

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

SELF-CARE FOR LAWYERS AND JUDGES

There has been an awakening in the legal profession about the importance of wellness and well-being practices associated with self-care.

Lawyers and judges need to be reminded often that “white knuckling” through long periods of anxiety, stress and lower levels of depression can, without warning, crescendo into mental health issues and even catastrophic events that can take them by surprise.

It’s common knowledge that many lawyers and judges do not take care of themselves and rarely put themselves first. We all know that lawyers and judges are extremely independent and self-sufficient. The pressure-cooker of law school taught us many things and perhaps the overarching lessons were “never give up” and “never admit weaknesses.” As high-functioning individuals, lawyers and judges often push the envelope in every direction.

But what many of us *did not* learn is that we are, in fact, mere mortals regardless of our accomplishments. Smart lawyers and judges often deftly think their way out of problems. Successes, both personal and professional, often result from wielding lawyerly analytical skills. But when self-care boundaries and practices are missing, it puts lawyers and judges at risk for mental health problems.

The problem is that no one, not even the smartest lawyer in the room, can independently outsmart serious mental health illnesses such as anxiety disorders, depression, alcoholism or other substance use disorders. No one is immune from developing a mental health issue. Thus, an ounce of self-care prevention can be invaluable to everyone when it comes to reducing the risks of developing a mental illness.

Of course, not all mental illness can be avoided. It’s a fact, however, that lawyers suffer high rates of mental health issues and that unchecked anxiety, stress and

pressure play a major role. Wellness practices like exercise, meditation and yoga can help reduce stress and preserve mental health. But if you ignore self-care now and fall victim to a chronic illness such as depression or alcoholism, there will be no way to “un-ring that rung bell” and it can outstrip the utility of wellness tools alone.

The epidemic of depression and substance use disorders in the legal profession still remains largely out of sight, hidden by stubborn stigmas. But, at least members of our profession are now becoming more cognizant of the alarming statistics.¹ Also, great national attention has been focused on the duty of self-care to help prevent mental health problems.² Nonetheless, it is still extremely difficult to convince all lawyers and judges that they *personally* need to take extra-good care of themselves.

It’s risky for any lawyer or judge to view the well-being movement from a distance and as a good idea *for only those who need it*. Every single person can benefit from improved self-care. The sooner our profession can reconcile that it is okay to be human, the quicker it can become a healthier profession. Self-care must be acknowledged as a universal component of maintaining health and success, rather than rehabilitation support when the chips are down.

If you are feeling stressed out, burned out or not exactly “happy, joyous and free” in the legal profession, here are some self-care basics that lawyers and judges can employ now.

► Reassess your personal boundaries. Sacrificing time with family and rarely having time for interests outside work and the practice of law suggest a need for recalibration. Set goals to balance work and play.

► Don’t become isolated. Get out of the office and the house and make sure you are still genuinely and openly involved with friends and engaged in extracurricular activities NOT associated with being a

lawyer.

► Eliminate problematic interpersonal habits and pessimistic thinking. Become optimistic.

► Beware of the “golden handcuffs” and becoming entrenched in a high-income lifestyle to the exclusion of a healthy personal life outside the practice of law.

► Don’t bring your “lawyering” home with you. Being skeptical, judgmental and striving to always be “right” with friends and family can damage relationships.

► Take the time to develop and adhere to a daily routine of stress management tools such as exercise, diet, meditation, yoga and simple things such as learning to say “no” to new tasks when overburdened and stressed out.

JLAP’s professional clinical staff can help you. If you are interested in obtaining information on ways to beat burnout, stress, anxiety and depression, or you feel that you could possibly benefit from an evaluation, contact JLAP. Your call is confidential as a matter of law and you don’t even have to give your name. For more information, call JLAP at (985)778-0571; e-mail JLAP@louisianajlap.com; or visit the website at: www.louisianajlap.com.

FOOTNOTES

1. “The Prevalence of Substance Use Disorders and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys,” <http://louisianajlap.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/HazledenStudy2016.pdf>.

2. “The Path to Lawyer Well-Being,” <http://louisianajlap.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ThePathToLawyerWellBeingReportRevFINAL.pdf>.

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