
Lawyers and Relationships in the Rockies: An Oxymoron?

BY SARAH MYERS, ESQ., LMFT, LAC



Photo by Priscilla Du Preez on Unsplash

Lawyers excel at many things, including arguing effectively, researching and focusing on details, outwitting and outthinking others, and avoiding 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, skepticism, defensiveness, perfectionism, and the need to be in control. Cultivating and maintaining healthy personal relationships, on the other hand, requires humility, forgiveness, humor, warmth, vulnerability, and open communication.

How can we be successful in both their careers and personal lives? It is a tricky balance. The first step is to purposefully use different skillsets in our professional and 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. This isn't always easy to achieve after a day of seemingly non-stop "battles." Try these simple tips:



Photo by Womanizer Wowtech on Unsplash

1. Slow down your competitive drive when you walk in the door: 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. Be more willing to concede the point when you're at home or with friends!
 2. Be honest, open, and vulnerable: ask for help when you need it, take off the superhero mask, and allow your friends and loved ones to assist you. If you don't let people help you, you prevent them from feeling valued in the relationship.
 3. Note the difference between quality time and quantity time: it's not about how much time you are spending with loved ones, it's about being present and open with them. Stop ruminating and perseverating about what happened during the day and put down your phone and computer. Your friends and loved ones are acutely aware when you are not paying attention because your focus is elsewhere; this can destroy a relationship.
 4. Create stress management plans: the practice of law is a very demanding profession. It is important to communicate openly about your stress levels. Ask your loved ones how they know when you are stressed; what behaviors or mannerisms do they observe? Give them permission to tell you when they are observing these traits and discuss how you can work together to prevent that stress from negatively impacting your relationships. Our family and friends need to understand how our profession impacts us emotionally and mentally and how they can support us. Alternately, it is crucial to learn how you can, in turn, support your loved ones when they are stressed and overwhelmed. Your stress isn't more important than their stress.
 5. Examine the level of "drama" of your personal relationships: the legal profession is loaded with dramatic and high-stakes circumstances. Our personal relationships 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.

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 seasonal change, focus on the positives in your life. Try to connect with people who bring out the best in you and try to think less about those who don't. Take more time than usual before you react to e-mails, phone calls, or confrontations. Examine your self-care: Are you eating healthy meals, drinking water, and breathing deeply to relax your nervous system throughout the day? Are you standing and moving around more than sitting? 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 is that we tend to use the same style of communicating with family and friends as we 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,” or perpetually distracted with work, your loved ones will not feel heard or appreciated. If your personal relationships are not satisfying, take time this fall to examine your overall well-being and your style of communication with family and friends. While there aren't many guarantees in life, research is clear that positive, supportive, and healthy personal relationships support a less rocky professional life. You put a tremendous amount of time, focus, effort, and energy into being a lawyer. Are you willing to put as much into your personal relationships? ●

Sarah Myers, Esq., LMFT, LAC, is the Executive Director of the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). COLAP is the free, confidential and independent well-being program for the legal community of Colorado. For more information, go to www.coloradolap.org. For a confidential consultation, discussion about your stressors, or to obtain helpful resources, contact COLAP at 303-986-3345 or info@coloradolap.org.