
Why Lawyers Need Self-Care

*“Self-care is not selfish.
You cannot serve from an empty vessel.”*

~Eleanor Brown

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The most important relationship we have is the one with ourselves. Sounds corny, doesn't it? But it's true. The beliefs you have about yourself; the way you talk to yourself; how you see yourself; how you treat yourself; and what you think about yourself directly impacts your mood, your physical and mental health, how you treat others, your relationships, your ability to learn; and your memory, to name a few.

Do you metaphorically “kick yourself in the butt” more than you “pat yourself on the back?” As a group, lawyers tend to do this more often than not. We are in a competitive field where there is little room for error and even less room for forgiveness or understanding. Keep in mind, however, that being tough on yourself affects many other people.

Our perception of reality is also based on how we view ourselves. We project who we are and what we think onto other people all the time, assuming (usually incorrectly) that we “know” people's motivations or reasons for their words or behaviors. These assumptions, minus clear communication, lead to and worsen conflict and misunderstandings every day.

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Take a few minutes and think about how you treat yourself. Do you take care of your physical health, exercise, eat well, and meditate? Do you take care of your emotional health, soothing yourself when you experience negative emotions and encouraging yourself when you need a cheering squad? Do you take care of your mental health, such as thinking positive thoughts instead of self-deprecating thoughts, allowing yourself to focus on what is important to you and to rest your mind when you need it rather than racing thoughts all the time?

When we neglect to care for ourselves, the care and nurturing we provide to others suffers. As lawyers, we are in the business of helping people. It looks different depending on what type of law you practice; but at the end of the day, lawyers serve the needs of others. If we aren't taking care of ourselves, we won't be able to take care of our clients, nor will we be of much use at home with family or friends. And, worse yet, our health will suffer. As Sharon Salzberg said:

“Generosity coming from self-hatred becomes martyrdom. Morality coming from self-hatred becomes ridged repression. Love for others without the foundation of love for ourselves becomes a loss of 2 boundaries, codependency, and a painful & fruitless search for intimacy.”

There are many simple things you can do daily to take care of yourself, to create happy moments, and to combat loneliness and depression. Some examples include watching a sunrise or sunset, playing with your pets, watching a funny TV show or movie, and singing out loud to your favorite song. You are probably doing many things that qualify as “self-care” already. The trick is to slow down, acknowledge that you are doing them to take care of yourself, and then appreciate your efforts. When you do this, the nervous system responds by producing healthy chemicals that counteract the negative side effects of stress. Research also shows that increasing your joy, gratitude, and sense of peace and calm a little bit everyday will improve your efficacy as an attorney, your physical health, and even your relationships. Treating yourself better does not have to be complicated. As ETTY HILLESUM eloquently said, “Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths.” If it helps to get you started, adopt the mindset of Audrey Lorde: “I have come to believe that caring for myself is not self-indulgent. Caring for myself is an act of survival.” ●

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