

# California LAWYER

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## Keep Calm and Lawyer On

EDUCATION

**A**T UC BERKELEY SCHOOL OF Law, students are taking a study break to ... Drink? Cry? Complain? Well, maybe, but many of them now are also meditating.

Thanks to the Berkeley Initiative for Mindfulness in Law, headed up by Charlie Halpern, its director and a lecturer at the school, the practice is becoming a routine part of many Boalt Hall lives. Since its inception in 2011, the Mindfulness Initiative has attracted some 10 percent of the Berkeley Law community, and similar programs exist or are forming around the country.

Halpern defines meditation as “the practice of looking inward and being still.” He adds that, “Mindfulness is when meditation succeeds, and we can then proceed through our days being empathetic and receptive.” Empathy is one of the central goals of meditation in law, allowing lawyers to connect better with their clients. Meditating provides a respite from the rigorous demands of the legal profession and the burden that often comes with difficult or emotional casework.

Across the Bay at the University of San Francisco, law professor Rhonda Magee also teaches a meditation class and says this movement is taking off nationwide: Courses or similar cocurricular programs are in place at UCLA, the University of Connecticut, Phoenix School of Law, and the University of Miami, University of Florida, and University of Missouri, among others. Magee argues that meditation enhances traditional lawyerly skills such as litigation (fewer nerves!), and that a contemplative practice can remind lawyers that we’re all in this together—a valuable insight for those in the business of conflict resolution.

At Berkeley, the program takes form in for-credit and noncredit meditation classes (both traditional still meditation, and a movement-based practice called Qi Gong), retreats, and workshops, including one that will be held June 6–9 called “Mindfulness in Legal Education.” Halpern expects that 40 or so educators from around the country will attend to learn more about incorporating meditation practices into their curriculums. For her part, Magee believes this openness to new techniques in law practice is at an all-time high and is a natural response to the negative stereotype of lawyers as highly stressed and lacking in empathy. “This movement is an organic one,” she says.

As for the students, are they buying it? According to Subin Varghese, a first-year law student at Berkeley who took Halpern’s Introduction to Mindfulness in Law last fall, they are. “At first ‘mindfulness’ is just a word,” Varghese says. “But then we’d tie it into the law through exercises like mindful listening to a client—no interrupting, no cutting them off—and you could see how one might use it. Also, I don’t think it’s something you have to do for years to reap the benefits. Even if you just sit and meditate once, you can feed off the stillness that you get from that all day.” —KARMAH ELMUSA