



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Balancing Professionalism with Being Human: Part I

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 it when someone is being unprofessional. We study it in law school, and swear an oath to “at all times faithfully and diligently adhere to the Colorado Rules of Professional Conduct” when we become licensed attorneys in Colorado. 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? Part of professionalism is balancing our professional identity with our personal lives.

Law school can feel like a period of “trial by fire,” and law students have not historically had a lot of help balancing “academic-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.) Fulfilling our academic requirements, and, if we’re not careful, our professional requirements later on, can contradict our basic human needs.

Law students (and lawyers) are known for putting in almost inhumane hours (or spend time worrying that they are not working enough hours), endure unhealthy amounts of stress, neglect to take time off (especially when needed) and frequently do not get enough sleep. Many law students put tremendous pressure on themselves to be “perfect” while worrying about grades, getting the “right” externship or job, large student loans to pay off, and the passing the bar exam. And, despite all of these issues, there is an expectation to not appear vulnerable (ie. human) at all costs. As the saying goes, “something’s gotta give.”

We may suffer in our personal lives if our studies (and later work) impact our personal lives in negative ways: we wear our “lawyer hat” home with us, 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 if 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 school or work. We become distracted during the day about what’s going on in our personal lives, causing our academic 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 school or 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 (student, friend, spouse/partner, etc.) and how your self-care (or lack thereof) could impact 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? Next time we will discuss ways to balance our professional identity with “being human” so that the integration of our personal lives and careers can be a healthy one.

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