

Lawyers ASSISTANCE

By Dr. Angela White-Bazile, Esq.

STRANGER IN A ONCE FAMILIAR LAND

“Is the conference in person or virtual?”

“Will the Zoom link be emailed shortly?”

“Do you have proof of vaccination ready to show?”

“Have you received your annual booster shot?”

Are questions such as these our new normal? Over the past two and a half years, much has happened in our country and across the world. This time has been full of confusion, anxiety, fear and death — not only the death of loved ones, friends and colleagues but also the death of our plans. Every single person has been affected in some way.

Court hearings, legal meetings, school, religious services, doctor appointments, exercise classes and social activities were entirely online.¹ Graduations, weddings and other celebrations included a Zoom link. This was unheard of before March 2020, when COVID-19 redefined what “normal” means for work, school and life. We were suddenly faced with lockdowns followed by social distancing. The unprecedented loss of life, employment and social interaction, along with the stress of quickly shifting to remote work or schooling, impacted us physically. What is discussed less is how we have been affected mentally and emotionally when faced with uncertainty about the future and the unknown. How did you deal with change and disruption to your plans?

Individuals were frustrated with the mask mandates and mandatory vaccines, and now some may be frustrated with returning to the office or classroom while others are excited. The days of waking up, getting dressed from the waist up, grabbing a cup of coffee and waiting for the Zoom meeting to begin, all in minutes, may be coming to an end or at least decreasing. We had to adjust when turn-

ing our living spaces into working spaces, and now we must adjust again after getting used to the comforts of working from home.

Are you stressed, concerned or anxious about going back to the office or classroom full-time? Are you worried about your safety? Are you contemplating who will care for young children, aging parents or pets? Are you comfortable attending networking events or traveling to conferences after interacting in virtual spaces for two and a half years? Socializing can be a source of anxiety for some. How do you feel about shaking hands or giving hugs?

Do words such as “overwhelmed,” “distracted” and “exhausted” seem to describe your current feelings? Are these feelings our new normal?

A positive of the pandemic was having the opportunity to reevaluate what is meaningful and the kind of lives we want to live.² COVID changed how judges, lawyers, law students and others view productivity and what we want from our careers. COVID showed us that flex work schedules and remote work are possible in the legal profession.³ We also spent time with our families, revisited hobbies and interests we left behind long ago or picked up new ones, and practiced self-care.

COVID made the world pause so we could focus on ourselves and what is important to us. Now that the world has opened and we are returning to “normalcy,” we cannot forget everything we learned over two and a half years. We must take care of our mental and physical health, or we will fail in caring for others. Making yourself a priority is not selfish but an investment, one of the greatest investments you can make.

During the pandemic, lawyer assistance programs saw increased mental health issues, substance abuse and finan-

cial stressors for judges, lawyers and law students. However, studies showed that, even prior to the pandemic, the legal profession had substantially higher mental health and substance abuse rates than the general population. Due to isolation, mental health and substance abuse have only increased since 2020.

Overindulgence of alcohol, drug usage, depression, anxiety, stress, eating disorders, or any mental, emotional or physical health issue should not be taken lightly or overlooked. Do not ignore what you initially believed you had control of. Do not minimize what once appeared to be an ant hill but is now a mountain hindering and delaying you. Do not close your eyes to what is staring you in the face, be it conflict or conformity. Yes, you are returning to your same office space, but are you a stranger in a familiar land? The foundation may be the same, but have the format and process changed by which things are done?

Take a moment to evaluate your current circumstances, both professionally and personally. If you are not practicing self-care, now is an excellent time to start. Being honest with yourself and knowing your limitations are forms of self-care.

If you are struggling with transitioning back to the office or classroom, you are not alone. Is there someone you trust to whom you can speak openly about your stressors?⁴ If you cannot think of someone close to you to open up to, “a therapist or other mental health professional can help you manage your anxiety triggers, develop better communication skills, and address negative feelings you have as you go back to ‘normal’ after a long, mentally exhausting period.”⁵

To reduce anxieties about returning to the office, set boundaries between work and home life. Working from home blurred many boundaries because we are

all attached to our smart phones and other electronic devices. The pressure to always be accessible to clients or fellow judges, lawyers and law students can be overwhelming. Take time away from work and fully disengage. Let everyone know that you are not available after certain hours as these hours are reserved for you.⁶

Also, take breaks during the day to preserve some of the balance you appreciated while working from home.⁷ Step outside and take a walk. Do some breathing or stretching exercises to relax your body and clear the mind or engage in meditation.⁸

Adjusting to remote work took time, and transitioning back to the office or classroom will also take time. Be patient with yourself and consider how much you have been through since the beginning of the pandemic.

Know that JLAP is here to serve and support you during these periods of transition. We are here to assist as you become reacquainted with your familiar land. You do not have to feel like a

stranger with JLAP.

To learn more about available resources or seek confidential, non-disciplinary help, you can contact the professional clinical staff at JLAP at (985)778-0571, email jlapp@louisianajlap.com, or visit our website at www.louisianajlap.com. Reach out without fear, stigma or judgment. It costs nothing but could make a huge difference.

We are a CONFIDENTIAL Safe Haven of Healing.

Welcome to the new normal.

FOOTNOTES

1. Esquire Deposition Solutions, "The Opportunity and Imperative for Post-Pandemic Legal Innovation," Esquire Deposition Solutions (Sept. 22, 2021), www.esquiredepositionsolutions.com/the-opportunity-and-imperative-for-post-pandemic-legal-innovation/.

2. Amanda Robert, "How should the legal profession navigate a post-COVID-19 world? ABA group has recommendations," ABA Journal (April 26, 2021), www.abajournal.com/web/article/abas-practice-forward-group-explores-effect-of-covid-19-future-of-profession-in-new-survey.

3. Wendi Weiner, "The Future of Work After COVID-19: What This Means for the Legal Profession," Above The Law (Aug. 17, 2021), <https://abovethelaw.com/2021/08/the-future-of-work-after-covid-19-what-this-means-for-the-legal-profession/>.

4. Katherine J. Igoe, "9 Tips for a Smooth Transition Back to the Office After Pandemic WFH," The Muse, www.themuse.com/advice/return-to-office-covid-pandemic-transition-stress.

5. *Id.*

6. Jayme L. Walker and J. Gary Gwilliam, "Being a Lawyer Doesn't Have To Be This Stressful," Plaintiff (March 2021), www.plaintiffmagazine.com/recent-issues/item/being-a-lawyer-doesn-t-have-to-be-this-stressful.

7. Igoe, *supra* note 4.

8. Lucy Goodchild, "Going back to the office? 6 tips to help you adjust," TED (Nov. 2, 2021), <https://ideas.ted.com/going-back-to-the-office-6-tips-to-help-you-adjust/>.

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I have always volunteered time for pro bono work since graduating from law school. What I receive from it is so much greater than what I put into it. The people I have assisted with difficulties of life have shown me appreciation and gratitude that are unmatched in their genuine and sincere quality. That has made me thankful for the privilege of service to others that my professional status allows. For the experience I am absolutely grateful.

Scott P. Gaspard

Baton Rouge, LA • Attorney at Law

Baton Rouge Bar Foundation Pro Bono Project volunteer

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