

Law and *peace*

by Francis Wilkins

Who better than a lawyer to help practitioners manage the pressure of working in the legal profession? Lawyers Weekly meets meditation teacher Sandy Wright

Stress is inherent in the legal profession. Talking of work pressure to a freshly-minted law graduate is already like teaching their grandmother to suck eggs. And there's more to come: getting established, coming to terms with billable hours, taking a job overseas, walking the road to partnership – all include more than their fair share of stress. Oh, and what about time for family?

Many top firms are now taking stress management seriously. Not only is a stressed-out lawyer likely to be less productive, but in the current legal job market the best practitioners can leave a position that is causing them too much grief knowing they are likely to secure employment elsewhere. Human resources departments are therefore increasingly shifting the "work-life balance" towards life, whether through fitness programs, flexible hours or casual-dress days.

Into this environment steps Sydney-based meditation teacher Sandy Wright. Wright runs courses and introductory workshops in meditation designed specifically for legal professionals – her programs even comply with the MCLE requirements of the Law Society of NSW. Recently she released a CD of three guided meditations and soothing background music, designed to help both

beginners and practitioners who have already done some meditation but want to revise their technique.

Wright is well placed to deal with stress in the legal profession. From 1986 until a couple of years ago – when she started teaching meditation full-time – she herself was a practising lawyer. She has worked in small firms and at a major city firm as well as in-house at Westpac and the State Bank of NSW. Most recently she helped develop policy at the Commonwealth Government's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, and while she is particularly experienced in banking and finance law, she has also worked

solution after a night's rest, Wright explains.

Meditation can also improve a lawyer's negotiation and communication skills and according to Wright, the most enthusiastic supporters of meditation techniques within the legal profession in the United States are those involved in litigation, mediation and alternate dispute resolution (ADR). "The aggressive system doesn't work. The 'win or lose' mentality doesn't work," she says. "That's why those in litigation and ADR are finding it more useful."

Not only are the health benefits of meditation considerable, Wright says, they also are well documented in studies by

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on disability and indigenous issues.

Wright's broad legal experience has given her an overview of the profession and its associated stresses in the private, in-house and government sectors and at both large and small firms.

Simply trying out, let alone committing to, the practice of meditation is "a big leap for a lot of people," she says. She has therefore tried to "demystify" meditation to help people experience its health and professional benefits uncluttered by any preconceived ideas they may have. Her CD includes gently spoken guidelines on how to relax, beginning with getting comfortable, deepening and slowing breathing and then relaxing the entire body, starting with the toes and working upwards. There's no mention of mantras or Hindu deities.

Wright believes regular meditation can benefit both a lawyer's personal and professional life. It is particularly helpful for practitioners who have trouble concentrating and focusing – one of the commoner signs of stress – and even after a couple of sessions, there may be noticeable changes. Meditating "allows you to see the trees *and* the forest," Wright says, and lets you focus on the task at hand without worrying about extraneous concerns.

Those who have trouble "disconnecting" and "leaving the office behind" once they have physically left work are also likely to benefit. Being unable to put work aside, another of the key signs of stress, can lead to sleep problems as well as marital and family difficulties and can eventually lead to professional burnout if left unchecked.

Executives can benefit from meditating on a problem rather than thinking about it, Wright says. "We're taught we can think our way out of everything," she adds, but meditation can stimulate the more creative parts of the mind, allowing someone to find less obvious solutions to problems. A similar process occurs when someone chooses to "sleep on" a problem and comes up with the

institutions such as the University of Massachusetts and Monash University. These benefits include "calmer" brain wave patterns and reduced secretion of chemicals associated with stress, as well as lessening the likelihood of developing conditions such as high cholesterol and heart disease.

The Australian Institute of Sport uses meditation techniques with top athletes since it allows them to train harder because their bodies heal more quickly, she says.

Wright's teaching program includes an applied meditation course comprising three 90-minute sessions, a 60-minute introductory workshop and a new eight-session meditation and discussion program for more advanced students who want to discover how they can apply meditation in the context of legal practice. She works with individuals and small groups and also builds courses tailored to law firm and company needs. Her clients have included Henry Davis York (HDY), PwC Legal and the NSW branch of the Australian Corporate Lawyers Association. Deborah Stonley, head of human resources at HDY, says there was such an overwhelming response from lawyers interested in learning to meditate that space limitations prevented all from being accommodated. The firm is considering doing further programs with Wright in the future, Stonley adds.

Wright believes lawyers at every level stand to gain from practising meditation. Younger lawyers with one to three years' experience are particularly interested because they realise law is a tough profession and they need to find some way of dealing with the stress if they are to remain in it; older lawyers may be concerned about health issues such as heart disease. "Members of the legal profession know they're stressed, and they don't like it," she says. "Mostly they are ready to give meditation a go."

Sandy Wright can be contacted by phone at (02) 9388 2148 or through her website, www.sandywright.one.net.au

