

Changing Your Mind About Meditation



By Gary Powell

I recently released a series of guided meditation exercises for lawyers under the name Legally Mindful. I choose the phrase “Changing Your Mind About Meditation” as the tagline for Legally Mindful for a number of reasons. In this article, I want to address a couple of the misconceptions people have about starting and maintaining a meditation practice, and why many of you must change your mind about meditation to be successful and enjoy the obvious physical and mental health benefits associated with a meditation practice.

As many of you likely know, there is an increased focus within our profession on improving the health and well-being of attorneys following the publication of the American Bar Association’s (ABA) Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being report¹ in 2017. One of the foundational pillars for improving overall lawyer well-being mentioned in the Task Force report is mindful meditation. The Task Force reported, “Research has found that mindfulness can reduce rumination, stress, depression, and anxiety. It also can enhance a host of competencies related to lawyer effectiveness, including increased focus and concentration, working memory, critical cognitive skills, reduced burnout, and ethical and rational

decision-making.” That is an extremely strong endorsement of meditation by the ABA.

While the benefits of meditation are undeniable, many people still resist meditation because they likely have misconceptions about the difficulty of starting a practice or the concern as to the time involved before any meaningful benefits from meditation are realized. Let me address these two misconceptions based on my experience using a non-traditional meditation approach.

First, starting a meditation practice doesn’t have to be difficult. When I first started meditating, I used the traditional approach of sitting quietly and following my breath and letting my thoughts

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pass through me without judging them. As I started this practice, I was never confident I was “doing it right” and I did not meditate often enough to notice or feel sufficient benefit from my time to make meditation a priority in my life. As a result, I didn’t put in the time I needed to experience what I thought I should for the time invested.

That all changed after I first experienced sound-assisted meditation. I attended a meditation workshop that used guided meditations with a sound wave technology “behind” the guid-

ance and relaxing music. The sound waves are engineered to help your brain get into a very relaxed state with no real effort on your part.² After all, meditation done right should require no effort; you should just allow it to happen. That was much easier for me with sound-assisted meditation than the traditional approach. Also, the guidance gives you comfort that you are doing it right.

During my first workshop exercise, I felt very relaxed and I was able to maintain a relatively deep meditative state — deeper than I'd experienced before. The experiences I had with my early use of sound-assisted meditation made it easier for me to set aside time to use these exercises. While my mind would sometimes wander, the sound waves in the exercises allowed me to return to a deeply relaxed state very quickly and it just got easier the more I used them. To me, that made all the difference.

The second misconception is that it takes a relatively long time to notice or feel personal benefits from meditation. I have found that any time spent in meditation is beneficial, even if for a few minutes at a time. Just like anything else, the more time you spend meditating, the greater the results you will achieve. With sound-assisted meditation, even at the beginning of my practice, I was able to have longer sessions in a deeper relaxed state than I was able to experience using the more traditional meditation approach.

In addition to being able to spend a longer time in a deeply relaxed state, the sound-assisted meditation technology helps to synchronize the two hemispheres of your brain, allowing it to be more productive. I used to consider myself to be a “left-brain dominant” person, as I was very analytical and methodical in my thinking and in the way I experienced the world. The more I used sound-assisted meditation, the more I have seen that I am now better able to use characteristics attributed to the right side of my brain — the more creative, imaginative side.

Here's how I understand this to work. While the brain is not a muscle, the more you exercise it, the stronger the connections become between neurons, for example. While this is a loose analogy, it serves its purpose in explaining how

sound-assisted meditation works to bring about a better working brain. The use of sound-assisted meditation helps you to better exercise the neural connections on both sides of your brain. Just like if your dominant arm is your right arm, weight training will strengthen both arms, so your left arm gets stronger but not at the expense of the existing strength in your right arm as it gets stronger too.

Meditation literally changes your brain. Research shows that meditation leads to an increase in brain mass in parts of your brain relating to executive function, including your working memory, emotional control, sustained attention, and time management. Because sound-assisted meditation helps you get into and stay in a deeply relaxed state longer, if your experience is like mine, you should be able to see these meditation-related benefits sooner than by using the more traditional meditation approaches.

Along the way, besides feeling more at peace within myself, I realized that I could return to a relatively deep meditative state even when I wasn't listening to an exercise. In other words, my brain “remembered” those deep mind states and through practice, those states were accessible to me whenever I wanted to return to them. I also recognized that I could carry a more relaxed but focused state into my waking life, even during stressful situations like a court appearance or meeting.

From my own experience, I can now carry a more focused and creative mental

state into my daily life, allowing me to listen better, to think creatively, and to respond more effectively. Meditation has also given me a better ability to step back from an issue and look at it from different perspectives, making me more efficient and productive in both my personal and professional life. As a result, I feel that I am a better attorney, as well as a happier, better person.

An additional benefit to using sound-assisted meditation is that you can actually take work into your deep meditative state to find creative solutions to complex issues. In my next article, I will explain how I use sound-assisted meditation exercises for work-related purposes, in addition to the more traditional use of mindful meditation for relaxation and stress relief.

Powell is general counsel at Emery Oleochemicals after spending over 25 years involved in litigation in private practice. This is his third CBA Report article on meditation. His prior articles appeared in the October 2015 and June 2017 CBA Report. The Legally Mindful app is available in the Apple App Store and Google Play.

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- 1 The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change (<https://lawyerwellbeing.net>). For further information on the benefits of meditation, here is a summary of the benefits compiled by the American Psychological Association (<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/07-08/ce-corner>).
- 2 For more information about the sound technology behind the Legally Mindful exercises, see <http://legallymindful.com/2018/09/a-simplified-discussion-about-brain-waves-and-the-sam-sound-technology/>

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