



PRACTICING WELL-BEING

What lawyers can do to take care of themselves during the coronavirus crisis.

BY CHRIS RITTER

Being a lawyer in Texas was already difficult. We start our path to become lawyers in the 96th percentile for anxiety. That is in law school. That is 26% more stress than medical students have. That is before we start handling dozens of our clients' most important problems. That is before we start seeing the trauma of clients losing their children in custody battles, wrongful death cases, or because of a murder. That is before being overwhelmed by endless emails and text messages every day as practicing lawyers. Almost half of 13,000 attorneys have admitted to suffering from depression during their practice. And that is all before the COVID-19 virus devastated our world.

While sunshine pumping is not credible or tolerable right now, it is important that we do the best we can to take care of our well-being. Here are some suggestions:

Connect and Debrief. We are not alone. Everyone is struggling. It is hard to know this if we isolate and do not connect. Likewise, if we do not talk to anyone about what we are going through, we do not process the anxiety and we continue to experience ruminating and stress associated with the need to connect and get a healthier perspective. Connecting with others who know firsthand what you are going through can help reduce fear and hopelessness. Fortunately, there are many ways we can connect online and, if you need to talk, check out the many online connection resources on tlphelps.org or texasbar.com/coronavirus or call TLAP at 800-343-8527 (TLAP) or text TLAP to 555888.

Set Boundaries and Focus on What You Can Control. Boundaries are important for a person practicing self-care. Do you deserve 4% of your life? That is one hour per day of self-

care. In order to get any time, we have to calendar it. We also have to consider limits to our work life and disconnect from the anchor of our emails and smartphones. Likewise, our minds will scan to solve every problem if we do not set a limit, such as this: Can I do anything about this issue today? If not, think of something else that you have some control over today. This can be very effective in avoiding anxiety when we have so little control over the frightening developments all around us.

Learn to Relax. For attorneys dealing with practicing during a world pandemic, relaxing can seem impossible. The mind is an instrument, but sometimes the instrument has become the master. Breathing practices have been effective for attorneys who need to relax or "quiet the mind." TLAP's website has links to guided meditations and other ways to relax. Whether it is meditation, running, playing an instrument, cooking, yoga, golf, or something else, it is critical that we do something physical after becoming stressed or we will remain in our sympathetic nervous system and experience chronic stress, which leads to depression.

Practice Gratitude. It can almost feel invalidating to hear someone tell you to look at the bright side. That is not what I am suggesting. I lost my wife to cancer last summer, and I cannot tell you how irritating it was to hear from others about their ideas of what I should think about. That said, I am certain that gratitude is an effective tool, when self-initiated, for a person experiencing complete chaos. It allows us to look at the things that we do have, that are truly good things, and it prevents our positive mind from atrophying. There are endless things wrong and endless things right in this world, so we can exert some choice in what we focus upon, at least if we practice gratitude. Science shows that thinking of three things each day that you are glad to have in your life can increase your happiness by 25%.

Use Online Resources for Well-Being. Technology has mostly been an obstacle to our well-being as we spend many hours each day connected to devices. We check our phones 150 times per day and read 120 new emails and 94 text messages daily. This was overwhelming before the virus hit. Now, aside from doing your essential work, try to limit your use of technology to finding healthy resources. The State Bar and TLAP have put a number of resources at texasbar.com/coronavirus and tlphelps.org to help you.

If you or someone you know needs resources for anxiety, depression, an addiction, grief, or any mental health struggle, TLAP is available to provide guidance and support at 800-343-8527 (TLAP) or text TLAP to 555888. **TBJ**



CHRIS RITTER

is the director of the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program.