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IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

TEN HAPPY TIPS FOR LAWYERS

Being a “happiness guru” is hard work. My years as a labor lawyer were easy in comparison, and so was fighting my way up the corporate ladder. Since I started working with Martin Seligman, the world-famous expert on the science of well-being, things have gotten really tough. All people want from me now is the secret to happiness.

My lawyer friends sometimes tease me about my new vocation (“Hey, are we playing golf today or searching for truth and meaning?”). But they also want to learn about well-being, and so do a growing number of law schools, law firms, and legal departments. The demand for answers (I would say cries for help, but everybody knows there’s no crying in law) is enormous. Everyone wants to know if happiness and law can coexist.

They have good reason for asking. Lawyers, as a group, are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety, alcoholism and drug abuse, and a host of other psychological and emotional disorders than any other occupational group. These facts seem unfathomable, given the relatively high social standing, affluence, and educational attainment of lawyers – factors that correlate with well-being in most careers. But the facts, as we like to say, are the facts.

So, at the risk of sounding trite while compressing centuries of thought and research into a list, here are ten ideas for greater well-being in law.

1. Play to Your Strengths. The research is overwhelming that you are

happiest when you use your strengths and personality in your work. If you are a happy-go-lucky extrovert, try to avoid spending ten years doing discovery requests.

2. Choose Optimism. Although happiness is partly genetic, it is partly of our own choosing. The good news is that optimism can be learned. Start by challenging your own thoughts. Pessimists develop negative thinking patterns, such as believing that a bad outcome is a career ender. Optimists perceive every setback as temporary.

3. Keep Perspective. The universe doesn’t revolve around you and your worries. If you aren’t in the top half of your class, it’s not the end of the world, although it might seem like it when first-year grades come out. If you don’t make partner, life will go on.

4. Keep Moving – Literally. Don’t fight evolution. Your DNA comes from those early humans who could outrun prehistoric predators. The sit-around types became dinner and didn’t pass on their genes. Take frequent breaks and walk around. Get some air and sunlight.

5. Be Sociable. Positive psychologist Chris Peterson defines happiness as follows: “Other people matter.” Pay attention to your friends, your family, and the person next door.

6. Practice Gratitude. Thank those friends of yours. Studies show that people who express gratitude to others,

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and have a sense of thankfulness for the good things in life, experience much higher levels of well-being than those who don't.

7. Be Resilient. As with tip #2 above, develop thinking patterns to help navigate through life's inevitable challenges.

8. Pause/Meditate. Stop! Right now. Focus on what you are doing. Block everything else out in your mind other than this present moment. Take a deep breath. Then take another. Relax. There is abundant evidence that a few moments of mindfulness or simple meditation during the workday bring significant health and happiness benefits.

9. Keep a Sense of Humor. And work around people who do. Humans are biologically programmed for fun and play. I am not talking about nerf football in the library, but try to lighten up a bit. I once had a job where laughing – I kid you not – was frowned on as being unprofessional. I quit.

10. Make Law a Calling – Or Get Out. There is work, and there are callings. The happiest people find both at the same place. If you are moved by helping clients solve thorny legal issues, or sense you are fighting for a cause larger than yourself, you are in a calling. And I bet you love being a lawyer. If you hate it, get out. Do anything, but don't stay in a job you hate.

I am a pragmatist and a realist. If you are saddled with debt, desperate to find a job, or feeling stuck at a high-paying firm because of a mortgage and private school for the kids, a list like this sounds glib. But I challenge you to try at least one or two of these interventions and send me an e-mail letting me know if they helped a bit.

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