

# Cooling Tips When Law Practice—and Life Heat Up

BY ROBIN OAKS

Summer is a time when temperatures are on the rise. It's a season we often equate with finding ways for "chilling out"—and lessening our work pace. The reality is that legal practice rarely slows down. It's full of stressors and unexpected challenges that happen no matter the season. In this article, I'll highlight a few simple, effective tips for skillfully bringing our internal mind, body, and emotional temperature down when life heats up.

Recently, several students in the law class that I teach at the Colleges of Law—Lawyer Well-being and Professional Identity—asked for help dealing with overwhelming "stress." A few were reeling from unexpected events, such as losses of or harm to loved ones, and others were navigating big changes at work. When we're putting out fires inside and out, what simple, quick steps can promote self-regulation, cooling down, and making decisions effectively?

When I use the term self-regulation, I'm referring to actions that can help quickly activate the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system. Sympathetic overdrive (i.e., feeling "stressed out") is when the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system is chronically over-activated. We need our sympathetic nervous system to mobilize and become energized to live life. But, if we're stuck in these sympathetic "fight or flight" response patterns, our emotional, mental, intellectual, and physical wellness and well-being suffer.

The parasympathetic branch of the nervous system acts as a "brake" on sympathetic arousal, creating a balancing state so that renewal, rest, and digestion can take place. The two branches work together like yin-yang dancing partners responding to the environment and regulating what we need.

The parasympathetic involves our "rest and digest" and "tend and befriend" functions. The major component activating our parasympathetic branch is the vagus nerve (tenth cranial nerve). It's a nerve network that "wanders" throughout the body to major organs, acting as a key communication pathway delivering and receiving vital messages that keep us alive. This nerve plays a crucial role in managing

stress, influencing mood, and modulating the body's inflammatory and immune system responses. The following practices all support activation of the vagus nerve (parasympathetic) and are simple tips to help self-regulate quickly.



Robin Oaks

## **Cold Helps to Cool**

The vagus nerve has a huge number of connections to and from the nerves in the face and neck (as well as throughout the entire body). This is why you can activate the parasympathetic by gently tapping or massaging certain areas of the face and neck, such as around the eyes and mouth, and behind the ears. Splashing cool water on your face or placing cold towels on your neck can help increase vagal tone. Cooling the temperature down in your bedroom at night helps support more restful, deep sleep because this promotes parasympathetic ("rest and digest") activation.

Humming and singing activate the vagus nerve by creating vibrations in the neck and throat. We are wired to pick up cues through our ears and eyes about safety – or threat. A voice that is not too high or too low, but is steady and prosodic, sends messages to our nervous systems of safety, which activates our parasympathetic nervous system. This is why humming lullabies in a soft and rhythmic voice to infants who may be hyper-aroused has such a soothing effect. Humming to yourself activates the vagus nerve, sending messages for beneficial changes throughout the body affecting heart rate, digestion, breathing, focus, and tension release.

## **Mini Mindful Moments**

Although mindfulness *meditation* practices—with *practice*—cultivate overall more aware, peaceful, and alert mental states, there are simple *mindfulness* practices that quickly shift negative ruminating, emotional volatility, and hyper-arousal. Many apps specifically designed for busy legal professionals can guide your attention in ways that promote nervous system regulation. Some techniques involve progressive muscle relaxation. Others adjust your breathing patterns or guide you to concentrate attention in certain ways that promote re-balancing, present moment awareness, and meta-cognition (awareness of thoughts).

Doing a mini-mindfulness “body scan” is one practice that can adjust your nervous system quickly. This involves consciously paying attention to the present moment by focusing on the sensations you’re feeling in your body from head to toe (head/neck, arms, torso, legs, and feet on the ground). Pause, close your eyes, and open your awareness with curiosity to whatever you feel around your head and neck area. If you notice any sensation of tension, imagine your awareness allowing a softening and loosening of any tightness you may feel. Pay attention slowly as you sense into each of these body regions. When you bring attention to your legs and feet, focus on the sensations of your feet touching ground. Imagine a sense of connection to the vastness of earth. Recognize that in this moment you are totally safe, as you gently slow your breathing down. This simple practice activates the vagus nerve and shifts your attention from your thoughts to physical sensations in a spacious way, which helps break stressful thinking patterns and promotes a sense of physical ease.

### ***Breathing for Balance***

Pranayama (breathwork) practices that have been used for thousands of years can quickly promote nervous system self-regulation. Every time we breathe out and exhale, we’re activating our parasympathetic. When we inhale, we slightly activate our sympathetic nervous system. Making your exhale a bit longer than your inhale rebalances sympathetic overactivation.

According to a study by researchers at Stanford Medicine, “cyclic sighing,” a controlled breathing exercise that emphasizes long exhalations, was found to be more effective in producing calm than other stress management practices studied. Dr. David Spiegel, director of the Center on Stress and Health at Stanford Medicine, explained, “When you notice what’s going on in your body [if you’re over-anxious and dysregulated], your brain thinks, ‘Oh no, this must be really bad,’ and you get more anxious. It’s like a snowball rolling downhill.” Intentionally engaging in “cyclical sighing” can hack this reaction and calm your mind and body

quickly. The study gave research participants the following instructions for “cyclic sighing”: “Breathe in through your nose. When you’ve comfortably filled your lungs, take a second, deeper sip of air to expand your lungs as much as possible. Then, very slowly, exhale through your mouth until all the air is gone. Then inhale again...” Many breathwork practices quickly reset the nervous system, increasing positive feelings of calm and alert awareness, and lowering resting breathing and heart rates.

### **Co-regulating with People, Pets, Nature, and Meaningful Connections**

The vagus nerve is activated when we feel safe in the world and with others. We are wired to need connection in order to feel well. This is why seeking out meaningful connections with people, pets, or nature helps regulate and rebalance the nervous system. Taking breaks when tension builds up and going outside to connect with nature supports cooling down physically and mentally. If you cannot go outside, then look out the window at a nature scene. Research has shown that this eases your nervous system, promotes healing, and helps working memory and learning.

Isolation, especially when we feel dysregulated, creates added stress on the body. However, choose your connections wisely during times of overwhelm. Being around other people who are dysregulated, anxious, tense, critical, or emotionally distant, can create more “fight or flight” reactions. To help you move through challenging life circumstances and build resilience, surround yourself with friends, therapists, and coaches who are supportive and can listen without trying to fix or judge you.

Ethan Kross, a psychologist and researcher, shares in his new book, *Shift, Managing Your Emotions – So They Don’t Manage You*, the science behind why talking to yourself in the third person, (“distanced self-talk”) is an effective stress management tool. Instead of using the word “I,” talk to yourself using “you” or your name. Tell yourself something to handle successfully any stressor you may be facing. In one pair of neuroscience experiments that Kross performed, “participants showed signs of experiencing less negative emotions *within seconds* of using distanced self-talk to regulate their emotions.” The research showed that it didn’t activate a brain waveform that tracks exertion of effort, which means that it “doesn’t overly exhaust prefrontal thinking resources.”

Kross admits that if he feels caught in a negative emotion loop, his go-to science-backed tool is distanced self-talk. He also sometimes unhooks from a present moment stressful experience by practicing what he calls “time-traveling.” This involves shifting attention to some imagined experience

in the future to help feel more in control, gain perspective, and restore equanimity.

### **Just Journal It**

There are many practices for journaling, but they all have in common using writing to express your thoughts. The idea is to write about anything (a pen and paper is better than typing) that is on your mind. Express yourself without judgment—by just letting your thoughts freely flow onto the paper. As legal professionals, we can easily get stuck in worry, regret, or over-thinking about the past or future. When journaling, you engage your rational side, which helps to feel more in control of overwhelming emotions. Journaling also utilizes the creative part of your mind, helping to see the bigger picture and preventing getting stuck in “fight or flight” reactivity. It allows you to slow down and be with your thinking in a more present manner, providing space to sort through the ideas or emotions that may be surfacing.

If you’re reluctant to try journaling because you fear creating a paper-trail of your deepest, perhaps darkest thoughts, then plan to shred what you wrote immediately after. You might even use the shredding of the paper as a ritual to imagine letting go of whatever is stressing you. Journaling allows you a sense of total freedom to express whatever is on your mind, compared to what legal writing feels like—with every word so carefully planned, permanent, and public.

### **Boundaries Build Resilience and Routines Reduce Decision Fatigue**

I recently read a quote from Steve Jobs that emphasized the importance of setting boundaries for both success and decision-making. He said words to the effect that, “Focus is saying, ‘No.’” While it may be tempting to push through difficult situations with mindless hyper-activity, endless striving to do, or saying yes to what others want from you, it is crucial for sustained mental and physical resilience to set clear boundaries about what you *really* need (and communicate this clearly to others). Jobs explained his secret to success was focusing on a few great ideas and letting the thousands of others go, simplifying choices so that energy is maximized for effective action.

There are estimates that in today’s complex world we make over 35,000 decisions each day. These decisions take energy. This diminishes our decision-making capacity. The more decisions one makes—and attorneys are in decision-making-mode all day—the more stress in the body, leading to energy drain. Have you ever noticed that when you feel fatigued, you may find short cuts in the form of

procrastination, impulsiveness, avoidance, and indecision.<sup>9</sup>

Limiting your choices, by planning ahead, engaging in routines, or performing rituals throughout the day, preserves your energy and provides stamina. Plan ahead of time what clothes you will wear or what meals to eat. Don't overthink your planned choices and stick to them. Delegate certain choices throughout a day to others, when possible. Do and decide less—to be more.

### ***Self-Compassion and Laughter = Self-Care***

Kristin Neff, a psychologist, has done extensive studies about the benefits of practicing self-compassion. Self-compassion is treating oneself with kindness and understanding, especially during challenging times. Self-compassion, according to Neff, is not about self-pity or self-esteem. Internal self-criticism activates “fight-flight-freeze” responses. Neff's research shows that self-compassion practices enhance resilience, reduce stress, and promote emotional self-regulation. Her research on self-compassion highlights three core components: self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity.

Self-kindness involves treating oneself with the same care and understanding that one would offer a good friend. Mindfulness involves witnessing whatever thoughts, feelings, and sensations are happening, with an attitude of non-judgmental curiosity, which provides insight and awareness. Common humanity recognizes that suffering and making mistakes are all part of the universal human experience. This helps reduce feelings of loneliness and shame.

When my mother passed away, I felt a lot of grief and dysregulation. She had a magnet with a message on it always affixed to her refrigerator. I decided to place her magnet on my own refrigerator door, using it as a self-compassionate practice that gave me a common humanity perspective to cool my heated heart. Every time I opened the refrigerator, I felt the cool breeze calm my body. I then mindfully took a moment to pause and breathe—while reading the quote on the magnet: “Falling down is part of life. Getting up is *living*.”

A final tip for self-regulating involves intentionally cultivating positive emotions. Laughter is not only an effective breathwork practice that activates your vagus nerve, but as

the saying goes, “Laughter is the best medicine.” Laughter increases feelings of connection with others and acts as a “safety valve” to effectively shut off the flow of “fight-or-flight” physical reactions. Laughter is cathartic. It helps process stored emotions that might be difficult to feel. It changes our brain and body chemistry—and even helps optimize our immune system and memory functions.

Did you know there is an organization, the American Association of Therapeutic Humor, that researches the practical applications and therapeutic benefits of laughter? The organization seeks to foster health, well-being, and performance of people, organizations, and communities through humor. Laughter is highly behaviorally contagious. It’s an effective stress management strategy for legal pro-

fessionals that we can all share freely for everyone’s benefit—including our own. ■

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## Checklist: Tips for Self-Regulating and Cooling Down When Life Heats Up

If you’re in need of self-regulating and restoring physical, emotional, or mental balance when something causes drain, dysregulation, or distress at home—or work, consider trying any of the following simple and quick practices in this checklist. Each is explained in this article.

- Cold Helps to Cool
- Mini Mindful Moments
- Breathing for Balancing
- Co-Regulating with People, Pets, Nature, and Meaningful Connections
- Just Journal It
- Boundaries Build Resilience and Routines Reduce Decision Fatigue
- Self-Compassion and Laughter = Self-Care