

No Lotus Without the Mud

Mindfulness and Difficult Emotions

By Katie Stanley

I'm seated in a small makeshift cubicle barely separated from the lobby of the rural court I've just appeared in. The court staffers are mostly stationed behind plexiglass, wearing masks, and half of the chairs are blocked off with caution tape meant to encourage social distancing. As I quietly enter my case notes and inch gleefully closer to the end of day 300-something of 2020, I hear a commotion erupt from the nearby courtroom. A defendant bursts out of her hearing and accosts anyone within earshot about the outcome of her case. The court security guard gently and graciously tries to calm her down, then almost ends up forcibly removing her—*twice*. She was screaming, crying, and refusing to keep her mask on (because as if dealing with difficult emotions isn't enough, a global pandemic is also in the mix.)

You know that still, small voice of intuition within yourself? Do you ever hear or listen to that? In that moment, my intuition was telling me that this person was going to become our client. Seconds after that thought crossed my mind, the woman combatively told the clerk that she wanted an attorney. As I looked on from my cubicle, the clerk turned to give me a pleading look without revealing my presence. I smiled and nodded, silently affirming that I wanted to help however I could. I stood up and introduced myself as a legal aid attorney, but

before asking about the facts of her case or giving any advice, I asked her to take a seat and do a quick three-breaths practice with me.¹

There are many variations of what a three-breaths mindfulness practice might look like or what each breath might be tailored to address, but in all forms, this is one of my favorite integrated practices. This type of practice refers to a mindfulness exercise that can be used anytime, anywhere, and right in the moment as opposed to a dedicated practice like going to the gym. You might focus on grounding yourself while inhaling and on letting go while exhaling. You might focus the first breath on fully arriving in the moment, the second breath on checking in with your body, and the third on asking yourself, "*What's really important right now?*" Many of us have intuitively done something similar, such as taking a deep breath before entering a difficult meeting.

Surprisingly, in this case, the woman didn't question my request. I guided the practice aloud as the clerks watched and, together, we took one breath to fully bring our presence to what's going on, we took another breath to try to relax any tension being held in the body, and as we took our final breath together, I asked her, "What's really going on?"

Any attorney can tell you that clients come to us with issues, not when all is well, so this is not an unusual occurrence (family law, I'm looking at you.) What is worth noting is not only how we can use mindfulness as a tool to deal with difficult emotions within ourselves and clients, but also how often what we see on the outside isn't the source of the real issue on the inside. When we experience this compassion and understanding, it makes it easier to extend to others.

Mindfulness asks us to look more deeply, to show up more fully, and to meet what we find with curiosity and compassion.

After the three-breaths practice, she calmed down. Not only was I able to provide advice to her, but I understood more fully why she was so upset. These things were contingent on both of us taking a *moment to arrive*, as it's often called, and a mindfulness practice provides great, practical tools for this.²

It's easy to get overwhelmed and snap at otherwise inconsequential slights if you aren't checking in with what's *really* going on; we've all experienced this in one way or another. Once, while I was working two jobs (one of which was representing crime victims) while also pursuing my master's degree, I cried over losing a \$10 bottle slip in the grocery store. I can tell you, as you

"Practicing Wellness" is a regular column of the *Michigan Bar Journal*, overseen by the State Bar of Michigan's Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program. If you'd like to contribute a guest column, please email contactljap@michbar.org.

You know that still, small voice of intuition within yourself? Do you ever hear or listen to that?

There is no way to separate suffering from our experience of life, which also brings us joy, hopefulness, and connection; we must learn to sit with our difficult emotions.

probably suspected, it wasn't about the money; I was overwhelmed. I had been on autopilot for so long, that I wasn't even aware of what the real issues were anymore until I took the time to explore what my mind, heart, and spirit were telling me without judgment. Upon deeper reflection, I realized that my life had gotten sorely out of balance and in this brokenness was an opportunity to create something new.

Life often splits us open and, consequently, creates the space for change and growth to take place.

Kick Workplace Stress to the Curb in 2021 with This Tip from LJAP

Plenty of studies demonstrate that work is a significant source of stress for Americans. Don't let workplace stress get you down this year! Worry well, but only worry once. If a workplace issue causes you to feel anxious or overwhelmed, set a timer for 10 minutes to worry through the issue. Think of all possible outcomes, positive and negative. Anything that must be handled immediately, do it. Otherwise, set a time when it will be necessary to think about the issue again. Put it on your calendar. Whenever the thought pops back up, tell yourself that the time to worry has passed and will come again on the scheduled date. This technique can help to reduce secondary or unnecessary worry while also eliminating avoidance.

Many refer to this process as post-traumatic growth.³ Researchers Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun coined the term to capture what they found to be seven areas of growth that most often spring from adversity: greater appreciation of life, greater appreciation and strengthening of relationships, increased compassion and altruism, identification of new possibilities or purpose in life, greater awareness and utilization of personal strengths, enhanced spiritual development, and creative growth.⁴ Todd Kashdan and Jennifer Kane, who studied experiential avoidance in post-traumatic growth, found that in many cases the greater the distress, the greater the post-traumatic growth.⁵

Not only does research show how scorched earth may often be the most fertile, it also backs up how ignoring or bottling up emotions may lead to negative health outcomes such as a greater risk of being diagnosed with cancer; increased anxiety; depression; and issues with memory, blood pressure, and self-esteem.⁶ Zen teacher, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst Barry Magid refers to this state of ignoring as spiritual or emotional bypass.⁷ In this sense, mindfulness provides a tool not to escape or get rid of suffering or difficulty, but to move toward accepting and facing it by acknowledging it with curiosity and compassion. If our thoughts incessantly tell us that we dislike a certain part of ourselves—such as saying, “I hate how anxious I am”—we often end up more focused on the negative and at war with ourselves. It's been said that, in general, anxiety is a result of trying to control the uncontrollable. One thing this year may teach us is how to begin identifying what's within our control, what is beyond it, and how to find acceptance.

So what can we do? The best place to start is with self-compassion.⁸ We all face challenges; we are all imperfect. One series of steps you might take follows:

- First, take a breath (or three) and identify what's *really* happening. Therapy and journaling can be very useful in unpacking tangled issues if you need help (shout out to the confidential services offered by the wonderful folks at the State Bar of Michigan Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program).⁹
- Then, acknowledge what you're feeling as valid; all emotions are acceptable, though all behavioral responses to them are not. Existentially, you are not your emotions, but you are experiencing an emotion right now and that's okay.
- Next, investigate whether something deeper is triggering this response in you (nothing to do with a bottle slip, perhaps?) What is inside of you that's asking to be looked at in this moment?
- Finally, begin the work toward letting go or discovering ways you have the power to respond compassionately to what you uncover. *One right decision, one day at a time.* As the saying goes, the choices we make today are what define the future of tomorrow.

The “bottle slip moment” for me, as I call it, marked my beginning in discovering mindfulness as a personal practice. I was empowered by the difficulties I was experiencing to slow down just enough to ask myself what was *really* going on. Slowly, and not without struggle, I identified the areas that were most out of balance and started taking the steps toward realignment that were within my control.

I forgave myself when I faltered. I started finding my health again. I started working a more manageable schedule. I finally gave the practice of mindfulness an honest try in order to better manage my stress. Eventually, these moments began to illuminate what brings me joy and aligns with my personal values and sense of purpose—something that no one else can define for us.

This is something we can all do as we reevaluate our experiences, whether it's through journaling, meditation, therapy, or

some combination of the three. For me, mindfulness provides the headlights to stay on the path, but it doesn't stop it from twisting and turning or surprising me as I discover where it leads. This year has given us all an opportunity to search inside ourselves and define what's really important. It may be a difficult process and even a messy one at times, but don't be discouraged; it doesn't have to look any particular way. Meet yourself right where you are and do it with compassion. The point is to start looking, not judging what you find, trying to be anywhere or anyone else, or using it as ammunition for self-criticism. Explore with kind curiosity and, above all, know that you are enough.

As Zen master and author Thich Nhat Hanh writes, you can't have the lotus without the mud.¹⁰ There is no way to separate suffering from our experience of life, which also brings us joy, hopefulness, and connection; we must learn to sit with our difficult emotions. As with the Japanese art

of *kintsugi*, or fixing cracked pottery with gold, silver, or platinum, this way of being owns its brokenness and is more uniquely beautiful than ever because of it.¹¹

And so are you. ■

Katie Stanley is a staff attorney and education manager at Legal Services of Eastern Michigan. She is also a Mindfulness Initiative advisory board member at the Crim Fitness Foundation and a Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute fellow. Stanley is currently pursuing a doctorate with a dissertation focus on wellness in attorneys following mindfulness-based interventions.

ENDNOTES

1. *Micropractices*, Search Inside Yourself Leadership Inst <https://siyli.org/downloads/SIY_Handouts_Micropractices_1day.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/S7QZ-GD3D>]. All websites cited in this article were accessed December 16, 2020.
2. *Id.*
3. Collier, *Growth after trauma*, American Psychological Ass'n (November 2016). <<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2016/11/growth+trauma>> [<https://perma.cc/4K7R-5KX7>].
4. Kaufman, *Post-Traumatic Growth: Finding Meaning and Creativity in Adversity*, Scientific American (April 20, 2020) <<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/beautiful-minds/post-traumatic-growth-finding-meaning-and-creativity-in-adversity/>> [<https://perma.cc/AH9Q-QJZV>].
5. *Id.*
6. Cousins, *Are There Downsides to Always Trying to be Positive?* HCF (February 2018) <<https://www.hcf.com.au/health-agenda/body-mind/mental-health/downsides-to-always-being-positive>> [<https://perma.cc/2E44-JCDT>].
7. Magid, *Taking Life Whole*, The Buddhist Review (September 2013). <<https://tricycle.org/dharmataks/taking-life-whole/>> [<https://perma.cc/9GJH-6WMF>].
8. Mead, *What is Mindful Self-Compassion?* PositivePsychology.com (October 14, 2020). <<https://positivepsychology.com/mindful-self-compassion/>> [<https://perma.cc/JU6G-3QN8>].
9. Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program, SBM <<https://www.michbar.org/generalinfo/ljap/home>> [<https://perma.cc/8MG3-6HAQ>].
10. Hanh, *No Mud, No Lotus* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2014).
11. *Kintsugi*, Wikipedia (December 8, 2020) <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kintsugi>> [<https://perma.cc/6CR9-PUTL>].

ACHIEVE WELLNESS AND MANAGE LIFE'S TRIALS



EMOTIONAL



INTELLECTUAL



OCCUPATIONAL



PHYSICAL



SPIRITUAL



SOCIAL

FREE CONSULTATIONS FOR LEGAL PROFESSIONALS AND THEIR FAMILIES

- Clinical assessments
- Professional wellness training
- Referrals to specialized and effective providers
- Short-term counseling for law students

All services offered are confidential as regulated by HIPAA



LAWYERS AND JUDGES
ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Contact LJAP today at 1 (800) 996-5522 or contactljap@michbar.org