



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Balancing Professionalism with Being Human

“Professional is not a label you give yourself – it’s a description you hope others will apply to you.” ~ David Maister

The term professionalism is a subjective concept. We have definitions for it, “know it when we see it,” and recognize when someone is being unprofessional. But where is the intersection of being professional, where we are supposed to behave civilly and competently at all times, and being a human being who has needs such as self-expression? And how does our concept of professionalism hold up in the face of chronically stressed, anxious, depressed, and overwhelmed attorneys? Part of professionalism is balancing our professional identity with our personal lives.

Lawyers, historically speaking, haven’t been very successful at balancing “work life/identity” with “personal life/identity.” As a human being, our bodies have basic needs (such as movement, water, food, sleep, physical contact with others) and our minds also have basic needs (to feel significant, to connect with others, to contribute to society, to learn and grow, etc.) Our professional requirements, however, often contradict our basic human needs.

In general, lawyers work inhumane hours (or spend time worrying when we don’t have enough clients), endure unhealthy amounts of stress, neglect to take time off, especially when needed, and do not get enough sleep. Many lawyers put tremendous pressure on themselves to be “perfect,” have huge student loans to pay off, and deal with difficult and traumatized people on a daily basis. And, while facing all of these issues, we attempt to avoid looking weak (ie. human) at all costs while trying to engage in healthy, successful personal relationships, raise children, and take care of aging parents. As the saying goes, “something’s gotta give.”

Often times, our personal lives suffer because we wear our professional “hats” home with us. We might cross-examine friends and family, argue with them in an effort to “educate” them (or have the last word) or try to solve all of their problems because that’s what we’ve been doing all day long. Our relationships can also suffer because we continue working even after we get home or on weekends, or we feel the need to self-medicate with unhealthy amounts of alcohol (or other drugs) to dissociate and become numb to the stress we are under at work. We become distracted during the day about what’s going on in our personal lives, causing our professional life to suffer. Under these conditions, being a healthy human and acting in a professional manor becomes difficult. We might become

angry, over-reactive, belligerent, anxious, and basically incapable of maturely expressing our emotions at work. Maybe we can “hold it together” at work, but we are irritable with loved ones at home, become distant from them, stop expressing our emotions around them, or even stop communicating with them.

Think about how you balance the different hats you wear (lawyer, parent, friend, spouse, etc.) and how your self-care (or lack thereof) impacts your professional identity. Ask your loved ones if they observe you taking care of yourself. And, if “professional” is a term others apply to you, how do you think your colleagues and clients would rate your professionalism?

Behaving civilly and competently can be difficult if we are anxious, depressed, angry, or if we are self-medicating with alcohol, drugs, excessive use of the internet, gambling, or other behaviors that have negative consequences. Likewise, healthy personal relationships can be difficult if we are taking our work home and neglecting loved ones. The media and entertainment industry often portray lawyers in stereotypes such as unfeeling robots whose dialogue is a series of contrary arguments, or as counselors who are so passionate about their client’s case (or cause) they have anger or stress management problems. Rather than living the stereotype, we can do better at balancing our professionalism with being a thriving human. Here are some tips:

1. **SLOW DOWN:** Slowing down your breathing, thoughts, speech, and movements helps reverse the stress response and allows you to be more mindful and aware.
2. **Get out of your head:** Anxiety is high amongst attorneys because we spend so much time thinking about every side to an argument, trying to anticipate the future, trying to problem solve issues that aren’t happening in the moment, or agonizing about whether we wrote the best contract, motion or brief. When you find the mental “gerbil wheel” is going full speed, and you become irritable or upset by your thoughts, use your senses to get out of your head. What do you see, hear, smell, feel, taste? Who or what is around you? Take time to appreciate your surroundings.
3. **Improve communication with others:** Maya Angelou said, *“People will forget the things you do, and people will forget the things you say. But people will never forget how you made them feel.”* While oral and written communication is the bread-and-butter for all attorneys, few of us have been trained or educated about the importance of non-verbal communication. For example, our tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact communicate more to the people we are speaking to than the words we choose. Since these non-verbal cues are mostly reflexive and unconscious, the way we are feeling often come across to others whether we want it to or not.

Consider how you speak to clients, colleagues, opposing counsel, judges, friends, and family. Part of being professional is to metaphorically “set aside” irritability, anxiety, depression, anger, and stress so we can concentrate on those around us and how they are doing. Take time to ask the people around you not only how they are doing, but listen to what they are saying and perceive what they mean (through their non-verbal cues). And, when the time is appropriate, find resources to help with your irritability, anxiety, and stress to address these issues so they do not impact your personal and professional relationships.

4. **Respond to unprofessional behavior professionally:** When people are behaving unprofessionally, don’t sink to their level, and don’t take it personally. You know you are taking it personally when you react to it. Instead, remember that that person is basically showing you that they are suffering, and that they are unable to control their own emotional states, or they are unable to communicate like a “normal” human being, probably because they have been stressed or felt inadequate for a long time.

The most important tip is self-care. We all know how to take care of ourselves: eat well, drink enough water, move around throughout the day and exercise, smile more, listen to music that boosts our mood, develop hobbies, and socialize with people we trust and have a good time with. So why are there millions of books on the topic? It’s because we don’t actually do what is good for us. When we are stressed, or if we have never been taught otherwise, we tend to self-sabotage rather than taking care of ourselves. Sometimes the environment we are in doesn’t support self-care, requiring that we make an extra effort to take care of ourselves and set boundaries to make that possible. Taking care of yourself is integral to professionalism. After all, most unprofessional behavior can be traced to chronic lack of self-care and unmet needs. Taking time for self-care is preventative care and risk management. When we are cognitively, physically, and emotionally healthy, the chances of being unprofessional diminish drastically, which allows us to be the civil and competent attorneys we should be. So take the time to take care of you!

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