



## FLORIDA BAR NEWS

### MINDFULLY WASHING HANDS

By Scott Rogers ▶ Special to the News ▶ Columns

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Concerns over contracting the coronavirus have led to health warnings to wash hands frequently and for at least 20 seconds. A popular mindfulness practice involves washing hands. As it is a short practice, it is termed an “informal practice,” to distinguish it from the more traditional “formal” periods of practice.

This month we’ll explore the practice of mindfully washing hands as it can serve to:

- offer you an accessible mindfulness practice, and
- extend the length of time you wash your hands.

You may also find the practice infuses your day with meaningful moments in which you feel more grounded and settled. This is an opportunity to engage in self-care that is of benefit both physically and mentally.

#### WASHING HANDS SLOWLY V. WASHING HANDS MINDFULLY

The benefit of washing hands more slowly is enriched when the same time is spent washing hands more mindfully. If the distinction between the two is unclear to you, this discussion may offer you a better understanding of what it means to do something “mindfully,” as it does not require doing anything differently. Rather it is the quality of attention that is engaged in a different way.

You know how to wash your hands slowly as this is purely a mechanical variation. To help people pace themselves—and to minimize frustration or forgetting — a common tip is to sing the happy birthday song. In “Mindful Parenting,” which was published in 2005, I shared with parents the practice of singing “Happy Birthday” to a child, wherever they may be, while washing hands mindfully. You may find it heart opening to sing “Happy Birthday” to a child, family member or dear friend, as you bring them to mind. This is a time when wisdom and compassion are much needed, and both can be cultivated through practice.

To wash hands mindfully is to be open and receptive to the sensory richness of the moment, and its impermanent nature. The practice of mindfully washing hands involves being more intentional by becoming more fully absorbed in the sensory experience of washing hands.

## MINDFUL HAND WASHING INSTRUCTIONS

We have all washed our hands tens of thousands of times. In all likelihood, most of the time we were on automatic pilot, lost in thought during the process. In this practice, we “wake up” to the moment by engaging curiosity and interest in the experience, deliberately attending to the sights, smells, sounds, and touch of doing so. Below is an example to give you a sense of the process. It can be helpful to move very slowly, intentionally attending to each of the senses, one after the other. Doing so will take more than 20 seconds and, with practice, you will find you can let go of the more rigid approach and more naturally wash your hands with increased mindful awareness.

1. Reach out your hand slowly to turn on the faucet. Bring awareness to the movement of your arm, hand and fingers. Notice the feel of the faucet against your fingers.
2. As water begins to flow (perhaps a moment of gratitude), attend to the temperature of the water as it washes over your hands, and the feel of the water on your skin.
3. Listen to the sound of water flowing. Breathe.
4. Look at what is taking place before you and notice how there is little you need to do. Much seems to be happening on its own. The hands know what to do. You get to observe.
5. Place soap on your hands and gently massage them. Slowly bring your hands to your nose, taking in the aroma. It is common to do this instinctively when at the spa. You are cultivating a similar state of mind and body in this practice wherever you are; after all, it's not really the place—it's the mind that is in the place.
6. At this time and throughout, take a few slower deeper breaths.
7. Feel the soap as you gently rub your hands together and work the suds in between your fingers and up to your wrists.
8. Close your eyes and notice how the sensory experience of sound, smell and touch may be enriched.

9. As this is a focused attention practice (you are attending to sensory experiences) when you notice your mind wandering — which you will — gently bring your attention back to the sensory experience associated with hand washing.

10. [If you wish to sing “Happy Birthday,” now is a good time to do so — faucet on or off].

11. Bring awareness to the experience of rinsing the soap and turning off the faucet, much as you did when you began.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

I believe you are likely to find this process to be very satisfying. While often it can be challenging to deliberately slow things down, engaging the senses allows for a more natural — and less frustrating — experience. The perception of the passage of time tends to slow and there is a natural settling of the mind and body.

If you find the above instruction to be informative but a lot to absorb and follow, you can instead inquire as you wash your hands: “What am I seeing? What am I hearing? What am I smelling? What am I feeling (touch)? as doing so will allow you to guide yourself. After each inquiry, take three slower, deeper breaths to help pace the practice.

Note that the activity of the mind — as it so readily moves into past and future, judgment, worry, regret, and so on — tends to settle a bit when attention is focused on the other senses. That is one of the reasons why washing hands mindfully (and its cousin, washing dishes mindfully) can be so satisfying. But this does not mean that various thoughts and feelings that arise are not worthy of attending to as well. We can learn a lot by observing our thoughts and feelings — without needing to analyze or problem solve — and noticing how just like smells and sounds, they too come and go.

We hope the above has been useful — both as a PSA associated with one of the ways we can each play a meaningful role in limiting the likelihood of contracting or communicating the virus — and to offer a deeper understanding of a simple mindfulness practice and the way it can be integrated into our day. Wishing everyone health, happiness, safety, and ease of heart and peace of mind.

If you have a question about mindfulness and integrating it into the practice of law that you would like answered in this column, send it to [srogers@law.miami.edu](mailto:srogers@law.miami.edu).



*Scott Rogers, M.S., J.D., is a nationally recognized leader in the area of mindfulness in law and founded and directs the University of Miami School of Law's Mindfulness in Law Program where he teaches mindful ethics, mindful leadership, mindfulness and negotiation, and mindfulness in law. He is the creator of Jurisight, one of the first CLE programs in the country to integrate mindfulness and neuroscience and conducts workshops and presentations on the role of mindfulness in legal education and across the legal profession. He is author of the recently released, **"The Mindful Law Student: A Mindfulness in Law Practice Guide,"** written for all audiences.*