

Managing Work and Life while Pregnant

Career Development





I am an in-house counsel at a healthcare company, and I am also a health coach. During the first trimester of my pregnancy, I had very little control over how my mind and body felt because of the morning sickness that commonly plagues expecting mothers. I felt that I lost my place as a lawyer

and my authority as a health coach because I was less functional and not living the healthy lifestyle I coached my clients to live. Here are two lessons to share from the perspective of both an in-house lawyer and a health coach.

1. Prenatal depression during the pregnancy journey should be part of the conversation

Pregnancy is first and foremost the biggest blessing I've experienced. But with change comes stress. Stress can encourage and empower resilience, but that does not mean it is easy or even manageable. Here are the ways stress became difficult to manage, and even developed into prenatal depression:

I lost control of my body.

When I have a functioning body, all I need is a system to execute my routines. Wake up at a certain time, work out, eat, get ready for work, and drive.

When I was in the middle of my morning sickness, I woke up in the middle of the night feeling nauseous, going straight to the bathroom. I spent hours trying to go back to sleep to no avail. When it was time to wake up, my body was too incapacitated to get out of bed.

The daily routines that I relied on to feel ahead, in control, and healthy for the rest of the day were no longer possible. Even worse, this lack of control over my body affected how I presented at work. I was late several times and had to stay home several times. There was nothing I could do about it, and I felt guilty.

I lost control of my emotions.

The more I lost control over my body, the more I felt guilty. Along with guilt, I felt shame that I suddenly had lost control over my life and was falling behind everyone else at work. I was playing catch-up all the time.

I had to ask my clients to be lenient with me when I had to wear my pajamas instead of my workout clothes during our sessions. In moments where these feelings of guilt and shame overwhelmed me, I burst into tears, typically on an evening after hours of doing nothing but being sick all day.

When you lose both mental and physical capacity, you likely have little left to help you manage the overwhelming pain, suffering, and stress. In the moments where I felt there was absolutely nothing I could do, I felt bouts of depression, primarily asking myself, when will this end? If it won't end, where is it going? I questioned the purpose of the pain altogether.

Two things helped me recover from this vicious cycle of discouraging thoughts. The first was when I listened to the heartbeat of my eight-week, two-centimeter baby through the ultrasound. All that pain and suffering was to create another heart to beat. I found the purpose of this struggle. But as much as that moment was unforgettable, the pain didn't stop.

That is when the second thing happened. I talked to a trusted family member. I told her how much shame, guilt, and helplessness I was experiencing because I felt like I couldn't do anything.

“What is it that is more important than creating another living being right now?” she asked me. She was right. I was giving myself too much credit. Where exactly did I need to be and what exactly did I need to do that was more important than this?

What I had done was attach my worth to producing work that was of value only to others, such as doing my work as a lawyer and coaching my clients. My pregnancy was a rare opportunity to let go of this attachment and focus on something that was valuable solely to myself and my family. When I realized that there really was nothing more important, the mindset shift helped the suffering and stress become more manageable.

2. Pregnancy-friendly policies and work environment are critical

On days when I could not make it to work, my boss gave me the time and space to recover. He showed me his generosity through his actions by covering for me where he could, and he didn’t make a big deal out of it. He treated me the same way, every day, like any other day, preventing me from feeling like I was sticking out of a crowd.

Luckily, over the past year, we have developed a strong relationship based on trust and respect. I was transparent with him about what was important to me, and he supported me. Shortly after I began working at the company, I felt secure knowing he had my back even when I made mistakes.

When I felt like I had my boss’s support, it made me want to do everything I could to make his life easier. As long as the work was done, and I showed him that I was doing my best and not neglecting my duties, he nor anyone else in the company gave me grief about my work.

I had been feeling like a sore thumb sticking out because, to my knowledge, no one else in the office was pregnant. But on days when I returned to work, others in the office gave me space if I needed to work behind closed doors and also checked in on me.

Experienced mothers reassured me that everything I was going through was normal and that there was nothing to feel guilty or ashamed about. Experienced fathers shared their own kids’ birth stories and made me feel less alone. They understood how challenging and yet how important this very personal experience was, and they took the time to show their empathy.

While each working day was unspeakably difficult at times, reflecting on the attitude and energy of everyone I work with allowed me to take a moment to feel so grateful for the opportunity to work at this particular company with this special group of people. My loyalty to the company solidified in a way I hadn’t imagined before.

The people and the flexibility helped me walk through the most trying weeks of my life, and I was not about to let the company down in any way. All I began thinking of was how to be a steady asset to the company without wanting more.

If my experience had gone the other way around, where I got less work, was treated differently, and/or was given a pay cut, I likely would have had one constant thought in my mind: Leave this place as fast as I can.

All of the training and knowledge I had received over the past year would have had to be retaught to a new lawyer, and that would have had cost the company another year’s worth of my salary.

Takeaway lesson

The biggest lesson I learned was how to forgive myself. That is what I struggled with the most because I continued to push myself and tell myself that I was coming up short and saw my pregnancy as a roadblock.

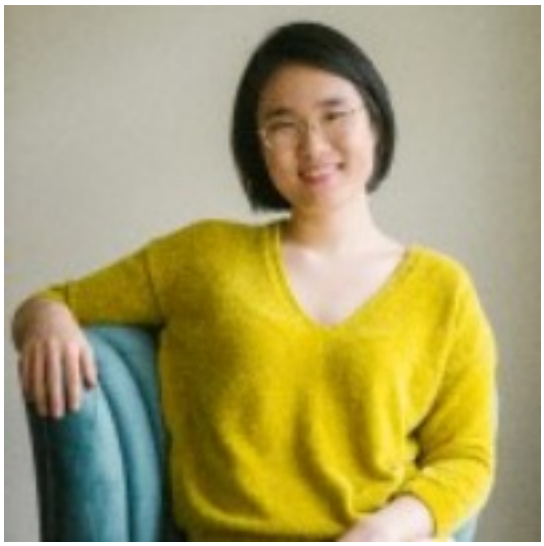
But once I learned to forgive myself, I began appreciating the small things, like the fact that I did show up to work and that I ate a meal that I enjoyed. I began appreciating the small, daily feats we achieve that we may take for granted because they typically come fairly easy on an average day.

But I was reminded that it was these small feats, like waking up, brushing my teeth, driving to work, and driving back home to family on a consistent basis that continued to mold me into who I was: my values, my thoughts, and my actions.

I began to see each day as an opportunity to learn more about myself, especially in times of struggle, so that I may truly discover what lights me up. The more I paid attention to myself and what I could do despite the roadblocks, I became more confident in my resilience.

Slowly, I found my place again as a lawyer and my authority as a health coach. I learned that it is because of these challenges that I have become better at what I do by being who I am.

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Her primary responsibilities are to manage commercial transactions, litigation, and labor and employment disputes. She is also a certified personal trainer and health coach. She works primarily with lawyers to help them take on the daunting challenge of being healthy by sharing the exact steps to take on challenges on their own terms. For more health tips geared towards lawyers, visit Angela's website at www.angela-han.com and connect with her on LinkedIn.