simple inhalation of three and exhalation of three breaths "while maintaining the half smile." Other types of meditation to try include: body scan (designed to sync body and mind mentally scanning, from the top of the head to the end of your toes); noting (sitting still and noticing what is distracting your mind); visualization; mantras (repeating a word or phrase); and loving kindness (imagining different people and directing positive energy and goodwill towards them).
- **Structured** (in person or online) programs like Openground's eight-week [Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction](#) course, [Ziva Technique](#), the [Indigo Project](#), the [Insight Meditation Society](#), and [Transcendental Meditation](#).
- **Apps**, for example Headspace, Breathe, or Dan Harris's 10% Happier app, which use different modalities including the more classic breathing through to imagery or particular genres such as loving kindness meditations.
- **Courses** including [Art in Mind at the Art Gallery of NSW](#) and the [Ruben Museum of Art's](#) courses and current recordings of guided meditations focusing on a specific piece of art.
- **Podcasts** such as 10% Happier with Dan Harris, the Tim Ferriss show episodes on

meditation, Tara Brach, or Sharon Salzberg's Metta Hour.

When you feel stressed and about to react — just stop and breath. If you can, slowly inhale for two breaths and exhale for four (increasing both as you go); or try box breathing — slowly inhale for four breaths, hold for four, exhale for four, and hold four (increase to six breaths if you can). Repeat a few times.

The next time you feel your limbic system hijacking your life (like when an email sets you off as though you were being chased by a sabre-toothed tiger), take a breath and try incorporating some of these simple practices into your daily well-being.

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Caterina Cavallaro is managing legal counsel at VGW.

She combines technical legal skills with practical business understanding and a love of innovation, project management, and legal technology to improve ways of working within the legal industry. She is a member of the ACC's In-House In-Health and Legal Technology and Innovation Special Interest

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In addition to her legal skills she has a Diploma of Positive Psychology and Wellness and is a freelance writer. Her “Positively Legal” column for the *ACC Docket* focuses on the intersection of neuroscience, positive psychology, and in-house practice by interviewing experts and fellow lawyers and curating up to date quality research, podcasts and books to help lawyers learn to take control of their own wellness and support their careers.

Outside of work, Cavallaro loves traveling, snorkeling, meditating and spending time in nature.