

World Mental Health Day: A Reminder to Legal Professionals to Accept What Cannot Be Controlled And to Focus on What They Can Control

By Lori L. Pines

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Today is World Mental Health Day, an important day to recognize that lack of control is a major factor in mental health that can affect the onset and intensity of numerous mental health conditions (including anxiety and depression). One of my favorite quotes about control, which is also known as the “Serenity Prayer,” is not only applicable to our personal lives, but can also be very helpful in our professional lives:

“Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” (Reinhold Nibuhr).

While many legal professionals tend to dwell on the uncontrollable aspects of practice, this special day invites us to accept what cannot be controlled and take stock of the many important aspects of legal practice that are, in fact, within our control.

It is well documented that resisting uncontrollable events can cause unnecessary stress and frustration. As a result, many people find it deeply liberating to accept what they cannot control. This should be especially true for lawyers since there are many uncontrollable aspects of law practice. Indeed, legal practitioners cannot control the facts of their matters. They cannot control the applicable law. They cannot control which judge gets assigned to their case. And as much as they would like to be able

to do so, lawyers cannot control opposing counsel’s behavior or when a deal will be signed. Furthermore, like everyone else, legal practitioners have no control over the market, world events, the weather, or the timing of emergencies.

With that said, given that most of the successful lawyers I know are accustomed to planning ahead while relishing their to-do lists and well-curated schedules, it is no wonder that many of them struggle with issues stemming from lack of control. For many members of the legal industry, including myself, lack of control is law practice kryptonite. The good news is there are key dimensions of legal practice that can be controlled: legal personnel who redirect their energy toward these areas will enhance both their law practice and overall mental health.

For starters, lawyers can control their own professional conduct and how they treat others. No matter what the circumstances, they can be steadfastly ethical and honest in their practice and not hide any mistakes. They can treat judges, co-counsel, and



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opposing counsel with courtesy without taking every interaction personally. They can provide clear explanations to their clients about processes, procedures, risks, and benefits, and set reasonable expectations. Lawyers can take care to show respect, kindness, and concern for their colleagues and team members, prioritizing others' well-being alongside their own. Strong teams help support and cover for one another especially during difficult times, providing a critical safety net for all.

Lawyers are also in charge of their own skill development and case preparation. Whether through on-the-job experience, helpful mentors, or continuing legal education courses, lawyers can master all of the legal knowledge, communication, negotiation, writing, and interpersonal skills they need to feel confident and to be able to provide superior advocacy in their field. Likewise, attorneys can ensure that they are thoroughly prepared for any given matter by taking the necessary steps to understand completely the relevant facts, applicable law, pending deadlines, and client objectives.

Notwithstanding the many stressors they face, legal professionals can control how they treat themselves and look after their own health and mental well-being. They can be sure to eat nutritiously, develop an exercise routine (with a trainer or physical therapist, if helpful), get good sleep whenever possible (and make up for it when they cannot), and schedule and attend regular medical, dental, and therapy appointments. Moreover, they can and absolutely should get up from their desks frequently, stretch, and move their bodies. As I can personally attest, sitting for too long, especially with poor posture, is unequivocally detrimental. I am amazed and horrified by how many of my partners now have back, spine, and neck problems because they spent countless, uninterrupted hours hunched over their desks.

Legal professionals also must accept that while there is no way to prevent all of the stressors associated with law practice, they can learn tools and strategies

(including mindfulness, breathwork, resilience, exercise, prayer, and therapy) to regulate responses to stress. There are many sources for these strategies from articles and books to apps, classes, and internal wellness offerings. For example, if participants avail themselves of wellness programs like the one I am in charge of at my firm, they can get assistance finding positive coping methods and obtaining needed support. These tools and strategies can help professionals stop fixating on what they cannot control/change.

Despite their busy schedules, legal professionals can be kind to themselves and find ways to exercise self-care and self-compassion. This includes setting aside time for friends and family and recognizing the value of social connection. Indeed, as the Harvard Study of Adult Development (one of the longest longitudinal studies of human life) found, the quality of our relationships is the strongest predictor of both happiness and long-term health. Exercising self-care also includes planning fun events, taking regular vacations, and pursuing healthy hobbies—which are not only pillars of well-being, but factors that enable peak performance in our personal and professional lives.

Finally, it is up to legal professionals to look after their own careers: no one else can or will do it for them. Legal professionals can choose where they work and what type of practice they want. They can choose not to work at an organization or firm that fails to value well-being and/or where there is still a stigma associated with mental health issues. Given that about 50% of the global population will experience a mental health challenge at one time in their lives, mental health challenges—including those that stem from lack of control—are incredibly common and should never be a source of embarrassment. As a community, we should continually aspire to ensure that no one feels pressured to suffer any mental health challenge in silence or without support.

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