



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Improving Personal Relationships

“Couples should learn the art of battle as they should learn the art of making love. Good battle is objective and honest — never vicious or cruel. Good battle is healthy and constructive, and brings to a [relationship] the principles of equal partnership.” ~ Ann Landers

The qualities that make great lawyers “great” often start before law school but are reinforced and perfected during the study of the law. These include knowing how to argue effectively, focus on all the details, delay, outwit, and avoid showing weakness. But, as Dr. Fiona Travis points out in her article, “Marry a Lawyer? Proceed with Caution,” these very qualities are contraindicated for personal relationships. The practice of law often requires 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 lawyers be successful in their careers and also successful in their personal lives? It is a tricky balance. According to Pat Benatar’s anthem, love is a battlefield; however, healthy relationships shouldn’t operate that way. The first step is for lawyers to separate professional relationships from personal relationships. When we are at 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.

The practice of law is a very demanding, often stressful, profession. 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 family and friends know what it is like for you to be a lawyer and practice law? Without violating confidentiality and privilege, it may 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 we truly listen to our loved ones and learn how we can support them. Your stress isn’t more important than their stress.

Another way to improve your various relationships is to examine the level of “drama” occurring within them. The legal profession can be loaded with high-stakes, dramatic situations. Our 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 produced 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 work days.

There are many reasons why we need to take time to focus on personal relationships. One reason is that the condition of our personal relationships has an impact on our health and overall well-being. Another is that our personal relationships affect our professional life. When our personal relationships suffer, we lose focus, miss deadlines, and often become irritable with clients, colleagues, and staff. As our professional life suffers, we often take it out on our personal relationships, and the cycle continues. Save yourself and your loved ones from this stress.

Interestingly enough, seasonal changes can impact our relationships. For example, in the fall, as the amount of sunlight diminishes, our bodies produce less serotonin, dopamine, testosterone, estrogen, and oxytocin. These chemicals are responsible for well-being, happiness, reward and pleasure, emotional and physical bonding, and general health. They are also the chemicals that directly impact our relationships because they can alter (for better or worse) our mood and the sense of connection we have with friends and family. The autumn months bring cooler weather, beautiful colors, sporting events, and the beginning of the holiday season. However, they also produce the drastic change of the environment going into its hibernation phase. We all experience internal changes as the seasons change. Fall is the season to slow down after the intensity of the summer months, to take stock of our lives, and to begin the process of renewal as the New Year approaches. Examining relationship dynamics and making a concerted effort to focus on the health of our connection to the people in our lives is a perfect exercise for this time of year. Not only will those around you appreciate the effort, but you too will be happier for it.

In order to maneuver the emotional changes associated with the seasonal change, focus on the positives in your life. Make an effort to connect with people who bring out the best in you. When you are around people or in situations that you react negatively to, make an effort to listen calmly and see things from their perspective before you get upset. Avoid interrupting people, acting distracted, or seeming judgmental when others are communicating with you. Take more time than usual before you react to e-mails, phone calls, or

confrontations. Mindfully consider your thoughts, your words, and your actions so you don't say or do something you might regret because your reaction was fueled by anger or negative emotions. Make sure you are getting your basic needs met. Are you eating healthy meals throughout the day? Are you getting out to exercise? Are you drinking enough water? Are you taking deep, slow breathes through the day to relax your nervous system? All of these are crucial to brain health and functioning and help us tolerate the effects of stress.

The ability to communicate, in many ways, is the bedrock of practicing law. Therefore, lawyers should, in theory, excel at interpersonal relationships. Part of the problem seems to be that lawyers use the same style of communicating with family and friends as they do with clients, co-workers, judges, and opposing counsel. If you are like the White Rabbit from Alice in Wonderland, always running around with a sense of urgency and "late for an important date," your loved ones will not feel heard or appreciated. If your personal relationships are not satisfying, take time this to examine your overall well-being and your style of communication with family and friends. The combination of taking care of yourself and expressing non-judgmental, open, honest care for your family and friends might be the key to a happier life.

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>

<http://www.lawyeravenue.com/2009/02/12/the-lawyer-spouse-balancing-love-work-ambition/>

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/improve_relationships.htm

*By Sarah Myers, JD, LMFT, LAC
Clinical Director, Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program
February 2014
© Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program, 2017*

Your Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program provides free and confidential services for judges, lawyers, and law students. If you need resources for ANY issue that is compromising your ability to be a productive member of the

legal community, or if there is someone you are concerned about, contact COLAP at (303) 986-3345. For more information about COLAP, please visit www.coloradolap.org.