

A close-up photograph of a tree trunk with a small green plant growing from a crack in the bark. The bark is dark, textured, and cracked. The plant has several bright green, oval-shaped leaves. The title text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

POST- TRAUMATIC GROWTH AND YOUR CAREER

By Joan Bibelhausen



The National Task Force of Lawyer Well-Being (Now the Institute for Well-Being in Law) identified six pillars of well-being in its seminal report *The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change*: occupational, intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual. As we ponder our work lives in the near and distant future, this article will focus on occupational well-being while recognizing that all six areas are equally important. How can you do your best thinking and best work if other aspects of your well-being are at risk?

Our profession is on the front lines of every crisis and every important issue in our society. We advise, we counsel, and we represent. Although it is sometimes a strain to understand why, every crisis and important issue is controversial. We represent every position. Many we represent or counsel are grieving and many of us are grieving not only loss of loved ones but also lost opportunities and connections as well. How does this impact us and how do we make choices in the wake of these challenges?

Our duty to our clients begins with a duty to ourselves. You would not review a contract or lease without basic training, experience, or guidance. Self-care and awareness are as responsible for our competence as CLEs, mentors, and other professional resources. Jeena Cho, co-author of *The Anxious Lawyer*, reminds us that elevated and continued stress can trigger an ongoing “fight, flight, or freeze” response and prevent us from returning to baseline and optimal competence. Mindfulness tools, such as breathing practices, walking meditation, and active noticing allow us to process and be attentive to experiences beyond our negative stressors.

The Call to Make a Difference

In the past year and a half, a central theme has emerged as members of our profession have called upon Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL) for career guidance and support to navigate unknowns and consider options. *At its simplest, this theme is the desire to feel we are making a difference.* The pandemic, increased calls for reckoning on racial justice issues, and economic challenges have resulted in opportunities as well as additional stress and anxiety for us and those we serve. As a result, our priorities for our lives and careers may have changed.

How does this search for difference manifest itself? These examples are amalgamations as all calls to LCL are confidential, and LCL hears from judges and law students as well as lawyers. The need to be seen and heard in a workplace in the wake of racial trauma was one theme and prompted us to write a blog post for our website “Today I watched George Floyd die again, but sure, I’ll have that memo to you by 5:00.” A lawyer told us, “I got a law degree to make a difference. I got a job and make a lot of money and feel no purpose. How do I communicate to my family that I desperately need to make a change when they count on my income?” A lawyer reported the exhaustion of working with small business clients who were struggling to stay afloat when limited legal remedies were available. We can lose sight of our boundaries in such situations.

What Are Our Options?

When considering career changes or adjustments, where do we start? These three directions may help you take steps on your journey, and they are not mutually exclusive: change something about the work you do, change jobs, or go deeper—the changes are within.

Changing something about your job. Some of us had no choice as practice areas slowed and needs arose elsewhere. Think about change not as whether you practice real estate or family law, but as how you approach the work. Each day we begin again. For your clients, a visit or other connection may be the most important part of their day, and they may be experiencing some stress about it. After all, most people who need lawyers wish that what led them to see a lawyer had not happened. You remind them of that difficulty. If you can mindfully think about the connection you will make with clients so they feel better after talking with you (yes, this is even possible with bad news), how will you view the day? If that client is simply one more thing to finish on your to-do list, how will you view the day? Of course, there are other aspects, such as challenging co-workers or processes, that you simply do not enjoy, and you can apply a similar approach to each of these. What part can you control and how will you do that? If you cannot control something, can you let it go? If it is sufficiently stressful, the next option might be to change jobs.

Changing jobs. As you think about a job change, your law school career services office continues to be a resource for you. In the world of recovery, there are warnings against a “geographic cure,” a change that is avoidance, not growth. If you change jobs, how can you view it as moving forward, not running away? Start with your resume. Are your skills described in a way that highlights what you like least about what you are leaving? After all, that’s what you think about. Focus on where you are going, not what you are leaving.

Changing within. The past 18 months have upended our lives in so many ways. For some, we wonder where the time has gone. Did we miss opportunities? As we look at returning to “normal,” that may be the last thing we should do. We were forced to adapt quickly to circumstances outside of our control. We did it. Now how do we take the best and keep it? Think of moving from post-traumatic stress to post-traumatic growth.

Katy Milkman, Wharton professor and author of *How to Change: The Science of Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be*, talks about the “fresh start effect” that occurs with temporal landmarks. These allow us to make resolutions or other changes at a recognizable time that we associate with a new beginning, such as New Year’s. Now we have a rolling landmark—the COVID-19 pandemic and we may feel less control. How do we take it back? Thinking of this as a strategic inflection point is one way. Andrew Grove, former CEO of Intel, wrote, “A strategic inflection point is a time in the life of business when its fundamentals are about to change. That change can mean an opportunity to rise to new heights.” Our year is a rolling strategic inflection point. Some of us feel malaise because we don’t have a specific, recognizable landmark, or we are simply exhausted by the magnitude and the continuation of the challenges. There is much we cannot control in these times or any other. By focusing on what we can influence or control, we are more likely to direct what happens next. We can take advantage of the fresh start and the inflection point.

Pulling It All Together

Disruptions are a trigger for change. All of us have experienced changing and disrupting events earlier in our lives and careers. Think about which of those experiences, for you, opened a new door that might never have been available. Maybe one of those led you to law school. I grew up in a family where alcohol was an issue. Today, I have an extremely fulfilling career supporting people in recovery because that door was opened.

Is this a blank slate? That can seem overwhelming as we analyze or overanalyze every possible step. It need not go that far. What worked well for you? What was okay, but given the chance you would now proceed differently? And there are small things. You still have lunch; instead of a microwave soup cup at your desk, begin with adding the physical (healthier) and social (not alone) pillars of well-being once a week.

More recently, a common theme for LCL has been uncertainty and anxiety about what happens next. This may include the burden of many decisions, a fear that one will be subject to decisions that do not feel safe or supportive, or symptoms of burnout. In her article “The Mental Health Factor: Accounting for the Emotional Toll of the Pandemic” for the *ABA’s Law Practice Magazine*, lawyer and resilience coach Laura Mahr discusses the impact of trauma, fatigue, and uncertainty in our work lives and offers guidance on flexible adjustments for lawyers and managers. She notes that as we again proceed without a playbook, we should consider mental health from day one. As you face and await decisions that will affect your work life, how will you incorporate mental health and encourage others to do so as well? It should be a priority.

Well-being awareness is growing in our profession and as this momentum continues, there will still be depression, there will still be substance use disorder, there will still be other trials. While well-being practices can reduce our risk, there are life-threatening challenges in our profession. No one develops a substance use problem or gets depression because they did not do well-being well enough. We need to reduce risk and we need to support those who are struggling. We can do both; our profession is filled with outstanding lawyers and judges in recovery because they were and are supported in getting the help they need.

When you look back on the pandemic, on our profession’s growing awareness and initiatives around racial justice, on new relationships and opportunities, what will be your turning points? You get to decide, and there is always someone available to help you. Remember, Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers offers free and confidential support and counseling on any issue that causes stress or distress, including working through most of the questions posed in this article. We’ll be here to help.



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