

# perspectives

...on the Semiahmoo Peninsula



Contributed photo

Stuart Zukerman (centre), with lawyers from the Surrey-based Zukerman Law Group, says his team is benefiting from mindfulness training.

*Meditation training seen as a way to reduce burn-out, increase productivity*

## Mindfulness matters for Surrey law firm

Alex Browne  
Staff reporter

A Surrey-based team of ‘mindfulness trainers’ is discovering just how effective this meditation technique can be in helping workers deal with – and function more productively in – high-stress occupations.

For the past eight weeks, Still Here Mindfulness – a blossoming business venture for South Surrey resident and former *Surrey Leader* reporter Kevin Diakiw – has been working with the legal team at Newton’s Zukerman Law Group in weekly one-hour training sessions.

And while the partners were initially skeptical, ultimately “employee buy-in has been huge,” Diakiw said.

The modern practice of mindfulness –

which originated in Buddhist concepts, although authorities differ on how closely it hews to historic Buddhism – can be described as a way of focusing attention on your own breathing, what you are feeling, and what you are experiencing around you in an in-the-moment, completely non judgmental way.

It is becoming increasingly popular as a strategy for dialing down the stress and anxiety that seems to be a given in today’s workplace, and in society in general.

For the lawyers working with senior partner Stuart Zukerman, whose practice is family law-oriented, stress

can run high indeed – which is one of the reasons he was open to the potential benefits of mindfulness training.

As Zukerman explained, the polar highs and lows of winning and losing cases – endemic to the legal business – gain heightened emotional intensity in family law.

He told *Peace Arch News* that in 28 years of practice in the field he has experienced cases

where, beyond merely arguing things like child custody rights, he has had to help determine the custody of children following the death of one parent at the hands of a spouse.

“You are the voice of the client,” he

said, adding that the toll of personal involvement in the work leads to a high incidence of burn-out among lawyers in the field (Diakiw said it has been estimated that the average ‘shelf life’ of family lawyers is around two years).

At a recent session, this reporter observed as a circle of Zukerman lawyers and employees gathered in a company meeting room to undergo a session on mindfulness as a way of coping with physical pain.

It was led by Diakiw with coach-colleagues Paula Carlson (Diakiw’s former editor at *The Leader* newspaper) and David Marshall – a former carpenter who has used mindfulness to significantly reduce pain from a herniated disc – who specializes in helping people with pain management.

*Continued on A14*



Paula Carlson



Kevin Diakiw

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# A mind for reducing stress

*Continued from A11*

"This is the most challenging aspect to a mindfulness experience," Diakiw acknowledged, as participants shared their attempts to come to terms with the idea of simply observing – even visualizing – pain rather than "trying to make something happen" to relieve it.

It's a difficult notion to accept, Diakiw noted, when someone has an issue, like chronic back pain, that has become part of their personal narrative, colouring their experience and expectations.

"We're setting our attention on (the pain), not setting a judgement of good or bad or introducing 'a story' – when we introduce a story it grows roots and is going to stay," he said.

Following the session, Diakiw explained that while we are conditioned by the fast pace of modern life to expect quick fixes, the mindfulness techniques work by loosening the crippling grip of stress and anxiety that can actually prevent us from recognizing solutions and strategies for dealing with our ongoing problems.

"When you stop and create space, and clear your head, you create an opportunity to really engage with what is going on," he said.

"It's about making space and clearing clutter. When do people have great epiphanies? It's when they stop what they're working on, and make coffee, and spill some sugar on the floor.

"Google has created something they call 'Fed-Ex time' – they calculate that 20 per cent of your time at work is spent thinking about something that is not to do with your job – yet that is where 50 per cent of the creative ideas come from."

Google is not alone in recognizing the benefits of mindfulness to both employee and company alike.

Diakiw said peer-reviewed studies of a pilot mindfulness project at US medical provider Aetna noted a 28 per cent reduction in stress, a 20 per cent increase in sleep quality and well-being and a 19 per cent reduction in pain among participants – along with a significant increase in employee production.

Major companies like Deutsch Bank, Nike and Proctor & Gamble have also taken note and incorporated it into their workplaces, Diakiw said.

And growing awareness of mindfulness has created an undeniable surge in Still Here's own business, added Diakiw, who recalled his first steps toward the current success, when he started moonlighting as a meditation teacher back in 2004.

"When it came time last year to consider



Contributed photo

**Stuart Zukerman says he has long been open to meditation techniques as a way of coping with stress.**

whether or not to continue on a journalistic path, it was really a no-brainer," he said. "If I look back (on starting the business) it's grown way beyond what I thought it would."

Carlson, who has been practising yoga for eight years, said she finds meditation – and developing her own specialization in mindfulness though movement – is a natural extension of a path she was already on.

"When Kevin started Still Here, I got on board as a coach," she said.

The project with the law group, now nearing its close, has been a learning experience for the Still Here team as well, she said, noting that when they first started, there was a high degree of reluctance and skepticism among the busy lawyers, who were being asked to interrupt an intense working day for the training.

"The tension in the room was palpable," Diakiw said. "But the more we got into meditation, the change in the room was one of the most dramatic I've seen in working with any group."

Noted Carlson: "I had a cold that day, and as Kevin led them into meditation I left to have a coughing fit. When I came back into the room I literally felt the change in the energy."

"They were begging us to come back in next week," Diakiw said.

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