



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The Hidden Risks of Being Intelligent

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” ~ Maya Angelou

The practice of law is not for the faint of heart. It requires a special set of skills including: tier-level thinking (like playing chess); being skeptical and critical; being independent/ disciplined/hardworking; having constant deadlines; having a “tough skin;” and being a perfectionist. Despite personality differences, everyone who practices law must have an above average intelligence; however, that quality does not always make “the pursuit of happiness” an easy one.

Intelligence is a gift, if used wisely. As with any gift, it is how we use and direct it that matters. If higher IQ leads to angst, loneliness, frustration, and anger, then we are hardly using it well. Considering attorneys have extraordinarily high rates of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse amongst professionals, clearly there is something amiss with how we are directing our intelligence. Individuals with higher academic degrees tend to be harder on themselves because of the pressure to succeed, achieve, and perform. The need to justify one’s intelligence and credentials increases as we “climb up the corporate (or public service) ladder.” This contributes to the perfectionistic tendencies experienced in, and perpetuated by, the practice of law. When we criticize the work of others and nothing is “good enough;” when we become belligerent towards ourselves and indulge in self-criticism; or when we procrastinate work because we’re afraid our final product will not be “good enough” to please others, anxiety results. The anxiety can easily lead to neurotic thinking that includes worrying about mundane concerns, focusing on the negative and what’s going “wrong,” replaying situations or conversations that didn’t go well, and mourning missed opportunities or lamenting making the wrong choices.

Alternatively, when we have a blind-spot for our own flaws, this anxiety can be directed outward towards others, causing us to focus instead on what we believe is wrong with the people around us. Research suggests that “lawyers...[are] more likely than other professionals to be exposed to toxic behavior in the workplace including verbal abuse, mistreatment, bullying, competition and destabilization from colleagues as well as sexual harassment.”¹ While the law is an adversarial process, and we are trained to zealously

¹ Marianna Papadakis, *Lawyers Have Lowest Health and Wellbeing of All Professionals, Study Find*, FINANCIAL REVIEW, (Nov. 20, 2015, 1:00PM), <http://www.afr.com/leadership/lawyers-have-lowest-health-and-wellbeing-of-all-professionals-study-finds-20151117-gl1h72>.

represent our clients and the system of law itself, it does not mean we need to become bullies in order to do so. We all have multiple stressors we deal with on a daily basis, and some of them, such as with high-stakes cases, can have serious repercussions that depend on our abilities and intelligence. To add insult to injury, there are many factors that we have no control over in a case, such as the direction the jury will go, the decisions the judge will make, and the potential instability of our client. Despite our best efforts, we often do not have the ability to control the outcome. Lack of control is another major source of stress and anxiety.

The world is not perfect, and when we act as perfectionists, our attempt to control those around us can result in bullying behavior. Ironically, when we try to control the minds or actions of others, it reveals our own insecurities and pathologies. When we aren't confident about ourselves, we worry what other people think and what they say (after all, they could be talking about us), causing us to feel generally insecure about our position at work, with family, or with our friends. The stress we put ourselves under to be perfect and "on top of things" can cloud how we perceive those around us and create a climate of paranoia. The underlying fear is one of abandonment and being "left out," which often leaves those around us feeling like hostages to our moods, insecurities, and micromanaging tendencies. We know that emotions are contagious; therefore, the problem with this dynamic is that the nervous systems of the people around us will react in ways that prevent productivity and healthy communication if they are metaphorically "walking on broken glass" around us. Unfortunately, in the practice of law, these situations happen often between individuals in positions of power and those who are their subordinates; and, because the field is created to be adversarial, many people do not recognize how pathological and dysfunctional this scenario is because it is the accepted norm.

Another problem we face in the midst of this type of environment is the fear of vulnerability. We "have to" be perfect, and we "have to" perform, on a daily basis. We take care of other people's problems, but we aren't allowed to have our own. The pressure we put on ourselves affects our mental health and relationships with others. This pressure can be a motivating factor in our success and accomplishments, but can also prevent us from leading full, joyful lives. Researcher Dr. Brené Brown asserts:

As someone who studies shame and scarcity and fear, if you asked me, 'What is the most terrifying, difficult emotion we experience as humans?', I would say joy, says Brown. When we lose our tolerance for vulnerability,

*joy becomes foreboding. So what we do in moments of joyfulness is we try to beat vulnerability to the punch ... We try to dress-rehearse tragedy.*²

In the practice of law, we consistently look for the “worst case scenario.” We focus on the past and the potential future. These are crucial skills in our field; but when we use them on a daily basis, they are unhealthy for the brain and the body. The stress of worrying over potential pitfalls, or ruminating over circumstances in the past, creates a toxic chemical reaction in the body that compromises our physical and mental health. While the law is adversarial in nature, we do not have to turn our relationships or personal health into a battle field.

In our fast-paced lives, we often look for quick fixes and easy ways to feel better, physically, mentally, or emotionally. There is, however, a very simple way to feel better: choose to be happier. You can produce whatever chemicals of emotion you choose to create; you choose your mood, not the environment you are in or the people around you (although we usually blame them for our bad moods). Regardless of the situation, you get to decide how you want to feel. The problem is that most of us get into an emotional rut. We practice the same types of emotions, feelings, or moods (anger, anxiety, frustration, etc.) and then become addicted to them. Over time, these practiced patterns become our personality and/or can change how we view the world around us. Rather than mindfully respond to situations or people, we go on auto-pilot and react in ways that add to our stress level.

The next time you react in a predictable way that is negative to a stimulus or situation, ask yourself if that is how you *want* to feel. If it is, then carry on; but if not, mindfully choose a different way to feel in response to the situation. In so doing, you begin to “choose your mood.” For most of us, being happy is not necessarily the goal. While happiness sounds ideal, it’s a foreign concept to some because it is so difficult to maintain. If this sounds like your pattern, strive for feelings of gratitude, appreciation, contentment, peacefulness, safety, love or joy, instead. As we increase our tolerance for more positive emotional states, the frequency with which we experience negative moods begins to lessen. Give it a try; you’ll be amazed at how much better you feel when you can choose how you respond to the circumstances around you.

It’s time to use that intelligence to improve your life; start today by metaphorically stepping back from the stress and pressure you are putting on yourself, and choose a kinder way to communicate with yourself and others. Despite the importance of our position as

² Kate Torgovnick May, *Brené Brown Interviewed by Oprah in a Two-Part Episode of “Super Soul Sunday,”* TEDBlog, (March 20, 2013 at 5:30 PM), <http://blog.ted.com/brene-brown-interviewed-by-oprah-in-a-two-part-episode-of-super-soul-sunday/>.

lawyers, we don't have to take everything so seriously. There is a vast difference in the chemistry of the brain when we know something is important and deserving of our attention, and when we think it is "do-or-die serious." The latter creates a panic and activation in the nervous system that mirrors the defense structure activated when we are in a life-threatening situation. Relax, and slow down. Reserve that stress response for true emergencies, and in the meantime, focus on enjoying your work and the people around you. As Lao Tzu said, "If you correct your mind, the rest of your life will fall into place." Use that brilliant mind and intelligence of yours today, and lighten up!

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