



Some Days are Better Than Others: Self-Care Tips for Lawyers During a Pandemic

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One day last spring, I shut down. The weeks leading up to this day had been filled with change. When the stay-at-home orders began in March, my colleagues and I could no longer be on-site at the law-school legal clinics we direct in Aurora and Rockford. We decided to team up and create a new virtual clinic, the NIU College of Law's COVID-19 Legal Response Clinic, to help individuals going through legal challenges during the pandemic.

On this particular day, things were hectic and emotional. In the morning, one law student and I advised a caller who wanted to know her legal rights regarding returning to work in person. The caller kept sobbing that she did not want to harm her elderly mother by exposing her to COVID-19. A few hours later, we had another call with someone who needed our advice about appealing his unemployment denial. He repeatedly mentioned not knowing how he was going to have enough money to pay rent. Later in the day while I was participating in a call with SNAP advocates, I heard story after story about the dire impact that the pandemic was having on food insecurity.

Personally, I was also adjusting to my "new normal." Childcare for our three children was unavailable, so my husband and I were trying to help our kids navigate e-learning while still working. My husband started a new role at his company that was challenging via Zoom. Between client calls, I was helping my 9 year-old prepare for her long-awaited speech to her classmates on the life of Walt Disney. My 13 year-old's computer was not working so we figured out Plan B. I worked on exercises to help my 3 year-old with his speech delay.

Additionally, my oldest brother had recently been diagnosed with COVID-19. I was frequently checking my phone for updates on his health. In the afternoon, I ventured to the grocery store to pick up milk, noticing the increased stress levels of the store employees. When I got home, I tried calling a homeless client. While starting to dial, I was interrupted by my daughter pounding on the office door, wanting to share her new-found wisdom that Walt Disney was a smoker. I eventually quieted her so that I could make the call. This particular client is always reliable with answering the phone, so I became frantic when he did not answer. I began wondering how the pandemic was impacting him. Was he okay? Was he alive?

At that moment, I became overwhelmed and shut down. I could not concentrate or focus on anything. It all was too much. This is not the only day this has happened since the pandemic started.

Pre-pandemic, our profession had begun to focus on the importance of professional self-care. As lawyers, we are used to emotionally difficult cases. We work with clients who are facing horrendous situations such as domestic violence, divorce and much more. We were seeing evidence that this work was negatively impacting us. The 2016 study conducted by the ABA and Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation highlighted the higher rates of substance abuse and mental health challenges faced by attorneys. Progress was being made by organizations, like the Illinois Lawyers' Assistance Program, who are lifelines for many attorneys experiencing mental health and substance abuse issues. We incorporated professional self-care into our law school teaching, recognizing the need to teach the next generation the habits for long-term balanced lawyering. We stressed the importance of boundary setting to our students, especially leaving work at work, in order to balance the emotional demands of being an attorney.

Then the pandemic hit.

Lawyering during a pandemic takes the need for professional self-care to a whole new level. The same pandemic shattering the lives of our clients is also consuming our own lives. No matter where we turn, we cannot escape it. Boundaries are blurred for those of us who work from home and are trying to balance our personal and professional lives. We are trying to keep things as much business as usual while adjusting to completely new ways of communicating with people socially and professionally.

The way we are now teaching self-care to law students has also changed in light of lawyering during a pandemic. All our teaching is online which makes checking in on the well-being of our students more important than ever since we cannot see them in person. One of my colleagues, Professor Laurel Rigertas, has been offering "Mindful Monday" sessions where students can log in and practice mindfulness with her virtually. The NIU Student Counseling Center has also been offering similar sessions. Professor Rigertas has taught "The Mindful Lawyer" for multiple years and fortunately is teaching it again this spring for students who want to learn more about self-care. The law school has hosted virtual sessions with therapy dogs to help students experiencing increased stress. Many students have not regularly seen other people since the pandemic started and are increasingly isolated. Students and faculty have coordinated mentoring sessions, virtual happy hours and community game nights so students and faculty can still socially interact and build community.

For me, I have started scheduling time at the beginning of my clinic meetings with students to ask about them. Many are dealing with difficult situations including deaths and illnesses of family members, loss of job offers, uncertainties surrounding the job market and bar exams, as well as challenges with their own health. There have been times when all they needed is

someone to talk to and other times when I provided the contact information for LAP and other resources. This is something we can all do more often, check in with each other.

Though I am not a mental health professional, here are some additional tips for self-care while lawyering during a pandemic that work for me:

1. Practice gratitude

Almost every article I have read about mental health and the pandemic has suggested practicing gratitude. Certainly, even in difficult times, I am clearly aware of my many blessings. I started keeping a gratitude journal a few months ago, jotting down five things every night that I am grateful for even in 2020. My family, home, job and access to health insurance frequently make the list. Some days it includes more mundane things like “conversations with my neighbors” while other days it lists “my large cup of coffee.” The clinic that I usually direct is located in Aurora at Hesed House, the second largest homeless shelter in Illinois. Working at a place like Hesed opens your eyes to all the blessings in life, many that are not material. Some of my clients, who are facing life’s most difficult adversities, have taught me that we can always find things to be grateful for, and acknowledging this gratitude can impact your world view.

2. Take breaks

For those of us working from home, it can be tempting to work from sunrise to sundown. After all, we have extra time that is regularly spent commuting that can now be reserved for work activities. This does not work well for me. I have found that taking short breaks increases my productivity. I try to walk around my block multiple times a day even if it is raining or freezing outside. The time away from a screen helps me process things and come back with a fresh start.

3. Work ahead

Some days, I feel like I am “rocking” lawyering during a pandemic. I get through to people on the phone, return emails, write in a coherent fashion, concentrate and have a sense of accomplishment. Sometimes, I even have extra time at the end of the workday.

Others days are different. It is hard not to think about how our world is changing, which can make it difficult to concentrate or focus. We have less control over our lives. For many of us, the need to quarantine for ourselves or family members, not to mention being diagnosed with COVID-19, interferes with our ability to work. A few months ago, I reserved a Friday afternoon to work on an article. Of course, I received a call from my son’s school nurse stating that he was exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19. I spent the whole afternoon in urgent care and then the whole weekend in lockdown, neither of which were on my radar or part of my article writing plan.

When you are having a productive day, work ahead. Now is not the time for procrastination because the world has other ideas for our schedules. NOTE: This does not mean to ignore advice #2 and still take breaks!

4. Be kind to yourself and your community

Be kind and forgiving to yourself. During the pandemic, most people are not functioning at their highest levels. In most cases, now is not the time to take on additional responsibilities or challenges. There will hopefully be an end to the COVID-era soon, and plenty of time will be available to set new goals. It is frustrating to put things on hold, but we will look back one day with amazement at all we were able to accomplish during this unprecedented time.

Also be kind to others facing similar challenges. I try to connect with my relatives on a regular basis, especially those who are alone. There is a group of moms from our law school faculty who have a “pandemic parenting” group. We share articles and have a call every other week to vent, share advice and realize that we are not alone in our struggles to raise children during this time. Take time for the people in your life. It will help get through this time.

5. Stick with the basics

We all know what habits help us take better care of ourselves, and now is not the time to abandon them. Keep a consistent sleep schedule and make sure to continue wellness visits with doctors. Exercise has been hugely helpful throughout the past nine months. In early March, we bought an elliptical that my husband and I both use daily. Drink plenty of water and eat healthy. Take your vitamins. All of it helps.

When you can, take time for the things that bring you joy. My students come up with “self-care plans” to identify activities that help them relieve stress. Some of these activities cannot be done now (for example, going to movie theaters or attending concerts), but many still can. Figure out what activities make you happy and carve out time for them.

Being a lawyer is emotionally hard. Being a lawyer during a pandemic is even harder. Fortunately, we have the Illinois Lawyer’s Assistance Program. LAP staff members are working tirelessly to make sure we handle our “new normal.” LAP staff members offer weekly group and nightly AA meetings, as well as individual counseling. They were a lifeline for many attorneys before the pandemic, including me, and their jobs could not be more important now. Do not hesitate to reach out to them.

Some days will be better than others, and remember that tomorrow is a new day.

LAP is always available to help!
Call 312-726-6607 or email gethelp@illinoislap.org
check our website illinoislap.org
for weekly virtual group meeting information.