



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

You can subscribe through iTunes or Google Play.

### **Mindfulness: Legislative Staff Elixir | OAS Episode 33 | May 10, 2018**

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

Working in state legislatures is a very demanding job. The shifting nature of legislation and the mixture of public opinion, rules, procedures and process make session work stressful. But for the estimated 30,000-plus legislative staff that work in legislatures during session, most will tell you that the work is rewarding.

The week that this episode of “Our American States” is being released, the National Conference of State Legislatures is celebrating “Legislative Staff Week.” For those that work in state legislatures, we are devoting this episode to stress relief. Later in the program we will talk to the head Science Officer of Headspace, a company that merges technology and meditation. Megan Jones Bell will be a featured speaker at NCSL’s Legislative Summit in Los Angeles this summer.

But first, we’ll talk with a legislative staffer who, in her leadership position, has implemented meditation into her work and personal life. We’re now online with Tammy Wright, who is the Clerk of the New Hampshire Senate. Tammy, welcome to the program.

Tammy: Thank you. Good morning.

Gene: So Tammy, tell us a little bit about your job and what you do there at the New Hampshire Senate.

Tammy: As the Clerk of the Senate, I work for all 24 senators, I’m elected by the body; but my primary goal is to work directly for the Senate President and make sure that all the legislation goes through the body by our rules. I set up and organize our Senate session right to with the legislation getting to the Governor’s office and being signed into law. I oversee the paperwork part of it, with working, coordinating with the leadership staff.

I also oversee setting the agendas, all the publications as far as calendars, journals, printing of bills. It's just many duties. There are a lot of things as far as meeting with both parties so that I have all the information I need to make sure that I can set up session correctly and, again, overseeing my staff.

Gene: Explain to us what the stress levels must be for the staff there at the New Hampshire Senate. What types of things do staff typically go through?

Tammy: Well, we have really strict deadlines and we have to meet, and just being in the Clerk's office, again, overseeing all the paperwork, everything has to be done by a certain time. So it's very stressful. We have to be completely organized to meet those deadlines. So that means there's a lot of overtime, there's a lot of not knowing.

I've worked for the Senate for 29 years. So I can see now what needs to happen or get prepared for things that might happen. Lots of times for the staff, that's stressful for them because we're doing a lot of work for just-in-case-this-happens.

All our publications are out on the Internet, so our errors are shown, whereas most other people, they're just passing their work along. But everything that we do in this office is public. So that brings a little bit of stress.

Gene: For you personally, what actions do you undertake to relieve stress during session?

Tammy: What we've done here... first I'll talk about team, because it is a team to make all of this happen – you have to be extremely organized to relieve the stress from it all. So I try to tell my staff and myself that we set the tone.

So especially like on a session day, we meet at 10:00 o'clock in the morning and they come in and they might caucus at 8:00 o'clock. And whatever changes that they told us at 8:00 o'clock the night before could be completely changed. So we have to work fast and furious.

So for myself, what I do with mindfulness, I try to slow myself down before I give an answer. I try to think about everything that I'm doing and with the staff we set the tone. So we have kind of like a ripple effect – if they start to see that I'm straying a little bit, they might come up and place their hand on my shoulder.

Before the session starts what I try to do is I just try to notice how I'm feeling, and it sounds kind of odd, but you know, if my mind is racing I try to just take deep breaths. I'm not sure if I mentioned that I teach yoga too in my other life. So one of the things that I try to tell... I teach to veterans... and what I've tried to tell them all like at the end when we do meditation, meditation is great when we're in a quiet room, but most importantly is when we can quiet our mind when we're in chaos, 'cause that's really when you need that tool.

So, you know, I have a few little things that I do. I wear Mala Beads. So I might even just take my Mala Beads off and pass them through my fingers just to relax. The last couple of sessions I've started using a diffuser in the chamber with lavender just to give it like a calming effect.

There's a birch tree outside of the chamber window that I used to, like when I started to feel like I was really getting overwhelmed 'cause, again, things happen fast and furiously and stressful, and I would look out the window and just take a few breaths and just try to collect my thoughts, and then come back, because I know that standing next to the Senate President, if I start to feel overwhelmed, things aren't going to go well.

So I kind of implemented these little things and I think talking with my staff, I think we've all done little things to help us get through that stress.

In my outside life I try to get as much rest as I can when I know we're coming into times... like right now, this is a deadline week for us. So I just try to take care of things that need to get taken care of so that I don't have added pressure, and I tell my staff they should be doing kind of the same thing. You know, I just try to get outside, I try to take a walk, because to me, if you still do something that you love, like with walking for me, I'll take a hike through the woods...

When I get out, like last night I did a 3-mile walk in the woods, when I got done I was just totally relaxed. So it doesn't matter if you're sitting down, closing your eyes and trying to calm the body, you can get that same effect. Anything that lowers your blood pressure or, you know, your heart rate or whatever slows your breath down, you need to do that.

Gene: For those people like me, can you explain what Mala Beads are?

Tammy: Mala Beads? They're similar to like Rosary Beads. There are 108 beads and what we do is sometimes sitting still for me is not easy. So you pick a mantra, which could be a prayer, a word, sometimes I just use the word "peace," and you're passing the bead through your finger, and hopefully by the time you get to that 108<sup>th</sup> bead, you've settled your mind.

The way I look at it, you use anything that can settle, that can help. Once you can concentrate on something, it'll take your mind off whatever it is that's troubling you, worrying you; at least it works for me. But it comes with practice. It's not something like the first time I sat down and used the Mala Beads or meditation. I actually went to a workshop.

We started on a Saturday and I did it with a couple of people, and we met every Saturday for a year. It all comes with hard work. You have to put in the work to get there. But the results are amazing. There's nothing like finishing a class and getting into Savasana, which is final relaxation, and just how you feel after. It's wonderful.

Gene: And when did you start being aware of mindfulness and taking these steps to make sure that you were personally ready for the job in a place where you could be the most productive?

Tammy: It took me a while. I started because I liked the practice of yoga. As I started going to class and started meeting new people and being in the environment... I'm not saying this is a bad environment, but it's high stress... I probably practiced a few years before I really got it; I have to admit that.

I decided to take the teacher training program, which I was unable to finish it a couple of times because of work, the hours. I finally finished it I think it was in 2010, and I did that class

completely because I wanted to further my practice. I had no intentions at the time of teaching other people, because I felt like I had so much to learn.

I think that was about really when I took the teacher training, it was a 200-hour, 10 months – you really learn about yourself. When you're in a group of people and you're with like-minded people, it's kind of rewarding in a way because you have to really look at yourself and see the things that you need to change about yourself. You look at the things that aren't working and then you start to implement the things that you find that are helpful.

And I'm not saying it wasn't good before, but I feel like every step that I've taken through this journey has made me better at what I do.

Gene: You sound very peaceful, in a good place.

Tammy: Oh, not always. It's work in progress. We take 10 steps back. At least I got it – that's how I look at it. When we're working all these hours and I can't even have my own personal practice, at least I know that I have to get back to it.

Gene: The one thing we really haven't touched on is that we focused primarily on the professional side of things, but there are definitely stresses in personal lives as well. How do you balance that professional/personal aspect?

Tammy: As best as I can. I have children, but they're grown, and grandchildren, so personally, my life outside of work is okay. It's just being mindful and knowing what you can do and accepting what you can do. And I know that I need to take care of myself, and that's the most important part, because I cannot do my job and I cannot help my family if I'm not taking care of myself.

And I probably wouldn't have done that years ago; I didn't see that as being really important, but it really is, even if it's an hour to go sit somewhere and do something that you love. You have to have passion, something that you're passionate about.

Gene: So Tammy, I'll close out on this... this podcast is airing during the National Conference of State Legislatures Legislative Staff Week – What advice would you have for others who work for legislatures across the country about mindfulness?

Tammy: I use an app on the iPhone and I go on and I set the tone of the day for me and everything, and then it will guide me through something. So there are so many ways to find something for free; that you don't have to just go to a yoga studio for this.

I just tell people to try to take a class, a yoga class, because yoga is far more than just the posture. And there is something for everybody. And I believe that if you go to a studio or somewhere and it doesn't resonate with you, try another one. Don't give up. There's just so much to it.

I know that with people, 'cause I've been teaching since 2011 I believe, I've heard positive feedback – they don't get why they feel better, but they just feel better. And I think that's important: sometimes you don't even have to get it. But everybody has got stressful, crazy lives now.

Gene: Absolutely. We've been talking with Tammy Wright, who is the Clerk of the New Hampshire Senate. Tammy, thank you so much for being a part of "Our American States."

Tammy: Thank you.

Gene: After this short break we'll talk with a science officer who has taken research to enhance online meditation programs for her company, Headspace.

Break

Gene: We now have as our guest Megan Jones Bell who is the Chief Science Officer of a company called Headspace. Megan, welcome to our program.

Megan: Great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Gene: So Megan, will you please share with the audience what mindfulness means and what mindfulness training is?

Megan: Absolutely. So mindfulness is the quality of being present in the here and now as life unfolds, fully engaged with whatever we're doing in the moment, free from distraction or judgment, with a soft and open mind.

An easy way to think about mindfulness is really meditation in action. Meditation... some people can't really tell the difference between mindfulness and meditation – but meditation, on the other hand, is that time when we intentionally remove ourselves from everyday activities to find a more conducive environment for practice.

Gene: And so what are the benefits of mindfulness training?

Megan: Generally speaking people experience a greater sense of calm, clarity, contentment and compassion when they cultivate a mindfulness practice. Scientifically, we also know that mindfulness is associated with improvement in general wellbeing, happiness, compassion, focus, and also with reduction in feelings of anxiety, burnout, aggression and irritability.

The way I like to think about it is meditation and mindfulness practice kind of brought into your everyday life, it can be an amplifier of positive emotions and show up in the world in a way that's more consistent with your values, and it can also kind of dial down some of those negative emotions or the intensity of them, or some of those actions that we might take and then later regret.

Gene: And so Megan, how long have you been in this field?

Megan: Well, I've been a psychologist for 15 years; I've been at Headspace for the last year.

Gene: What drew your interest to this field?

Megan: I actually chose to become a psychologist because I was interested in preventing mental health disorders and I went to graduate school originally because I wanted to learn evidence-based treatments for common mental health disorders, and immediately started working in digital interventions because one of the issues that I've always wanted to solve is around reduction in stigma for mental health disorders and just mental health generally, not only as a disorder in its most extreme form, and also to address the disparities in access to effective help.

I've spent these last 15 years developing and evaluating digital interventions. When Headspace called about a year ago, I was really excited because of the opportunity to work in a company that is really helping change the cultural conversation around wellbeing and mental wellbeing, and helping normalize mental health.

Gene: So you talked about earlier pressures that the people are under. Our audience for this podcast are people who constantly find themselves under intense pressure during a legislative session, constant pressing deadlines, committee hearings, constituent outreach, media questions, and other appointments that make it difficult to take time to meditate or practice mindfulness.

I'm sure you have other sectors that you deal with that have similar demands and make it difficult for people to take time to do this type of training. What do you say to those people?

Megan: I have a number of pieces of advice here and this is a common experience for people. So I'd say first, especially in the context of where you have fairly predictable seasonal stressors around work and time scarcity, I would say take full advantage of those times when you aren't in session to build up a stress buffer and really invest in your resilience, because you'll still benefit from a more intensive mindfulness practice that you've done previously in that stressful moment when you are in session, because the effects of mindfulness can be lasting. So I'd say go into a predictably stressful period with more resilience in the first place.

Then if you're trying to cultivate a practice more in the moment, start small and set very achievable goals. You're not going to be a monk overnight and that may not be anyway what you need. So we see benefits after about 10 minutes done about three to four times a week. And so we know from our research that even small doses of meditation training can yield really measurable results, both in terms of how you feel and also in terms of how you act.

Then when you're trying to cultivate that meditation habit, it's a great idea to anchor that to an existing routine and leverage cues in your environment. And so what I mean there is that we're much more likely to build new habits when we attach them to existing ones.

So this might mean that I sit down at my desk in the morning before I open my laptop or open my email application and dive in and come out later that night maybe to take 10 minutes or 5 minutes, if that's all you have, while you're already sitting and perhaps even block out time in your calendar, or put a note on your screen – something that is a visual cue and a time protection, so that you can cultivate that practice.

The other thing I'll say is it can really help to make meditation a collective practice. We've heard from a lot of our users and the partners with whom we work that they organize group meditation in their environment and maybe play a Headspace session. The social accountability

of showing up, taking that time together, and also the effect it has on normalizing this, especially when a leader is present, can really help reinforce that habit formation.

Gene: Your company helps combine technology and mindfulness. Is there an intersection there where actually technology is helping people to practice mindfulness?

Megan: It's an interesting dialectic and this is something I've explored my entire career. And the way I see technology and the way Headspace sees it is as a tool that helps us meet people where they are, and leverage the technology that's already with you all of the time, and to give you a moment of peace rather than a moment of distraction.

So I really like this idea of coopting something that can be a source of stress into a source of respite. And then as a psychologist, I think about these subtleties that we have in our habits. So if we can train ourselves to reach for our phone in a moment of boredom and scroll through emails, the news, social media, we can also train ourselves to do the opposite and take a moment to focus on our breath and cultivate awareness, or even to a guided meditation.

Gene: The people who are legislators – there are many of them across the country who are I would describe as adrenaline junkies; they kind of get their energy from the adrenaline and from the stress and the chaos that often comes from that, from a legislative staff perspective – what advice would you give to the legislative staff to deal with people who have that kind of need for that kind of energy?

Megan: Yeah, I would say if you yourself are one of those people who thrive on that kind of energy, I would say: what meditation can do for you is it can let you keep that energy, but help you clarify your focus. That's something that I notice through working at Headspace. We have this regular at 10:10 every day group meditation for the whole company for anyone who wants to participate. So by that point I've had two cups of coffee, I'm ready to go, I have 100 emails, I'm looking at my stack of meetings. But what I feel in spite of maybe being over-caffeinated going into that meditation is that when I come out, I'm much more intentional, I'm more focused.

And so I think that there's a way to marry both of those energies. It certainly will help you go back into your interactions with other people with less irritability, with more compassion, you'll be able to hear and understand your stakeholders and understand what's behind their actions or statements, and overall help you become more effective. And that's both my experience with meditation and it's also what our research consistently shows.

Gene: So, Megan, you're one of our featured speakers at the National Conference of State Legislatures Legislative Summit in Los Angeles this summer. What are you planning on sharing with attendees?

Megan: Well, I'm excited to share more about the science behind meditation and help people take something that they feel can be very abstract and understand some of the more concrete and measurable impacts that meditation has on our brain, our behavior and how we relate to our thoughts and emotions.

I'd also like to inspire the attendees to think about how they can bring mindfulness into their everyday lives and help build more mindful cultures in their homes, workplaces and communities.

Gene: We've been talking with Megan Jones Bell, the Chief Science Officer for Headspace. Megan, we will look forward to seeing you in Los Angeles.

Megan: Likewise. Thanks very much.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of "Our American States." We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Google Play. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.