

HEALTHY HABITS FOR LAWYERS

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HEALTHY HABITS FOR LAWYERS

This paper will highlight four healthy habits that can help make a great foundation for wellness and resilience-building for professionals: 1) Sleep; 2) Physical activity; 3) Nutrition; and 4) Connection. These are certainly not the only healthy habits that contribute to overall wellness, but research shows that a commitment to these fundamentals can greatly increase our ability to rebound from challenges and help us process the stress and anxiety we experience in our lives in a healthy way.

I. SLEEP

It is common when we think of improving our health to think first about food nutrition and exercise, both which will be addressed subsequently in this paper. Without question, both are critical to our overall physical health. Arguably even more critical to our physical health, however, is getting an appropriate amount of sleep.

Research shows that getting enough sleep and in particular having a consistent sleep routine can make all the difference in the world where our mental and physical health is concerned. We have to be asleep for at least a few hours before our bodies are cued to release proteins and hormones into our bloodstream that help repair and restore us from the emotional and physical stresses of the previous day (Van Der Helm, 2012). These same proteins also help fortify our immune system and protect us from potential health compromising ailments. When we continue a pattern of skipping out on sleep, we prevent our bodies and minds from healing. This can be devastating on our overall health and wellness exposing us to illness, burnout, anxiety, and depression.

The good news is, there are simple strategies we can implement in our daily lives that can help us get an adequate amount of sleep (8-10 hours for an adult) and also improve our sleep quality (National Sleep Foundation, 2019). Here are three suggestions to implement to improve your sleeping habits.

- a) Be consistent.
Try establishing a consistent wake time and bedtime. Our bodies love routine. If we consistently wake-up and go to sleep around the same time daily, our internal clock picks up on the pattern and will begin to prime itself accordingly. Studies show that people who practice regular sleep schedules feel 56% more rested than those who do not (National Sleep Foundation, 2019).
- b) Create a pre-sleep ritual.
Again, our bodies crave routine. Engaging in a relaxing activity, regularly, right before

bedtime can do wonders in getting us in the right frame of mind for a great sleep. Examples of pre-sleep activities: warm bath, knitting, gratitude journaling, or meditation.

- c) Put away devices.
Try putting away your technological devices at least an hour before bedtime. Smart phones, laptops, and other electronic devices we use emit blue light. This blue light tricks our brain into thinking that it is still daytime, even at nighttime. Seeing blue light prevents our bodies from releasing the hormone, melatonin, which helps us to become sleepy (National Sleep Foundation, 2019). When we stop looking at our devices before bedtime, we enable our body to ready itself for restorative sleep naturally. This helps us fall asleep faster and stay asleep longer.

II. PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The benefits that exercise provides for our mental health is well researched and documented. Moving our bodies helps us release stress and enables our bodies to produce proteins and hormones that protect and fortify our immune system. Although most of us understand that exercise is good for us, starting an exercise routine can feel like an overwhelming commitment. We tell ourselves we are too busy or we are too tired. We also may have preconceived ideas of what an exercise routine looks like running twenty miles a day or three hours at the gym daily. If you have the time and stamina to commit to that kind of physical health routine, wonderful. If you do not, good news: Research shows that even 20 minutes a day of moderate physical exercise can result in substantial health benefits (HelpGuide, 2019). A challenge for busy professionals, such as lawyers, is simply getting started. Here are some ways that may help starting and maintaining an exercise routine more realistic.

- a) Think baby steps.
As lawyers, we tend to have a “go big, or go home” mentality. This can serve us well in the courtroom. That same mentality, however, can keep us from entertaining an exercise regimen. When we think about physical activity in this manner, we can fall into a frame of thinking that if we are not competing in the Boston Marathon, then we cannot call what we are doing exercise. Approaching the idea of engaging in physical activity in a more mentally manageable way can help us stay motivated (HelpGuide, 2019). You may be familiar with the saying, “eat the elephant one bite at a time” being used when describing how to attack a seemingly insurmountable challenge. The same perspective can be

applied toward investing in physical activity. If you decide to implement an exercise routine, start with manageable and realistic goals. Walk around the block a few times a day. Try a 10-minute morning stretch combination. Remember lasting changes do not come over night.

- b) Cut yourself some slack.
Some days are going to be “blah” days. We all know that life happens and there are times where we simply do not feel like exercising. This does not indicate weakness, this indicates that we are normal (Polizzi, 2019). When we encounter a “blah” day, try to hold off on cancelling your workout plans in the morning. Wait to see if you feel better later in the day. If your day does not improve, try being creative about fitting in some physical activity in your day: walk to lunch or take the stairs (HelpGuide, 2019).
- c) Visualize success.
Studies show that if we can picture ourselves succeeding the odds of us doing so increases (Polizzi, 2019). Think about why better physical health is important to you. Are you wanting to live a longer life so you can see your grandchildren grow up? Have you always wanted to hike the Blue Ridge Trail? Visualize yourself doing so and write down what that looks like in a journal or somewhere. When “blah” days come around, conjure these visions and refer to this journal for motivation.
- d) Set realistic goals.
Sure, most of us would love to be on the cover of Health and Fitness magazine one week into our fitness journey, but Rome was not built in a day. An effective way to stay committed to a physical health routine is to set realistic goals for oneself. A great way to do this is a process called “chunking” (HelpGuide, 2019). Chunking is breaking down whatever task you have before you into manageable segments. Some of us already do this in our professional practices. When we have an important brief due in a week, we commit to write four pages a day. This can be a great strategy for exercising too. If committing to exercising an hour straight through, tell yourself you will exercise for five minutes then see how you feel. If you feel alright after five minutes, commit to another five. Chunking our exercise regimens can help the process feel doable and helps us stay motivated (HelpGuide, 2019).
- e) Schedule it.
We are in a demanding profession, have families, and have other responsibilities that

fill our day. Actually setting time aside for physical activity on our calendar increases the likelihood that we will get it done (Polizzi, 2019). Our lives are hectic and it is easy to get distracted or simply forget to fit in physical activity. Scheduling time for physical activity, just as we would a doctor’s appointment, in our smartphones and on our written calendars is a great way to ensure that physical activity will become a habit.

- f) Partner up.
Research shows us that having a workout partner helps with accountability and motivation (HelpGuide, 2019). We are not all feeling motivated at the same time. When we are not feeling like engaging in physical activity, most times our workout partner is. This can motivate us to show up for our partner and exercise anyway.

III. NUTRITION

Another habit lawyers can employ for overall better mental health is paying attention to what we are putting into our bodies for nourishment. In a world where fast food abounds and lawyers are so short on time, it is easy to make food choices that are not very helpful for our brain or body. There is plenty of research out there recommending what types of foods are better for our physical and mental health, but many find it most challenging to actually begin to make better choices. Good news, there are strategies we can implement that can help us start our path to better nutrition.

- a) Baby steps.
Similar to tackling the beast of exercise, think baby steps. Studies show that people who make gradual changes with their nutritional choices are more likely to be successful long term (HelpGuide, 2019). So, instead of changing your entire way of eating overnight, maybe start with choosing water over soda a few days a week.
- b) Meal planning.
Another strategy that can help us make better food choices is, meal planning. Meal planning comes in many forms. One way to meal plan is looking at a menu online and deciding what you will order before you go to a restaurant (HelpGuide, 2019). Research shows if we go out to eat with our mind already made up, the temptations that accompany of time pressure, savory smells and sumptuous descriptions are less apt to get us to stray from more reasonable meal choices.
- c) Eat beforehand.
Our busy lives are filled with parties, happy hours, and celebratory events. While these

can be fun, they can also be a minefield for those trying to make better nutritional choices. If you have advanced warning that a happy hour adorned with scrumptious, cheesy, fried happy hour accoutrements is heading your way, try eating a few of your favorite healthier snacks before you go (HelpGuide, 2019). Arriving to your happy hour feeling satiated may help you avoid the triple stuffed bacon cheesy bites.

- d) Prepare your environment.
To the extent that we can, controlling what we store in our refrigerators and cupboards can help us commit to better nutrition. If our freezers are full of ice cream, when midnight strikes and we are feeling the urge to snack, if ice cream is there, well ice cream is probably what will be consumed. If we make an effort to keep better food choices at our finger tips, we will reach for those at midnight or maybe not choose to midnight snack at all.
- e) Prepare when you travel.
Lawyers are constantly on the move. We are in airports and away from home frequently. Traveling makes nutritious choices even more challenging. A strategy that can help us be healthier when we travel is researching before we go (HelpGuide, 2019). Before you leave, Google where you are staying. Take note if there is a grocery store or restaurant nearby where you could make a quick stop for healthy snacks or healthy meal. The more prepared we are for a new environment, the better choices we tend to make.
- f) Make it easier on yourself.
Another strategy that can help one reign in what foods are in our environment is to indulge in grocery delivery services, or curbside pick-up. Studies show that doing our shopping via an app or computer can help keep us from making impulse purchases. When we take the sights and smells away from our shopping experience, it is more likely that we will stick to our preconceived shopping list, and less likely we will throw that unlisted package of cookies in our basket.

IV. CONNECTION

While most of us understand the importance that both physical health and nutrition is to our wellness, we often do not realize how important connection to others is when it comes to staying mentally healthy. When we isolate or keep ourselves from being around others, however, the consequences can actually be devastating. With the workload and responsibilities we harbor as attorneys, it can be tempting to shut ourselves away for extended periods of time to get that brief finished or

prepare for a deposition. While this is unavoidable occasionally, when isolating becomes a habit it can take a toll on our mental wellbeing. Studies show that when we isolate: we begin to lose our social skills; we start to overshare; we become less collaborative; and it can lead to (Cassens-Weiss, 2018). Below are a few ways we can make sure that we are getting the connection we need to stay healthy (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2016).

- a) Make eye contact.
If we think about it, when we were infants how we knew we were safe, loved, and cared for was through reading the facial expressions of our caretakers. Before we knew how to speak, we were getting cues that we things were going to be ok merely by looking into our mother's eyes. While communicating with someone verbally and hearing someone's supportive verbal response when we share about a difficulty we are having, research shows that also seeing the reaction of the person with whom we are sharing our news releases a unique set of endorphins soothing us in a way that merely verbal communication does not (Center for Disease Control, 2020). Talking about how we are doing over the phone is helpful, but sharing in person or via video chat is even better.
- b) Designate your space.
Designating your space means making sure that if we have allowed a space in our home, never intended to become part of our workplace, to return it to its original intended purpose. For example, now that many of us are working from home, some of us may use what once was only our dining table as our work desks. While this is a resourceful use of limited space, it is also a visual and literal way our work lives can begin to take over our personal lives. With our laptops and work files so accessible to us at home, it is easy to sit down at the dining table thinking we will just check on "one thing" only to find ourselves still in front of our laptops an hour later because we have gone inevitably gone down an email rabbit trail. A way to help avoid this trap and stay connected to our families when we are at home is to close our laptops, put those work files in a box, and store them somewhere else at the end of your workday. Thus, returning your dining table to its intended purpose, a place where you can gather and connect with your family. With our work accoutrement less accessible to us, we are less likely to reengage in work

responsibilities and more likely to stay present in our personal life.

c) Help others.

As lawyers, our profession is built on a foundation of helping others. It is what we do. Being a part of a profession that is purposeful and helps others is why many of us decided to be lawyers. Tapping into that motivation outside of work can be a tremendous boost to our mental wellbeing. Research shows that when we are helping others our self-esteem improves, we feel needed, and we feel purposeful (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2016). A 2016 study from the *Psychosomatic Medicine: Journal of Behavioral Medicine* involved scientists researching how our brains reacted when we help others. These scientists learned that our brains' pleasure center lights up when we are actively helping someone else (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2016). This means that when we are helping others, our bodies are releasing endorphins into our system that help restore our minds and bodies, not to mention make us feel good.

V. CONCLUSION

In a profession that is extremely demanding of our time and energy, it can be a challenge to maintain our wellness, physical or mental. Our professional responsibilities coupled with the responsibilities of our personal lives can leave us feeling anxious, drained, tired, and burned out. The good news is that small steps and incremental changes to our daily routine can drastically improve the way we are feeling and help build our resilience to the stresses that come our way. Simply implementing just one or two of the strategies mentioned above can get you on your way to wellness, or bolster the great practices you may already be doing.

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