



In my office, I have a small glass box. Two equilateral triangles are joined by flat pieces of glass soldered together to form a lovely piece filled with sand and small shells. It's a great well-being tool: If you change your perspective by turning the box, you will see things differently.

In the face of a global pandemic, the box may seem quaint, even trite. Perhaps it should be smashed to bits or buried—that seems more appropriate to what we're facing. But the box can continue to be a metaphor, even in the worst of times.

As we look at our place in an uncertain world, it becomes even more important to focus on all aspects of who we are. The watershed 2017 report *The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change* identified six facets of well-being: occupational, intellectual, spiritual, physical, social, and emotional. To that, I would add cultural. Each of these aspects of the whole lawyer is affected in different ways by the pandemic, with distinct triggers and opportunities. Many of us are required to attend to health, financial, and career challenges far beyond anything we have had to confront in years, if ever. What do you mean well-being? I don't have time for that! Yet attending to the whole lawyer will help us.

Detours on the Path to Lawyer Well-Being

Finding our way forward in an upside-down world

By Joan Bibelhausen

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a useful tool to examine these facets of the whole lawyer. Illustrated with a five-level pyramid, the bottom two levels consist of physiological and safety needs; both may be endangered. Love and belonging are the third level, and can be threatened when our place is insecure. If these needs are met, we often don't notice or consider them closely; if they are not met, we struggle. The top two levels of need are self-esteem and self-actualization, and this is where we might think well-being belongs: "I'll get around to it when I have the important things 'in place'." But attention to our mental health and well-being can help us better satisfy the most basic needs of the whole lawyer. We need not rise to a certain level of the pyramid to attend to our well-being. There is no threshold.

Our new reality

Several of our colleagues, in different places in our profession, have shared this thought: *I have dealt with many challenging situations and handled them. I don't know how to handle this.* When we are faced with an unknown and threatening situation, our normal response is fear. Fear helps us with a flight, fight, or freeze reaction to become safe. In the face of this pandemic, we don't have a clear sign of when the danger will be past or how large the threat will be. We may deny, we may become paralyzed, or we may lash out. This same fear reaction, when viewed mindfully, can also show us where we need to pay attention. When we look at the facets of the whole lawyer's well-being, where are we struggling the most? Additional attention is needed to care for that part of ourselves. Where are we strongest? Additional attention is needed to allow that aspect to grow and support the whole lawyer.

Let's take a look at what we can reasonably expect. We will experience a range of emotions, and each facet of the whole lawyer may respond differently. If we are working from home, we may feel less productive and effective, both personally and professionally. This can lead us to "awfulize": *I can't do anything well.* An entire support system in our firm or office helps us do our best work. It may

be available in different forms now, or not at all. Yet we expect to perform at the same level. If our job ended or we don't have enough work, our options are hard to identify and may seem unfathomable.

At home the "office" dynamics are different in so many ways, and our negotiated and managed methods for supporting our families and managing our households are upended. We feel we have failed if we did not smoothly glide into a routine just as organized as before. We don't get to leave work and come home. Our virtual meetings, without a handshake, seem distant and incomplete. I heard both a lawyer and a judge say, "I'm online with people all day and I'm lonely." If we are back in the office, that milieu has changed too. Whatever your disruptions, they are different and they are difficult.

■ **Grief.** If you have lost loved ones or are connected personally to someone with the virus, we offer our deepest condolences. If you have lost your job or wondered if your firm or business will survive, you are grieving as well. We are also grieving individually and as a society for what we have lost and what might have been. You may be in a place of denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, sadness (or depression), or acceptance—and in different places with respect to different losses. Recognizing you are grieving can help you move through it, sometimes with the assistance of others.

■ **Burnout.** This psychological syndrome arises in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job. It may result in feelings of cynicism, detachment, ineffectiveness, and exhaustion. Burnout may impact different aspects of the whole lawyer in different ways, but all of these are connected and can be affected. We feel powerless and overwhelmed. If you recognize some of these symptoms and feel you are at risk, decades of research have yielded tools.

■ **Trauma.** This complex topic involves the unique individual experience of an event, series of events, or set of circumstances. The individual's ability to integrate their emotional experience is over-

whelmed and the experience is physically or emotionally harmful or threatening; it has lasting effects on the person's functioning and every facet of well-being. In other words, the whole lawyer.

In our profession, we commonly encounter clients and parties who have experienced direct trauma, and we can experience secondary trauma. We define secondary trauma as stress reactions and effects from providing services or listening to others recount traumatic experiences. Now we are experiencing both, and earlier experiences in our lives may be triggered by something that is happening now.

We identify these challenges not to create a sense of doom but to suggest that recognizing and calling them by name can lessen their impact. How do we do that? Let's start by recognizing, again, that we do not have to cross a threshold of distress to begin. As our stress develops over the course of a day or week, it will build until there is a noticeable stress reaction.

It may be depression or an anxiety disorder—or we may lash out, withdraw from meaningful connections, drink to forget, or something else. The point is, we reached a limit. But if we know we are at risk and mitigate the impact more frequently, our risk is lower. To be clear, we can reduce our risk for mental health or substance use issues, but it is no more our fault if we develop a mental health disorder than if we develop cancer. If there is one silver lining of the pandemic, it is that stress and distress are now universally recognized as something we have permission to address.

Tools for resilience

Resilience is the ability to respond to stress in a healthy, adaptive way to achieve personal goals at minimal psychological and physical cost. It encompasses the ability to persist in the face of challenges and to rebound from adversity. It gives us the courage to grow from stress. Basic self-care, such as the way we eat, sleep, and move, is critical to enhancing our immune systems. People in recovery from any mental health issue are facing new risks. Providers and recovery communities have quickly

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adapted to virtual opportunities to offer additional support. The tools that follow are intended to support those higher-level needs even as we attend to the basic ones on the pyramid.

■ **Self-awareness and mindfulness.**

How many of us were advised to “count to 10” when something angered us as children? This is mindfulness! It can range from a simple breathing exercise to active yoga or meditation practices to seriously examining our worldview and analyzing what is affecting us the most and why. By being aware of our inner selves, we can feel that we are leading our lives rather than being hijacked by external factors beyond our control. In addition to what you might find with your own search or on LCL’s YouTube channel, try this. Within your environment, what are five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste? Engage all of your senses, and repeat as needed.

■ **Connections.**

Ample evidence supports the importance of touch as a way to release hormones that help us feel connected and develop trust (those missing handshakes). If you are away from people you might normally embrace, the loss may be palpable. Human connection helps our immune system, reduces our risk for mental and physical health challenges, and reduces perceptions of pain and threat. The five-senses mindfulness exercise reminds us that we have more senses than touch. Look for opportunities to have positive interactions with people, even if remotely. Hear everything, not just the words. Look someone in the eyes. Direct eye contact activates mirror neurons leading to the same social benefits as touch.

■ **Boundaries.**

What is your personal space and how is it different for clients or parties, colleagues, and personally? Think about and create your safe positive space with each of these groups. Think about how you will protect and secure it so you can do your best thinking and be your best self. What is safe, reasonable, and permissible for each aspect of the whole lawyer? Don’t be afraid to ask for what you need.

In our own distress in difficult times, we may be far less aware when crossing the boundaries of others—and that may be particularly true for what our clients are asking of us.

■ **Perspective.**

When you find yourself creating an inventory of all the ways in which you feel deficient, turn it around. Are you doing the best you can? Probably. Return to the aspect of well-being where you feel strongest and spend some time with that part of yourself. As lawyers, we are often paid to find (and litigate or negotiate) within a worst-case scenario, so that is often where we go when faced with a stressful situation.

This deconstruction exercise asks you to look at best- and worst-case scenarios, and your place in making them happen. Imagine a situation and its worst possible outcome. What *must* you do for that to happen, and how likely are you to do that? Now imagine the best possible outcome and what you *can* do to work toward that outcome. This reframes the situation and gives you a tool to operate as the driver, not the victim. There are situations and scenarios we cannot control. Focus on what you can, because that’s where you will see the greatest positive result, and the greatest likelihood of mitigating your stress.

■ **Gratitude.**

Gratitude is true appreciation for what you receive and acknowledgment of a source that is outside of you. You can be grateful for past experiences, for future opportunities (optimism), and just for today. Gratitude practices have been linked to improved personal and professional relationships, and improved physical and mental health. This is mutual help, not just self-help. These practices can include cultivating a greater awareness of what you are grateful for as well as regular exercises, such as a gratitude journal.

Our MSBA president, Tom Nelson, is known for his handwritten thank you notes. I’ve been the recipient of a couple of them and the kind way in which he expresses appreciation for LCL’s work makes my day and sometimes my week. Thinking about an opportunity to be grateful is a mindfulness exercise in itself. Start by

exercising gratitude to yourself for taking the time to engage in well-being practices. Sometimes they are inconvenient or difficult, but you are worth it. Then choose an activity such as a morning or evening gratitude journal or a gratitude inventory. Remember the image of the small glass box and turn it over as you ponder another way to consider a situation. What opportunity for gratitude does the new formation provide? Just eight weeks of a gratitude practice can alter our brains to experience more empathy and satisfaction.

■ **Asking for help.**

As we face challenges we have never before seen in our lives, we need help. We need help to secure food in new ways. We need help to care for our loved ones in new ways. And we need help for our well-being. We need not wait for a sign, omen, crash, or event to seek it. There is no threshold. Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers has long advertised that we have a 24-hour “hotline.” Every day, for any reason, there is a “warmline.” LCL will take your calls, respond to your emails, and meet you in our virtual groups and programs. If you are concerned about another, we will coach you on reaching out to them. Minnesota and national resources may be found on LCL’s website, social media pages, and YouTube channel. We will come to your organization to talk about well-being in a CLE or other seminar. If you think it will get better on its own, it won’t. Call us. We’ll help. LCL has your back. ▲

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Lawyers Concerned for
Lawyers. Founded in
1976, LCL provides free,
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professional support to
lawyers, judges, law
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on any issue that causes stress or distress. Legal organization staff members may call us too.

There is someone to talk to 24 hours a day and counseling is offered throughout Minnesota. You can help us reduce the stigma. To learn more or get involved, go to www.mnlcl.org, call 651-646-5590, or email help@mnlcl.org.

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