

Self Care For Lawyers – How To Feel Better and Produce More!

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I. Introduction

This article explains the benefits of self-care, how to put self-care into practice, and how it will directly benefit you. It is a real world look at the problems faced by lawyers in practicing self-care. To be clear though, those issues only go so far, because we all only deserve what we reach out and achieve.

Neither I, nor this article, can convince you to take better care of yourself. It is too hard to define what “better care” is, and frankly we all have different goals. Therefore, this article is simply a tool to show you that whatever your goals are and your definition of “better care” or “self-care”, your goals will be easier and faster achieved if you put into practice the model described. As the reader, you must take the reins. You must choose to believe that you can achieve your goals, that you are worthy of happiness, and that change can happen.

As attorneys, I believe that many of us *think* we know that we can be happy, but we actually do not. Even now, after studying this in depth and hours of therapy, I still find delusions I have created of what happiness really means for me. In such times, I have to constantly redefine what I think I know for what really is. The proof is not what we think we feel; instead, it is what our actions show about our own belief system.

If you are brave enough to keep reading, brave enough to look at the parts of yourself that you might be using to over compensate and pretend that you are happy, brave enough to believe that maybe there is a way to achieve all of those goals you have built up and still find happiness, not because but in spite of those goals, then please enjoy what may be an uncomfortable, but needed and worthwhile, journey into happiness and goal achievement through self-care.

II. What Is Self Care?

A good friend and former law partner of mine calls this the “care and feeding of lawyers,” which is a very good way to look at self-care. For the purposes of this paper, self-care is simply anything that nurtures a lawyer from an emotional perspective. The reason that definition is so broad is that there are so many different types of people and lawyers and likewise, there are so many different goals.

The purpose of this paper is help you reach your goals, so we begin with the end in mind. As such, if your goal is to simply bill additional hours, then lots of family time at home may not be the best self-care for you. In that example, you will likely be wishing you were at the office billing, and the family time will actually diminish your emotional wellbeing. In contrast, if your goal is to just bill enough hours to feed yourself and your family, then perhaps that family time is exactly the self-care you need.

Given this broad definition and the reason for it, self-care can take time to identify. For me personally, I am a very focused, time-efficient individual. In almost anything I do, I maximize the value and minimize the time required to do it, and I plan that ahead of time. As such, I have found that to allow myself that kind of laser focus, I must completely unplug at certain planned times during the week. No cell phone, no email, no texting, and I do it through yoga. My yoga practice is scheduled with others to keep me engaged and honest, and my cell phone and laptop are left in my car, completely inaccessible during this time. Does it drive my family and clients a little crazy not being able to reach me? Yes, but I have demonstrated to those same, very important people in my life that this time away makes me a better father and lawyer to those people who count on me. I have additionally built trust in each of these relationships that their needs will be met and met well, that they will not suffer in the least for the time I have carved away from them.

Again though, you may have different needs and goals, so your self-care may look much different than mine. The following chart provides examples of other types of goals and associated self-care. Notice in the chart, though, that the goal is first and drives the form of the self-care. Here is the chart:

| <u>Goal</u> | <u>Example of Self Care</u> |
|-------------|-----------------------------|
|-------------|-----------------------------|

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Billing hours | Sleeping and exercising to maximize time at the office and ensure health to get you there |
| Spending time with family | Setting aside time outside of the office to make sure you can spend it with family |
| Developing clients | Finding activities, like golf, hunting or fishing, that match the interests of your clients that can produce that client development AND feel like downtime |
| Making free time | Establishing and keeping office hours and training your clients, family, and fellow attorneys accordingly |

There are some very important additional things to notice from this chart. The first thing to notice is what is missing. Notice that drinking, drugs, and other self-destructive activities are not included. Socializing may be a form of self-care, but try not to confuse socializing with these destructive activities. I drink, and I am not shy about that fact. However, too many attorneys justify “cutting loose” as their form of self-care. No one is here to judge; those activities simply do not achieve a productive goal. Thus, they are outside of the definition of self-care for this purpose.

Another important point to notice in the list of examples is the implicit boundary setting required in some of those activities. I could write a whole paper on boundary setting alone. What I can say is that most attorneys do not believe their lives are their own. We, as a profession, generally believe that we became lawyers because we love practicing law or for the money or both, and we have to “suck it up” to reach one or both of those goals. As I am reminded regularly by friends (and yes, my trusted therapist), that mentality ultimately leads to unhappiness.

A note of caution (or a request for restraint): Please do not understand my instruction or belief to be that we all need to find excuses. It is quite the opposite. In our modern social media driven society, it seems everyone has an excuse for what they cannot do. I am not one of those people, and for years, I used the “suck it up” mentality to overcome any obstacle (and yes, poke a little fun at those who did not). What I have come to learn, however, is that you have to find a balance between strength and softness, a balance between overcome the hurdles in your life and having compassion for yourself and others when you cannot. Without that balance, every time we fall, we crush ourselves with limiting thoughts, heaping shame upon shame for normal human error. Without that balance, we are overly critical of ourselves and each other, and no amount of success can fill the ever-growing hole we dig for ourselves. Of course, you do have to get through obstacles, without which nothing would be accomplished. The trick is to overcome and retain our kindness, our humanity, both for ourselves and to others. I know, I know – it is a lot to consider in an ever growing list of duties, hourly billing, families, friends, but I implore you to just consider what you crush within yourself and in others without that inherent understanding that we are (and you are) all human.

Back to the topic at hand, though: the KEY common characteristic in all of the successful people I have studied is the belief that their lives are their own. We all have to answer to other people sometimes, but for real self-care, you must believe that you can direct your life, that the people in your life want your ultimate happiness and sanity, and that those same people will appreciate you taking care of yourself. I mentioned in the introduction this required belief, and no matter what form of self-care you decide upon, it must be coupled with your real, honest, “feel-it-in-your-bones” belief that you can make your life the one you want.

III. Why Is Self-Care Important?

Put simply, self-care is important because happy people do better, and unhappy people do worse. Wait, wait, wait – hold on. Happy? That is one of those emotion words! We are lawyers! We bill hours! What in the world does happiness, or emotions for that matter, have to do with anything?

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