

Practice Stress Management Skills to Improve Mental Health

The legal media spent much of 2019 talking about the mental health of lawyers, thanks to the bravery of Reed Smith counsel Mark Goldstein, who [revealed his struggles with depression](#). Law.com did an entire special report on the subject titled “[Mind Over Matter](#).” In addition to issues of mental health, the series dealt with stress and its physical and emotional impacts. This is an important conversation, especially given the high levels of stress that lawyers face in their day-to-day lives.

But something was missing: non-lawyer professionals. The life of a professional services marketer is stressful. In many cases, the partners you work for expect you to have the same schedule, availability and priorities that they have, but without the same financial resources to help manage your responsibilities outside the office. In October, the publication of “[Stressed Out, Left Out: Law Firm Staff Suffering in Silence](#)” brought non-lawyer professionals into the discussion of work-life balance.

Ideally, research and conversations about this topic will continue among professional services firms and associations. In the meantime, let’s talk about some concrete ways to work toward balance in your own life.

Put It on Your Calendar

Like the flight attendant says during every safety briefing, put your own oxygen mask on first before you help others put on their masks. You need to make yourself a priority. If you have a standing meeting with friends, mark it down. If you have to reschedule, that is fine, but at least you are reserving time in your schedule for yourself. The same is true of family time. If your child has a basketball game every Tuesday evening and you want to attend whenever possible, write it down. And don’t forget about exercise, which is a key method of stress reduction and health promotion.

In short, however you choose to relax and connect with others, put it on the calendar to help make it a priority. These self-care activities are important in helping you maintain balance and deserve the same level of attention as your work appointments.

Set Boundaries

In the world of the billable hour, it is common to be rewarded for putting in more time at the office. But at what point in time does your output begin to decline in quality? At a certain point, it is just not possible to function at your highest level.

When you do not set boundaries for yourself, you do not allow yourself enough time to rest, regroup and recover. As a result, your performance declines, which is exactly counter



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to your goal of overachieving. Research supports this. [Stanford researchers](#) found that productivity declines once you work 50 hours in a week and even more so when you hit 55 hours. So stop skipping meals at work, go home at a decent time if you can and know when to take a day off.

Say No

It is okay to say no. In fact, some people will even respect you more. By saying no to things that threaten your efforts toward balance, you are showing others that you prioritize yourself. A partner once told me that on Friday nights, pending an ongoing client emergency, they put their smartphone in a drawer in the kitchen and didn't take it out until later in the day on Saturday. Why? This was the time they carved out for their family. Their spouse and children could count on the fact that they would spend Friday nights together.

To achieve this, that partner had to say no to some requests and events, leave on time, and – most importantly – [set expectations](#) of others. All of the partner's clients knew that phone would be out of reach on Friday nights. If something just could not wait, they could and would call another member of the team, or call the partner's home phone. How often do you think either of those things happened? Never.

Take Your Vacation

Think about the last really good vacation you took and how relaxing it felt. [A study by the U.S. Travel Association](#) found that 55% of American workers do not take all of their vacation days. Be honest: Are you one of those people?

The use of paid time off (PTO) peaked in 1981 with an average of 21.2 days. By 2018, the average American worker was using only 17.4 days of PTO. Years ago, it was not uncommon for employees to be asked to plan their vacation time at the beginning of the year. This allowed companies to plan for coverage and make sure operations continued smoothly, especially in manufacturing. Today, most of us plan vacation time as we go. One reason? Coverage is less important in a time when we are all tied to our smartphones, which makes us always available.

Do yourself a favor – this month, plan out your vacation time for 2020. If you put it down on paper, you are much more likely to take your vacation. You might have to reschedule something, and that is okay. Remember, PTO is part of your total compensation. If your boss doesn't want you to take your vacation, assuming you are being reasonable about your timing, that says a lot about them.

Now What?

Are you noticing a theme here? If you are not listening to your body, setting boundaries and making time to recharge, you are not working at your highest level. As with everything, [balance is the key](#). If you can find the elusive balance, you will be more present at work and at home; you will be able to perform at your highest level; and you will enjoy lower levels of stress.

As you strive for personal and professional balance, please share some of the strategies that work for you. You can reach out to me, Michelle McCormick, at mmccormick@jaffepr.com or 281.975.9447.