

The Importance of Self-Care and Workplace Culture in 2020

By TRACI CIPRIANO

THE YEAR 2020 WILL GO DOWN IN HISTORY AS A PERIOD OF GREAT UNCERTAINTY and societal upheaval, with the pandemic and its health and economic consequences, as well as increasing racial tensions and extreme political divisiveness, propelling us toward change. While we cannot know what the future holds, we can be confident that our lives have changed. And rather than the usual nearly imperceptible erosion or evolution rate of change, these last six months have brought cataclysmic and collective alterations, some permanent. What we all need are familiar and reliable anchors to promote stability. Self-care is one of those anchors—often overlooked and ignored in the chaos of responsibility and pressure. Investment in self-care is necessary, even as we deal with forced alterations to our lives, work schedules, and work locations.

When we are busy or feeling overwhelmed, self-care tends to be the first thing to slide: it may even feel selfish or exploitive to focus on the self amidst family, work, and societal pressures. Even when we recognize its importance, we let it slide. Why is this?—Because our self-care is the one thing over which we have complete control. So, let's exercise that control to enhance health—and in so doing reap the benefits in resiliency, mental strength and endurance, and happiness and fulfillment.

Well-being, however, goes beyond self-care strategies. How we do our work, including time management and boundary-setting, and evaluate our own performance, are also essential in protecting our mental and emotional resources.

I have found lawyers in particular are prone to devaluing well-being and self-care. The competitive nature fundamental to the profession leads to a laser-focus on prevailing at all costs, including costs measured in terms of mental and physical health, happiness, and social connectedness.

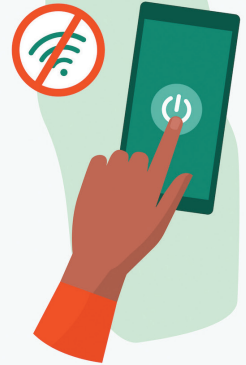
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TAKE TIME FOR YOURSELF



BE KIND



DO A DIGITAL DETOX



PRACTICE MINDFULNESS



PLAN A HEALTHY DIET



BE SOCIAL



GET ENOUGH SLEEP



EXERCISE REGULARLY



TAKE BREAKS DURING WORK HOURS



BE IN NATURE

The Importance of Self-Care

Taking Care of Your Mental and Physical Health

Self-care can take many forms. The key is figuring what is most rejuvenating and restorative for you—consider an outdoor activity, a physical activity challenge (such as a road race or triathlon), or a creative pursuit, to name a few. Be sure to make time for cultivating personal relationships, which provide outlets for fun, relaxation, and feeling connected. Taking a self-care day on a weekday and relinquishing work responsibilities (think quarterly!), can feel like a luxurious indulgence.

The Mental Health Continuum

When we think of mental health and well-being, everyone falls on a continuum, from a mental health diagnosis to transient fluctuations in mood, anxiety, and stress. We know that most diagnosed mental health issues, if caught early, can be effectively managed with medications, psychotherapy, or some combination of the two. But during times when external stressors are high, symptoms can be more difficult to manage.



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CDC and Kaiser Family Foundation data reveal greater incidence of depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, substance use, and domestic violence since March of this year, including both new symptoms and the exacerbation of underlying mental health and substance use disorders. Significantly, these mental health impacts are projected to be long-term, lasting for years to come.

Even if you do not have a mental health diagnosis, life events and circumstances can impact your overall mental health and well-being. Regardless of where you fall on the continuum, it is important to be attuned to how you feel when faced with stressors in your life, so you can manage your mood and anxiety and prevent longer-term consequences.

Finding Your Escape to the Present Moment

The uncertainty, new pressures, and volatility of 2020 have created some degree of stress and worry for all. Stress and worry, left unchecked, can lead to an overall inability to focus, or an endless cycle of negative thoughts and worries, as well as fatigue, physical symptoms or illness, depression, and burnout.

Meditation, with its many research-supported benefits related to improving stress and mood, has gone mainstream as an important self-care strategy. One of the benefits of meditation is getting out of your head and into the present moment, which is particularly effective for dealing with uncertainty and breaking the cycle of worry. Finding success with meditation without training, however, can be difficult. Eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) courses are an effective, evidence-based way to learn to manage stress and uncertainty through meditation and yoga. Currently, many of these courses are being offered virtually from university medical centers.

Yet, similar to other self-care strategies, meditation is not one-size-fits-all. You might try different types of meditation, or different instructors, to see what feels most comfortable.

Meditation may simply not be for you. Look for other activities that have the same “escape” effect on you, such as working on a puzzle or household project; taking a walk, jog or hike; getting together (safely) with friends; pleasure-reading; or engaging in a creative pursuit such as drawing or painting, playing an instrument, gardening, cooking, or photography. There are many possibilities; the key is finding what most engages your attention and thus allows you to let go of any pressing thoughts and worries.

Shift Your Thinking

Along the same perfectionist lines that lead lawyers to strive to prevail at all costs, research has shown how we approach mistakes and our performance also has an impact on our well-being. Instead of focusing on the negative, it is important to be able to frame mistakes more positively as a learning opportunity and strategize for the future.

In addition—instead of focusing on “When will it end?”—shift your thinking to “What do I have control over right now?” You can focus your attention on four broad areas: 1) *Taking Care of Your Physical Health*, by practicing social distancing, handwashing, wearing masks, getting daily exercise, getting adequate sleep, limiting alcohol consumption, and maintaining a nutritious, balanced diet; 2) *Taking Care of Your Mental Health*, with daily self-checks, adequate sleep, daily exercise, meditation, socializing, psychotherapy, hobbies, and limiting alcohol consumption and doom-scrolling; 3) *Taking Care of Your Financial Health* through planning and budgeting; and 4) *Modifying Your Work Schedule*, Location, and Content based on limitations, needs, resources, and opportunities.

Practicing gratitude has also been shown to improve mood by shifting your thinking from the negative to the positive. Recent research suggests it is not necessarily the positive thoughts that benefit mood, but rather the intervening and stopping the negative thought cycle. You can practice gratitude through writing one item in a journal daily, or journaling three items once or twice a week.

Establishing a Well-being Routine

In the end, we cannot overlook the basics: no one-shot (or occasional) self-care day, or even regular meditation, will correct the impact of inadequate sleep; an unhealthy diet; workaholic excessive caffeine, alcohol, or illegal substances.

There is no self-care quick fix. Self-care is not a temporary remedy, applied solely during times of stress. While most needed during challenging times, self-care strategies as routines build resiliency and ground us against the unexpected turn of events and sudden demands and downturns. Self-care builds a foundation for stability, endurance, and perseverance.

Just as you practiced oral arguments and trial strategy in law school before setting foot in court, or practiced a sport before jumping into a game or meet, self-care strategies need to be practiced so that they become an automatic process, like driving home from work each day or brushing your teeth.

Each of the many facets of self-care is just one important piece of your well-being routine. I deliberately use the word “routine” here to remind you that self-care activities need to be incorporated into your daily life, so that they become automatic, without thought. If this sounds overwhelming, focus on one aspect of self-care at a time, ideally with the overarching goal of change across many aspects of your lifestyle.

The Role of Workplace Culture

Legal employers can also do a lot more to improve workplace culture. In order for real change to occur in the legal profession, we need a shift in culture. A part of that shift involves promoting the ability to recognize the signs of emotional distress in our colleagues and knowing how to reach out to offer support and assistance in getting the help they need. Often, it is not clear to people or their colleagues that help is needed until work performance becomes impaired. The discussion of emotions in the legal profession has traditionally been considered taboo, so knowing how to reach out is often a barrier, even when signs of distress are recognized.

The other part of that workplace culture shift involves leadership and workplace policies. The important role of leadership in self-care messaging, promotion, and role-modeling cannot be understated. In addition, while slow to become adapted in the legal profession, flexible work schedules and remote workdays are common in other industries, where it is recognized how supporting employees in this way can reduce stress and can lead to improved productivity and better employee retention. Such flexibility is especially important during the current pandemic, as remote work options are vital in reducing both COVID-19 risk and employee stress related to that risk, and work schedule flexibility is crucial in alleviating pressures on parents resulting from modified school schedules. Importantly, flexible work schedules and

remote work options can help employees engage in self-care activities, including exercise and meditation.

In addition, workplace policies about internal communications can be implemented, based on law firm well-being officer or committee-established definitions of “emergencies” and “time-urgent” matters.

Finally, cultivating strong working relationships at the office also goes a long way in reducing stress and improving workplace culture. Colleagues and staff are more likely to pitch in, help out, and go the extra distance when you keep the lines of communication open, are respectful, and take the time to establish a relationship before a crisis arises.

It is during times of heightened stressors, heightened uncertainty, and chaos that self-care and workplace culture take on paramount importance. In the absence of self-care and healthy work environments, we risk burnout and not having the mental, emotional, or physical resources to do our work or take care of others, both in our work and home lives. ■

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