Let’s Talk About Inclusion:
Supporting Mental Health & Well-Being During Difficult Times

Practical Tips for Maintaining Your Own Health & Well-Being

• **Take Inventory.** The concept of work-life balance is not a very helpful one for busy attorneys. Even in normal times, the idea falsely pits “work” and “life” as seated on opposite ends of a teeter-totter (or see-saw). In reality, “work” is one component of life, along with family, physical and recreational activity, religion or spirituality, hobbies, community engagement, and intellectual pursuits. And in the post COVID-19 world, most of us are living where we work and working where we live, so any boundaries between the two concepts have been blurred beyond recognition.

A more realistic and sustainable goal might be to aim for purposeful and planned integration of work with the rest of your life. Instead of fretting about “balance,” focus on making deliberate decisions regarding how much time you devote to work and to each of the other aspects of your life that are in alignment with your personal values and the needs and desires of the significant people in your life. Remember too that your life will likely have several different “seasons.” What you are capable of doing or participating in both related to work and outside of work may be very different if you are partnered or married, have or decide to adopt a child, are caring for aging parents. The time and energy you have available for non-work pursuits may vary considerably depending on whether you are nearer to the beginning, middle or end of your legal career.

Finally, it may help to consider the idea of there being a rhythm to your life: periods of engagement, which may be intense as needed, but alternated with regular periods of reflection, recreation, relationships, rest etc.

Here are a few questions to consider in evaluating how well the rhythm of your professional life matches your personality, temperament, and desires:
Do I consistently have enough energy for things that are important to me? Where, when, or while doing what do I tend to run out of energy most frequently? What gives me energy and engages me? How often am I doing those things?

If I could have two extra hours in a day, what would I spend them on?

Do I have mental space to reflect on what I have been doing, and to proactively plan what I need to do next? How often am I able to take a step back periodically and assess what’s working and what is not?

What are the 3-5 things I need in my life to be happy and healthy (i.e. having dinner with my kids most nights, a regular “date night” with my spouse, sleeping 8 hours etc.) What can I do to ensure that these things happen?

Take time to try to look at life as a comedy, rather than a tragedy. Find places for humor and play in your life. Take yourself lightly and your work seriously.

**Strive for Self-Awareness.** It is beneficial—in fact necessary—for lawyers to pay attention to sources of stress, fear, or pressure. Consider:

- What are the warning signs that I am under stress, pressure, anxiety or fear? What do I do with these emotions or sensations when I realize that they are present? What has worked in the past?

- Which sources of stress are legitimate, and to be expected in my practice? Which ones can I do something about, and how?

- Is there anyone helpful I can talk to about it?

**Don’t neglect the physical dimension of your life.** Yes, we lawyers work primarily using our brains, but the brain is interconnected with the body, and therefore how you treat your body (proactively and reactively) has a profound impact on how well your brain functions. Consider the following simple suggestions:

- Avoid high caloric foods. Instead, eat a healthy diet with fruits and vegetables, and a good source of protein—especially early in the day.

- Exercise regularly and remain physically active throughout the day (i.e. use the stairs, park farther from the office door when weather permits), but not close to bedtime.
When taking up exercise, choose an activity that you truly enjoy—not just something that you think you “should” do (or see other folks doing) to keep “fit.” The more you have a healthy passion for the activity, the less you will have to “make yourself” do it.

Take short breaks when working and/or studying.

Get enough sleep. Make your room completely dark. Reduce brightness of lights as bedtime approaches, then brighten in a.m. Taking a hot bath or shower prior to bedtime may also help you fall asleep.

Minimize intake of caffeine, stimulants, and alcohol.

Practice the 4 x 7 x 8 exercise or any deep breathing exercise. It is physiologically impossible to stay anxious or stressed while deep breathing.

- **Engage more fully and purposefully in positive, healthy, non-demanding relationships.** Law is a service profession, and you have plenty of people who need you. Look for positive ways to engage with the people in your life that you enjoy.

  - Spend time with friends. For many, it is the first thing eliminated under stress. Human beings simply cannot bond as well over the phone, or by texting, chatting, or emailing.

  - Avoid distractions that appear to offer a temporary escape, but provide little or no enduring value. If you notice yourself drawn into “flipping channels” or excessive internet surfing (e.g., spending hours on your iPad, or social media sites like Facebook or Twitter, or plowing through 5 or more episodes of a show on Netflix at one sitting), ask yourself if that is really how you want to allocate your time.

  - Get a pet (or spend more purposeful time with one(s) you already have!)

- **Make regular time for the kinds of things that move you, refresh you, or nourish your soul.** In *Dead Poets’ Society*, Mr. Keating said, “We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race and the human race is filled with passion…. Poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.” Would bringing more of the arts into your life improve your wellness? Consider these other quotes in that regard:
“Music is a basic need of human survival. Music is one of the ways we make sense of our lives, one of the ways in which we express feelings when we have no words, a way for us to understand things with our hearts when we cannot with our minds.” Karl Paulnack, Dean, Ithaca College School of Music

“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.” Father Thomas Merton

- **Pay Attention to Your Thoughts.** No one else talks to you more than you do. Would you continue to spend time with any other “friend” that constantly ran you down, or focused on your flaws? Watch out for negative “self-talk” that interferes with self-care.

  - What are the "should" statements that prevent you from leaving the office earlier, saying "no" to requests from colleagues or others, or taking a lunch break?

  - Notice when overly critical self-talk may be affecting your mood, or contributing to habits you would like to break.

  - The study and practice of law trains us to be left brained/analytical. Give yourself permission to feel your emotions. Your emotions can provide valuable information.

- **It takes commitment and practice for a new behavior to become a regular part of your life.** In order to make lasting change in your wellness consider following these steps:

  - Begin by choosing one thing to change, and then report your plans to another person (perhaps a loved one, friend or professional coach or therapist). Give that person permission to follow up and ask how you are doing with your commitment.

  - If you have difficulty making the change, consider what has gotten in the way. Do you really want to make the change? Was the amount of change too ambitious?

  - You don’t need to reinvent the wheel. What can you learn from times that you have successfully made life changes?