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Five Thoughts for Big Law Attorneys to Consider on World Mental Health Day

Lawyers not only have a duty to clients to attend to well-being, they owe that duty to themselves because no one else has a greater ability to influence his or her own well-being.

BY LORI L. PINES

Today is World Mental Health Day, an important day to educate and increase awareness about mental health challenges.

It is no wonder that many Big Law lawyers and staff get stressed and even depressed at times. The hours are long and the work is demanding. The matters are large and complex, often involving high stakes and bet-the-company disputes and transactions. Clients rightfully expect their lawyers to be responsive and on top of things at all times and to perform with excellence.

With that context in mind, I'd like to offer a few thoughts for all of us to consider as we do our best to thrive throughout the year—for ourselves and our families, as well as our clients and colleagues.

1. Don't Overlook the Benefits of Working in Big Law When it Comes to Mental Health

At the risk of sounding like a Pollyanna, there are positives about Big Law on the mental health front that go beyond the obvious benefits—the high salaries and interesting, often newsworthy, cases and matters.

Working in Big Law means you frequently work in teams: that means there are others around to support you. Good team members help each other, watch out for and cover for each other. Being a member of many litigation teams who experience the daily ups and downs of client matters, and sharing many laughs together, has always been my favorite part of practicing law.

Surrounded by people, Big Law lawyers also have more opportunities to find mentors or sponsors at their firms. Most Big Law firms have formal mentoring programs in place. Being social and staying connected to others has been linked to happiness,

so it makes sense to take advantage of there being many others around to form friendships and find mentors. Helping others also promotes well-being. Virtually all Big Law firms perform pro bono work to assist those who cannot afford representation. My firm has a social responsibility program that includes charitable contributions to nonprofit organizations and year-round volunteer opportunities and cause-related events.

Furthermore, Big Law employees generally have excellent health care benefits. Our firm offers an employee assistance program and a benefits package that includes comprehensive mental health coverage for treating issues, such as depression and anxiety, as well as a 24/7 emotional support line. Additionally, our wellness program provides workshops on topics such



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(Courtesy photo)

as substance abuse, depression and loneliness, suicide prevention, positive psychology, and mindfulness, as well as free access to mental health related apps.

2. Looking After Your Own Mental Health and Overall Well-Being Is Not Optional

All attorneys have an ethical duty to provide competent representation, and a lawyer's well-being is central to the duty of competence. In fact, ABA Model Rule 1.16(a)(2) states that a lawyer shall withdraw from a representation if the lawyer's "physical or mental condition materially impairs the lawyer's ability to represent the client." Consequently, attorneys must look after themselves, exercise self-care, and get treatment for mental health conditions including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse issues.

In truth, you not only have a duty to clients to attend to well-being, you owe that duty to yourself because no one else has a greater ability to influence your own well-being. Some aspects of practicing law are inherently stressful and cannot be eliminated entirely or made more enjoyable. However, there are ways to help you handle the stress better, improve your mental and physical health and achieve greater levels of happiness including mindfulness, gratitude and exercise practices and programs. You need to explore and see what works for you. Lawyers are not superhuman; they need to force themselves to look after all aspects of their health. Yet, it always amazes me that very few lawyers even take the time to familiarize themselves with their own firm's health-related benefits and programs.

3. You Would Not Hesitate for Very Long to Get Treatment for a Physical Ailment—Likewise, You Shouldn't Hesitate to Seek Professional Help for a Mental Health Issue

Most of us would not hesitate to seek medical help if we broke a leg or were in physical pain. You should do the same when mental health issues arise and be able to arrange for treatment on a confidential basis. Sometimes the symptoms

are not obvious, so you should continually ask yourself how you are feeling. Everyone needs help from time to time; the pandemic only made that more apparent. While I would love to say that the stigma associated with mental health challenges has been eliminated in the legal industry, what I can say is that it is much more acceptable than ever to address mental health issues and nothing should stop you from getting the help you need.

4. There Are Many Great Professional Opportunities Out There if This Path Is Not for You

Big Law is not for everyone—and there is no shame in making that discovery. There are many great professional opportunities, if the path of Big Law is not for you. Sometimes we all can get tunnel vision when we are working hard alongside highly driven people, but there are a multitude of other options if this is not your bliss.

5. Firm Leadership Cares More About Your Well-Being Than You Think

There is no question that commitment from firm leaders is needed to advance well-being in the legal profession. Certain leaders are more committed than others, but on some level, firm leadership has to care about your well-being. Firms do not want their lawyers to make mistakes, and well-being is a vital component of employee productivity and performance. I also have real hope that law firms are finally discovering that well-being is a critical business issue that is inextricably intertwined with important firm initiatives such a greater recruitment and retention, and even better results on diversity, equity and inclusion.

So, make the most of this day—and every day—to check on your mental health. You owe it to yourself.

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