



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Why Lawyers Are So Tired:

The Hazards of Working in a Helping Profession

“If you have to prove your worth, you have already forgotten your value.” ~ Anonymous

The practice of law is about helping others. Attorneys are referred to as counselors because they advise others how to “fix” the situation they are in. But practicing law is much more than dispensing legal advice. Lawyering involves communication with many people every day; clients, co-workers, opposing counsel, investigators, and judges, to name a few. It also involves a tremendous amount of strategizing, analyzing, research, and writing. These skills require that an attorney spend the majority of his or her time responding to external demands that require mental focus and emotional energy. Over time, we can become depleted from feeling overwhelmed, experiencing anxiety or depression, becoming isolated, or feeling a general lack of love, joy, and happiness. The strain on our cognitive ability, emotional stability, and nervous system can create physical and mental illness, the potential for client harm or, at the very least, a compromised work product. Additionally, this unmanaged stress can compromise our relationships with friends and family. Unfortunately, because of the large amount of pressure attorneys feel, many don’t have the time to deal with their personal stress or unhappiness. Thus we create a situation where we are “running on empty” for long periods of time.

Professions that focus on solving other people’s problems, such as the law, have a high percentage of individuals who operate from that “empty” place. Many attorneys adopt the ‘Superman’ or ‘Superwoman’ complex, attempting to solve problems at work by day while continuing to solve the problems of family and friends by night or on weekends. Let’s face it; it is hard to turn off the skills we use during the day when we are trying to relax in our personal life. We need a break, however, from skills that require perpetual mental and emotional output or else the negative consequences of becoming judgmental, critical, and resentful will result. If we do not give our brains and nervous systems that respite, we end up approaching life as a constant problem that needs to be solved, and we limit our wellbeing. These limitations play out as mindsets that prevent us from thinking clearly and from being content. Take a moment to see if you can identify with any of these examples: Do you catastrophize and anticipate the worst, or focus on the negative aspects of a situation? Do you polarize and see things as only good or bad? Do you personalize situations, assuming that everything has to do with you? Do you alter your behavior or words to avoid conflict so that people will like you? Do you find fault and criticize others to control them? Do you

“look for a fight” because you secretly need drama to define who you are, or because you are addicted to adrenaline and can’t shut it off? Do you have an underlying belief that you aren’t good enough?

One common trap that we fall into with this cycle is the “twin traps” of resentment and self-pity. We begin to resent the restraints on our time and energy because we feel pulled in several directions at once. Many people are (or we believe they are) relying on us and demanding our attention. Because we are so busy, our own needs seem to be ignored and unmet, fueling more resentment and creating a sense of self-pity. It’s difficult to tell if our needs are being ignored by others, or if we are simply not expressing them because we don’t even recognize that we have needs anymore. For some people, compromising their own well-being becomes second nature. After all, how can we express our own desires or needs when we spend all of our time addressing the needs of others? Or perhaps we love problem solving so much that we have created co-dependent relationships so our position as the designated “helper who doesn’t need anything” has been established. When that happens, we can find it difficult to change roles and have authentic, honest discussions about how we are doing and what the other person might be able to do to help us. Whatever the situation, the bottom line is that when we ignore our needs, or we take care of others at the expense of ourselves, we become mentally, physically, and emotionally unhealthy.

The truth is, anyone who works in a helping profession is going to become overwhelmed or stressed at some point. And we all go through cycles of feeling down, irritable, or just negative in general. If those cycles don’t balance themselves with periods of joy and laughter, or if we aren’t successfully integrating our work and home life, we might end up sabotaging our health, our careers, or our personal relationships. The key is to take action long before the tipping point occurs when chronic occupational stress becomes long-term exhaustion, also known as burnout. Investing our mental and emotional energy in others doesn’t have to deplete us. There are several ways we can take care of ourselves:

1. **Produce more serotonin.** Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that produces relaxation and calm, amongst other things. Research has found that individuals who produce more serotonin have higher social status than those who produce less. Individuals who produce less serotonin have lower impulse control and higher impulsive aggression. In other words, individuals who know how to self-soothe themselves, who handle their emotions in a mature and mindful way, have a greater impact on their environment and naturally produce more serotonin. It also means that rather than suppress our emotions or expressing them in overly dramatic ways, we need to learn how to express them honestly. Therefore, when you feel yourself getting anxious,

stay calm and breathe deeply; you will be better able to manage not only your emotions but also those around you.

2. **Be yourself.** Sounds easy, right? This is trickier than it seems. First, we have to know who we are, and then we have to be dedicated to speaking and behaving in ways that align with that self (which is also, by the way, a fluid and changing concept since we are always learning and growing). Unfortunately, when the people around us expect us to behave in certain ways or say certain things just to make them feel better, it becomes a juggling act to keep our professional and personal relationships harmonious while still being true to ourselves. When we aren't able to speak or behave in authentic ways because we fear retaliation from the "other" in some way, our resentment and self-pity trap becomes activated. Start with small steps, begin to speak your thoughts or true opinions more often with people you trust. For example, when you feel overwhelmed and need to rest, look at your to-do list and learn to say "no" to demands that are not immediate priorities. Establish boundaries to take care of yourself. It takes a lot of energy to suppress your ideas or your true personality, and to wear different masks to please (or confront) those around you. That is an unnecessary drain on your energy.
3. **Don't compare yourself to others.** We all learned how to speak and behave by watching those around us. Think about your early role models: family, friends, teachers, public figures, etc. If they had skills, abilities, or personalities that we admired, we tried to emulate them. If, on the other hand, we did not like their words or actions, we attempted to be different from them. Either way, many of our personality traits developed through a comparison with others. As adults, we no longer need to compare ourselves to others. Many people, however, are invested in making sure we do just that. Think about law school. We were trained to compare ourselves to others. In an adversarial and competitive profession, it takes a strong person to have an internally motivated sense of self-esteem, rather than letting other people's opinions or behaviors dictate how we feel about ourselves. As Mohadesa Najumi said "The [person] who does not require validation from anyone is the most feared individual on the planet." The bottom line? Be who you *want* to be, not who you were *taught* to be.
4. **Change your opinion of vulnerability.** Being vulnerable is a strength, as is asking for help when we need it. People who pretend they have it all together, who may be pushy, bossy, or even scary in their attempts to control others, are actually the weak ones. For example, if we didn't feel fear, there would be no need for courage. Most

emotions can be rationalized or argued away, but those who have inner strength allow themselves to feel their emotions, process them, and then use them as motivation for change. Be honest about how you are feeling, and recognize how brave you are to take risks. Sometimes the risks are big ones, like launching a new business or buying a new home. Sometimes they may seem small, but nonetheless, they too require bravery, like being honest with a friend or a co-worker about how you really feel or going to therapy to examine and work through some of your issues.

5. **Appreciate yourself and others.** Many of us grew up with a complicated and maladaptive understanding of self-worth, value, and appreciation. Some of us were taught that to appreciate ourselves was vain and modesty was admirable. The problem is that as we got older, many of us became adept at modesty and forgot the self-appreciation part, believing that other people are more worthy of accomplishment, admiration, or love than we are. This tendency can cause us to put others on a pedestal so that we don't see them clearly (which can end badly if they show us a side that doesn't match up with the fantasy) or we behave as if other people's needs are more important than our own. Supporting others at our own expense can leave us feeling like a martyr. Alternatively, some people on the opposite end of the spectrum behave like narcissists to mask low self-esteem and a lack of self-worth. These individuals don't seem to empathize with other people's feelings, and treat the people in their lives as objects to satisfy their own needs in order to feel powerful and in control. Either way, whether it is the "martyr" or the "narcissist," both extremes reflect a lack of self-worth. Remember to appreciate who you are. Your opinion of yourself is the only one that really counts. So make it a good one! And remember that appreciating others is also important, and it will make you feel better to recognize other people's uniqueness and special qualities rather than being judgmental or jealous of them.
6. **Create quiet time for yourself.** If you are used to being that counselor 24/7, it can be difficult to walk away from your computer or smartphone. Remember that most people around you do not know or fully understand how overwhelmed or stressed you are, and you may have weeks, months, or even years when the requests for help seem endless. Because you have created a situation where you were always there for everyone, you have to be especially proactive in setting your limits and boundaries. Ultimately, no one else is responsible for your wellbeing but you. In fact, despite your job title, your most important job is taking care of yourself. Taking just 10 minutes every two hours to breathe, center and ground yourself to collect your

thoughts can make all the difference. The key is to take the time to check-in with how you are feeling and what you are thinking. During an especially demanding, high-paced workday, or evening with friends/family, we can end up losing ourselves in other people's needs. You need time every day during which you can relax, and not respond to anything from the external world.

Keep in mind that your well-being is the most important aspect of your career and home life. Making excuses ("I don't have time") to avoid self-care is like an ostrich putting its head in the sand. Things will only get worse until you intervene and make some changes in your routine. Otherwise, the twin traps of resentment and self-pity will creep in before you know it. In a law based society, the expectations, duties, and responsibilities placed on officers of the court can be overwhelming. Thus, we have an even greater responsibility to safeguard our wellbeing. Self-care is not optional; it is essential. Your mind and body will reward you for tending to yourself so that you aren't always "running on empty." As you invest your time and energy into helping others, remember that making the investment in yourself has the highest rate of return; not just for you, but for everyone around you!

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