

My Take: Be Well

Career Development



Taking care of ourselves is not optional or simply a “nice thing to do” — it is essential.

As members of one of the most stress-inducing professions in the world, it’s no wonder that many lawyers must work at balancing mental and physical health. We are so busy being the loyal guardians and trusted protectors for everyone else that we often end up neglecting our own well-being — much to our detriment.

According to the American Psychological Association, lawyers are 3.6 times more likely to suffer from depression than other professionals. And when they looked at substance abuse rates within the legal profession, they found that those rates are also much higher than for the general population. Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control found that lawyers, when ranked against other professions, have some of the highest rates of suicide; beat only by members of the healthcare profession — physicians, pharmacists, and dentists. In fact, the American Psychological Association found that the legal industry has the 11th highest incidence of suicide among professionals.

Worrisome, right? These statistics are an alarming wake-up call for the legal profession. Taking care of ourselves is not optional or simply a “nice thing to do” — it is essential. If we don’t give ourselves permission to invest in our physical and mental well-being, we are incapable of contributing at home, at work, or as members of the various communities to which we belong.

I understand the pressures faced by gatekeepers and trusted advisors to the business. You are often in positions that require you to work late, on weekends, and sometimes even when you're technically on vacation. But not working this way — to stop being "always" available — would, for too many, cause stress in and of itself. A recent article in Psychology Today titled "The Depressed Lawyer" stated that most people who become lawyers are driven by "ambition and a compulsion to overachieve." It went on to suggest that we sometimes have a "relentless drive to be perfect" both at work and at home.

While I understand this all too well, I'd like to challenge you to give yourself a break — and to allow yourself to step away. Give yourself a cut-off time for replying to emails. Take Fridays off when you can. And when you get that long-awaited vacation, turn your email off.

I can almost hear audible gasps at the suggestion to turn off your email! What if something happens? I can't possibly not check in! While there are sometimes emergencies, I'm willing to bet that the team you work with — and maybe even had a hand in developing — is more than capable of handling things temporarily. When you allow yourself to truly disconnect, you return refreshed and ready to jump right back into the daily grind.

I can personally attest to the benefits of disconnecting this way. This is a practice I've championed for years, even when former colleagues expressed doubt or caution when I turned my email off to go on a three-week vacation. You know what? The sky didn't fall, and I came back refreshed and ready to tackle any challenges that came my way. When I joined ACC, I extended this option to all employees because I believe in this practice so much — it's good for the vacationing employee as well as those entrusted to getting the job done. Staff have grown to appreciate the many benefits of this approach, and I believe it also demonstrates our commitment to work-life balance. At first, I had to push a few senior managers, but then cutting off email became more commonplace. In fact, for the month of June, my email account was cut off (temporarily disconnected) while I enjoyed a four-week sabbatical.

Those who enter professions like law tend to be ambitious and driven, maybe even a little overachieving. Many of us carry those expectations into our professional careers, which while admirable, can lead to behavior that can be harmful to our health and wellbeing. In order to effectively lead and to support our organizations and communities, we must first practice self-care. Lawyers are leading the way in many areas, including sustainability and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG). Wouldn't it be game-changing if we led the way in adding wellness to that list? ESGW — that has a nice ring to it.

Additional resources

"Still Checking Work Email? This Employers Says Stop," The Washington Post, (March 2017).

"Rethinking Reactions to Stress: You can't control the sources of your anxiety – only your response," ABA Journal, (May 2019).

"Addiction in the Legal Profession," Sunrise House, (February 2019).

"Attorney Suicide: What Every Lawyer Needs to Know," ABA Journal, (January 2019).

"Lawyers, Judges at High Risk for Mental Health Issues," The Daily Business Review, (January 2019).

“Why Are Lawyers Killing Themselves?” CNN, (January 2014).

“The Depressed Lawyer. Why are so many lawyers so unhappy?” Psychology Today, (May 2011).

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Veta T. Richardson is the immediate past president and chief executive officer of the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC). Headquartered in Washington, DC, ACC is the world's largest legal association dedicated exclusively to serving the interests of in-house counsel. With an international membership of more than 45,000 in-house lawyers at more than 10,000 organizations in 85 countries, ACC serves as the "voice of the in-house bar" for corporate lawyers at 98 percent of the Fortune 100 and 51 percent of the Global 1000.

With more than 60 chapter operations around the world, Richardson's top priorities as CEO involve continuing to increase ACC's global footprint and charting the organization through a strategic plan and vision designed to strengthen its position as the global voice for in-house counsel. Members look to ACC to advocate in support of their rights and interests as in-house counsel, as well as to offer the practice resources, education, global legal and regulatory analysis, and networking opportunities needed to advance their professional development.