

DON'T THINK ABOUT IT

Savouring the moments at work can help you focus, be more productive and feel less stressed, writes **JANE SOUTHWARD**.

Ros McCulloch was doing the juggling act so many parents face these days – a busy practice in local government and planning law, two teenagers, a recent divorce, and weekly yoga classes. The yoga helped her feel calm but at night she went to sleep too late and often woke up early to start her to-do list for the day.

“I noticed a change in my mental attitude after yoga,” recalls McCulloch, 52, Special Counsel at Pikes & Verekers. “It gives you a peacefulness. People suggested I try mindfulness as a way to get more of this feeling. What I didn’t expect was how much it would improve how I was working.”

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) was developed in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts by Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn who is convinced mindfulness practice can help patients deal with stress, pain and illness. Eight-week MBSR courses are now run worldwide by 1000 certified instructors including in Australia.

Sydneysider Elizabeth Granger gave up 14 years of working as a lawyer to practice psychotherapy seven years ago and, like several Australian MBSR instructors, has trained hundreds of people in mindfulness, including lawyers in NSW.

“Our mindfulness programs focus on three elements – attention, awareness and action,” Granger explains. “It’s not just about training your attention so as to increase focus and presence but it also cultivates increased self-awareness of how you think and act in the world, including your patterns of reactivity. Once we have a strong stable attention and increased awareness of our patterns, we are then in a position to take action to change our behaviours so as to live and work more effectively with higher levels of engagement, clarity and creativity.”

McCulloch, who completed an eight-week course through Open Ground in 2007, giving up two hours from an already jam-packed weekend, says the impact was immediate.

“I was sleeping longer hours within a couple of weeks but the biggest change was in my attitude,” she says. “I learned not to sweat the little things and to accept that not everything goes to plan. I have also learned to be a bit less hard on myself.

“It has given me a more mature attitude to what’s important and what is not. I can set my priorities better. I don’t get upset about how long my to-do lists get. They used to overwhelm me.”

After the MBSR course, McCulloch decided to stop being annoyed that she wasn’t sleeping longer and to use that time at 5.30am for her daily mindfulness practice. She often now begins the day with 35 minutes of breathing, meditation and yoga moves.

Granger says medical evidence supporting mindfulness and proving that the brain can rewire itself through a phenomenon known as neuroplasticity were key to the growth in support for mindfulness. *Time* magazine published a cover story on mindfulness earlier this year, saying that Americans spent US\$4 billion on mindfulness-related alternative medicine in 2007 and that the National Institute of Health in the US was funding 50 clinical trials into the effects of mindfulness on health.

“Mindfulness had been written off as pop psychology but now that it is grounded in research and science it is becoming more accepted,” she says, adding that she is convinced that training your mind to focus your attention – rather than doing a zillion things at once – is a must for getting good work done.

Despite the benefits of mindfulness, McCulloch says maintaining mindfulness practice can be challenging – especially for the time-poor. Earlier this year she did a refresher course aimed at corporate workers.

“It takes commitment and time and when your time is limited, such as for most lawyers, this can be hard,” she says.

“But it really is worth it. I am more efficient now, so much happier and much less stressed.”



Pikes & Verekers Special Counsel Ros McCulloch says mindfulness practice improves her wellbeing – and her productivity.

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ELIZABETH GRANGER

Granger says managing stress so you can work better is a common bonus of mindfulness.

“There is no doubt that in law if you don’t know how to manage your stress, you won’t go very far,” she says. “All lawyers feel at times a sense of rising panic. In these times it is harder to think rationally, calmly and creatively, tempers can flare and you can overreact. Once you have awareness, you can create skillful habits.

“Practising law is stressful, so it’s time we train our minds to deal with the stress. I think mindfulness is something all law students and young lawyers should be trained in as a proactive thing. Mindfulness is all about giving people the skills to take care of their minds.

“It starts with a breath but it’s much more than that. It increases our ability to be present, to regulate our emotions more skilfully, and increases our cognitive capacity so that we can respond more effectively to all the challenges of work and life. When I was a lawyer my most creative moments came while I was swimming or in the shower, times when I gave myself space. Mindfulness gives us this space.

“We can’t control what’s going to come our way but what we can control is how we respond to it.” You can find out more about mindfulness programs by emailing elizabeth@openground.com.au **LSJ**