



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Balancing Professionalism with Being Human: Part II

“Without reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful.” ~ Margaret J. Wheatley

Last time we discussed the tight-rope walk of the balance between being a professional and a thriving, successful human being. What happens when the stress of our profession negatively impacts our personal life, or vice versa? 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 studies or work home and neglecting loved ones. The media and entertainment industry often portray lawyers as 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 resulting in unprofessional behavior. Rather than becoming a stereotype, law students have an opportunity to mindfully choose, cultivate, and develop their professional persona and prioritize their wellbeing in ways that balance professionalism and civility with being a thriving, healthy person. 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 law students 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 paper, 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 future attorneys, few 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 classmates, colleagues, co-workers, 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 with whom we have a good time. 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 will allow us to be the civil and competent attorneys we should be. So make the time to take care of you!

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