

May Is Mental Health Awareness Month: Make It a Good One

Lawyers are skeptical, urgent, and argumentative by nature. While these traits can be useful, they can also cause us problems. Like any precious asset, our minds and mental health need to be maintained.

BY MATTHEW SHIN

A lawyer's career begins with a series of sprints. Applying to law school. Preparing for first-semester memos and finals. Competing for summer jobs. Aspiring lawyers soon learn their capacity to expend enormous effort in pursuit of short-term goals and will rely on it in practice. Many also cultivate a lasting, core belief that there is always something that they should be doing and there might not be enough time to do it. This can lead to a few problems.

Lawyers are an anxious bunch, and I am no exception. We are skeptical, urgent, and argumentative by nature and these characteristics are tools of the trade. These traits are useful. They can give us what we need to show up and be competent, diligent, and competitive in our sprints. To successfully navigate the vast, conflict-riddled ambiguity of practicing law without that intuitive sense of worry as motivation would be a tall order.

But due to that anxious nature, we tend to push the pedal to the floor and leave it there. Our ability to rebound from even minor bumps and setbacks begins to fragment over time. What started out as a tremendous capacity for productivity gets run into the ground. Problems start cropping up at work and at home and if we ignore all the warning lights, something eventually breaks.

I was guilty of this. I embraced a near-constant state of anxiety, urgency, and stress for more than a decade. I was also a committed do-it-yourselfer, taking pride in practicing independently while declining to take care of myself. I needed people to know that I could take on more, buckle down, and push through.

Operating this way felt strangely safe. It also set a shortened timer on my legal career.

Only after I became a psychotherapist did I realize that this mindset was problematic. Our minds are our greatest asset, and I neglected mine for too long. Our ability to solve problems, serve clients, support our colleagues – all of it and more turns on our mental health. Your mind determines who you are, your skills, your values, your memories, and your plans. It is your whole world.

Like any precious asset, your mind needs to be maintained. It needs rest. It needs to expe-

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rience different things, explore the depths of its creativity, bask in good feelings, and play. It needs to feel close to others. During rough patches it needs more help and support than we can give it ourselves.

For this Mental Health Awareness Month, consider the long game over the sprints at hand. If you find yourself in a tough spot, take a leap and talk to someone. Experiment with vulnerability. Prioritize yourself over the work. Do this for your clients, colleagues, friends, and family and especially for yourself. You have a life to live, and the rest of your career is ahead of you. Make it a good one. **WL**



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