



Postmortem of a Breakdown: Embracing a New Approach to Work





I experienced an acute depressive episode, triggered by extreme anxiety and stress. Like many lawyers, I had a lot of both. This is what happened and how a new approach to work helped me to not just recover but thrive. I share this with the hope that other lawyers will not make the same mistakes I did – pushing off the need to address their mental-health struggles. This is my story.

BY JOSEPH A. BUGNI

A breakdown can be a beautiful thing. For me, it was both difficult and painful, but also necessary. And it has (in fact) proven a great blessing. What follows is the story of what happened and how a new approach to work helped me to not just recover but thrive. I am sharing this with the hope that other lawyers who find themselves in similar straits will know what to do; and even more than that, I'm hoping that other lawyers will not make the same mistakes I did – pushing off the need to address their mental-health struggles.

I have written this article as though I was meeting another attorney for coffee and talking about the struggles of practice and life and how I came to grasp the need to care for my mental and emotional health and what I did after I found myself in desperate straits. I have used terms colloquially: in the sense of how a sincere friend would share their personal experience with another, casting off clinical labels. For those with specific questions, the State Bar of Wisconsin has wonderful resources listed in the endnotes and in Dr. Amber Ault's "On Balance" column, "When Lawyers Need Help, Where Do They Go?", which appears elsewhere in this issue. My experience and advice are shared as one would with a friend, and nothing more than that.

Chasing Efficiency

Early on, I embraced the view that my career was more than a job: it was my vocation. I resolved to pursue professional excellence. But I also knew that I couldn't sacrifice my family for my career – even if I conceived of it as a vocation. So, I pursued professional excellence with efficiency, devouring the classics on time management.¹ I kept lists, set

boundaries, and learned to say "no." With that focus on efficiency, I hoped that while my clients got the best lawyer I could be, when I left the office, my family would also get the best husband and dad I could be.

Three years ago, a dear friend who shared my goals regarding family and work recommended the OptimalWork coaching platform. It had many elements of the time-management classics, but it was different. It didn't demand half-day blocks for intensive focus nor did it divide tasks into different quadrants. Instead, it emphasized two complementary parts. The first centers on the individual's ideals and purpose – the *why* of work.² And the second focuses on a single hour of work – the *how*.³

Sensing the immediate value (and seeing the fruit in my buddy's practice), I embraced the *how* of crafting an intentional hour of work. Briefly, here's how it's done: there are a few minutes of preparation when you lay out the project's steps. Identifying the steps lets you proceed through them sequentially and without distraction. And then, before you start the work, there's a short session of mindfulness that primes you to create a state of flow, where you're completely absorbed in a feeling of energized focus. (It's a great state to work in.) After the hour is up, you take a break and reflect on what went well (or poorly) and how to improve for the next hour. This process is set out on the OptimalWork website.⁴

The year after I embraced the OptimalWork system was the most productive of my career. No single year of practice came close. But I ignored the approach's *why*. Instead of using the increased efficiency to strengthen the relationships that



truly motivate me, I took on more cases and drafted more briefs. My desire for efficiency and excellence became (in a word) disordered.

The Breakdown

That year wasn't only marked by feeding my ego. Like most public defender offices, during the pandemic my office was short-staffed and we had a backlog of cases.⁵ Using those new techniques, I tried to get through more and more cases without sacrificing quality. And for a while, there was no problem – other than the nagging conviction that I wasn't being as available to my kids and clients as I used to (and wanted to) be. I pushed that feeling aside, rationalizing that as much as I loved being available to my clients and truly getting to know them and their families, they needed me to win – that's what mattered.

Around this time, my wife and I were blessed with a new baby. A trial cut my paternity leave to only a few days, but that didn't kill me – neither did the sleepless nights. What killed me happened a year later. The doctors were concerned: our son was undersized, particularly his head, and he wasn't hitting his benchmarks. I dismissed most of it as: "he's the youngest of six, so he doesn't need to do much – his siblings are always at his beck and screech. Kids grow at different rates. His head looks fine. And besides, I need to focus on work and getting the older kids to the never-ending practices."

Then one day my colleagues and I were celebrating a recent victory. At the

party, there were two toddlers my son's age. I watched as they played. And there, right in front of me, was what a kid his age should be doing; and there, I saw clearly what my son was *not* doing. I held it together, but something inside me had cracked. Time spent investigating his potential conditions with Doctor Google stoked my worst fears. And like a fool, I spoke to no one about it. I just silently carried it all, deep inside me. Big mistake.

Then one Friday, things started to break. Court had been tough, but not too bad. Still, I felt off. Unprompted, I cried in the car. That night, I told my wife something wasn't right. I told her about the feelings I'd experienced about our son, but there was more I was hanging on to – burdens from work I couldn't unload, feelings I couldn't shake. We agreed that I needed to see someone. (As an aside, she had been saying that for years and I always wish I'd heeded her advice – foolishly, I always insisted I was fine, and besides there wasn't time or money for that.)

Saturday was worse. There was more unprompted crying and an overwhelming sense of despair. And then on Sunday, I went to confession and the dam broke. The levees that I had built over the past decade of practice were washed away. These levees held back the secondary trauma all public defenders experience;⁶ they held back the guilt I bore at the way I'd failed my clients, so many, many, many times; and they held back myriad other emotions I always thought I didn't have the time to process, including the fears I harbored for my son.

That Monday, I called my doctor and told her what I'd been experiencing. She told me that this happens, and I needed to take a few weeks off and meet with a professional therapist. I then called my boss to let him know what was happening. In an act of sheer magnanimity, he helped me process it all and assured me that I had to do what was best for me and my family and that my clients wouldn't be harmed as I took some time away to work through this. In retrospect,

his gracious response and thoughtful encouragement made all the difference in how I approached the time away.

The Aftermath

I learned that I was experiencing what's called an acute depressive episode, triggered by extreme anxiety and stress – I had a lot of both. I needed to take time off and work through some of this with a professional. Unfortunately, I couldn't find someone to talk to right away – there were no available therapists, and it would be many months before I could have an appointment with someone. While I couldn't talk to a therapist, I could take time off work, and that was hard – at first it was impossible. I'd lost my bearings, including some sense of my identity. And I was racked with self-doubt. Could I still practice? *Should* I still practice? I had to figure this out. I needed help. Because there were no therapists available to talk with, I resolved not to hide it. I asked to meet with attorneys who I respected, and I candidly asked about their mental-health struggles and their methods of coping with the burdens of practice. I had these conversations with attorneys in many different fields and stages of their careers. And through it all, I was surprised at how open others were about their own struggles with mental health and the burdens of practice.

While all these conversations were helpful, two stood out. The first was with a friend and long-time state public defender. His take was that I'd hit a wall, and I should have hit it sooner. The breakdown was a sign of simply doing and carrying too much. I needed to respect the wall and not try to fight against it. He assured me that this would pass and that I would (in time) rebuild but that I had to understand there were limits and to respect the limits. He was convinced that given all I was carrying, this was inevitable. He was completely right.

The second conversation was with the friend who introduced me to



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OptimalWork. We talked about the workload and the clients, my guilt over some cases and my anxiety over others, and my fears about my son's health. Through it all he listened, and then he asked if I was using OptimalWork. Proudly, I told him my commitment to it was what let me be so efficient – it's what let me handle the pandemic's backlog. And then I bragged this had been the most productive year of my career.

He paused, then incredulously, though kindly, asked: "Wait, you're telling me that you were simply using it for the naked efficiency, so you could take on more work?" Then he explained OptimalWork's philosophy – again. And I listened with a fresh mind, realizing just how much I'd been missing. I had embraced the process but missed the purpose. I had swapped its deeper and richer meaning and lessons for, well, just more work, and work done more efficiently. I went home and started over,

this time determined to use all of it – the process and the purpose. I relistened to the podcast episodes, some as many as 10 times.⁷ I watched the website's tutorials and probed all the features I previously thought I didn't have time to use. And I took its master class – twice. Through it all, I reimagined what work could be and I learned to infuse cognitive behavioral therapy into my workday.

OptimalWork

What follows may seem a bit like a product endorsement – it's not. The editors have graciously cut this section down from my original in-depth overview of what OptimalWork offers to combat anxiety and a slew of other issues, as well as the nitty-gritty of cognitive behavioral therapy. The focus now rests with the parts of OptimalWork that helped me embrace and reframe the challenges within my breakdown and recovery. The article drives home

one point: after breaking down, I found what I needed in an easily accessible program – one that brought cognitive behavioral therapy into the workplace. That program helped me approach work in a different way – one that enlivened it with purpose and that helped me be transformed by the challenges and opportunities for growth that work presents. And my wish is that everyone would embrace this approach, casting off the stigma of mental-health needs and finding the support they need in it.

Despite my initial attraction to the time-management piece, OptimalWork isn't about pursuing pure efficiency. Instead, it's based on taking cognitive behavioral therapy into the workplace – it's about working with your highest ideals in mind and carrying them out in your smallest actions. As you work toward these ideals, the program teaches you different strategies to improve your work habits. At the core,



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these consist of reframing, mindfulness, and challenge.

Everything begins with reframing, seeing the situation (the problem or task) you're confronted with as an opportunity – that is, this task or project or meeting is not something that I merely have to get through but is a chance for me to grow. That changed mindset lays the foundation for the work that follows. After that, you learn to train your attention with mindfulness, which is, for lack of a better term, amazing. Mindfulness helps prime the pump for your attention as you turn toward the work you've set out. Then, you can embrace this work with a deliberate feeling of challenge – either in a quantitative sense (I will do this task with greater efficiency) or in a qualitative sense (I will do this task better with a particular ideal in mind). The purpose of the work you're now doing is animated by the ideal you're striving to serve, so you carry that purpose with your full attention into whatever task you're doing. This repeated process of deliberate and intentional work trains people to see that the challenges we encounter, when fully embraced, can (and should) be met as opportunities to grow.

Practicing this approach has opened me to the deepest parts of personal growth. By reframing in this manner and broadening my perspective, work now goes beyond the task at hand and my focus extends to the broader context of purpose – the *why*. Put differently, my

work has become animated by a deeper meaning. And with that meaning firmly in mind, I've been able to shape my work and be transformed by it.

As I rebuilt and immersed myself in this approach to work, I reimagined everything. I restructured my workdays and my habits. I approached my cases as projects and listed the steps. I took my days one hour at a time. More importantly, I refocused on what mattered most: the bonds I shared with my clients, my colleagues, and even opposing counsel. I tried to be kind – even in the face of hostility. I tried to be generous – even when others weren't. And through it all, I felt a newfound sense of joy in practicing law. To be clear: this wasn't done overnight, and I'm not always successful. I still struggle – a lot. But I now detect those struggles early on and I see them as opportunities to grow, as challenges to be embraced. And this has done wonders in combatting my anxiety.

Of course, work was not the only driver of my breakdown, and OptimalWork wasn't the only piece to my recovery. My breakdown was precipitated by a lot of things – exhaustion, secondary trauma, and the fears for my son's long-term well-being. (As an update, my son is now thriving.) Some of those matters can only be worked out with therapy and reflection, but embracing OptimalWork's approach has changed me and how I approach work and life. Here are two concrete examples.

During a recent trial, I walked back to

the office in the rain. My suit was soaked through, but I keep clean suits in the office closet. The next morning, 30 minutes before closing arguments, I learned that my intern had lost the key to the closet and with it my access to a dry suit. Instead of exploding or pouting, I saw this an opportunity for me to model the person I want to be. So, I simply looked the intern in the eye, told him that I appreciated all he'd done throughout the trial, and to look on the bright side: this would be a story he'd never forget. Then, I put on the still rain-soaked clothes from the day before and went back to court. I was focused, I had collected myself, and I was (thanks to some mindfulness) unflappable.

But the change wasn't just apparent at work. When my wife and I discussed whether to write this article, she said that since embracing OptimalWork, I am "a whole different person." It's not that I was a bad person before; I was just overwhelmed, preoccupied with the burdens of work. I was often on edge and riddled with anxiety from work-related stresses. Seeing work differently and embracing this new approach of reframing, mindfulness, and challenge have changed everything for me. The same burdens of litigation are still there, but I see them differently. And the way I've learned to embrace those challenges has helped me to be a better colleague, husband, and father. So much so, that I can say my breakdown was a great blessing. **WL**

ENDNOTES

¹See Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (2016); see also Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (specifically the "Time Management Matrix").

²OptimalWork, <https://optimalwork.com/the-science> (last visited Apr. 1, 2024) (quoting Aristotle's work on eudaimonia and phronesis respectively).

³*Id.*

⁴*Id.*

⁵Christine Hatfield, *Wisconsin Public Defenders Stress Need for Solutions to Agency Staffing Shortage, Case Backlog*, WPR (May 4, 2022), <https://www.wpr.org/justice/wisconsin-public-defenders-stress-need-solutions-agency-staffing-shortage-case-backlog>.

⁶Elizabeth Dotson, David C. Brody & Ruibin Lu, *An Exploratory Study of Occupational and Secondary Traumatic Stress Among a Mid-Sized Public Defenders' Office*, 4 J. Crim. Just. & L., no. 1, at 22-39 (2006).

⁷Here is a list of some of the episodes I found most helpful from The OptimalWork Podcast:

181-183: Overcoming Anxiety (I-III)
168: The True Value of Reframing
167: The Power of a Golden Hour
147: Why Growth Goals Are Better Than Outcome Goals
145: The Best Way to Do OptimalWork
135: How to Flourish in Work and Life
110: How to Work Intensely Without Stressing Yourself Out
9: What is a Golden Hour
7: Bring Your Ideals to Life **WL**