



Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program

How to Improve Relationships

“Falling in love and having a relationship are two different things.” ~Keanu Reeves

The qualities that make lawyers often start before law school, but are reinforced during the study of the law. These include knowing how to: argue effectively, cross-examine, focus on all the details, delay, outwit, and avoid showing weakness. But, as Dr. Fionna Travis points out in her article, *Marry a Lawyer? Proceed with Caution*, these very qualities are contraindicated for personal relationships. The study and practice of law require attributes such as ambition, narcissism, skepticism, defensiveness, perfectionism, and the need to be in control. Cultivating and maintaining healthy personal relationships, however, requires humility, forgiveness, humor, warmth, vulnerability, and open communication.

How can law students become successful in their careers and also successful in their personal lives? It is a tricky balance. Contrary to Pat Benatar’s anthem, love is NOT a battlefield. The first step is to separate professional relationships from personal relationships. When we are at school (or work), we can put on a problem solving, argumentative, and adversarial hat. But when we are with our loved ones, we need to change the hat.

Personal relationships are not meant to be adversarial, but rather collegial, understanding, and compassionate. Don’t focus on winning the argument or figuring out the quickest way to solve the problem. Be open to discussion, particularly listening to and understanding your loved one’s point of view. Agree to disagree. Be honest and vulnerable. Ask for help when you need it. Understand the difference between *quality* time and *quantity* time. When you are with your spouse, partner, family, or friends, it’s not about how much time you are spending with them; it’s about being present and open with them.

Being in law school is very demanding and often stressful. It is important to know and communicate openly with your loved ones about how you can work together to prevent that stress from negatively impacting your personal relationships. Do your friends and family know what it is like for you to be in law school? It might help to let your loved ones know how a typical day impacts you emotionally and mentally; and how they can support you. Alternately, it is crucial that you truly listen to your loved ones and learn how you can be supportive of them. Your stress isn't more important than their stress, even though the magnitude of what you deal with on a daily basis can, at times, seem so.

Another way to improve your various relationships is to examine the level of "drama" that is occurring within them. The legal profession can be loaded with high-stakes, dramatic situations. Your relationships with friends, family, and loved ones should not mirror this conflict. In her article *Drama and Chaos in Relationships*, Dr. Linda Hatch explains that tension, chaos, and drama in relationships can be a symptom of avoiding intimacy and boredom. The adrenaline that we produce during arguments or hostile situations can be addictive and when life becomes calm, we crave that adrenaline. Hence dramatic situations can be created and repeatedly played out in our relationships especially after long stressful days.

There are many reasons you should take the time to focus on your personal relationships. One main reason is that the condition of your personal relationships has an impact on your health and overall wellbeing. Another is that your personal relationships do affect your professional life. When your personal relationships are suffering you could lose focus, procrastinate assignments, miss deadlines, and often become irritable. If you go home and take your irritability, anxiety, or stress out on your personal relationships, the cycle continues. Save yourself and your loved ones from this stress!

Click below to read more about balancing your work and your personal life:

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/in-practice/201301/50-characteristics-healthy-relationships>

<http://www.campbell.edu/pdf/counseling-services/characteristics-of-healthy-romantic-relationships.pdf>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/turning-point/201502/improve-your-relationships-give-these-4-habits>

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