

For the Sake of Your Mental Health, Stop Thinking (and Acting) Like a Lawyer

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Recently, I've been writing and speaking a lot about lawyer personalities (see, e.g., "[Stop Thinking \(and Acting\) Like a Lawyer](#)" in the September 22, 2022, issue of *GPSolo eReport*). My basic argument is that the things that make us good lawyers can interfere when we are trying to build a practice or advance our careers.

An advertisement for BridgeBank. On the left, a white box contains the text "OUR TEAM MAKES SOPHISTICATED M&A DEALS DOWNRIGHT SIMPLE." in red, the BridgeBank logo (a stylized 'B' in a circle), and the text "BridgeBank" with "A division of Western Alliance Bank. Member FDIC." below it. A red button with "SCHEDULE A DEMO" is at the bottom right of the box. On the right, a photograph shows a person's hands typing on a laptop keyboard, with the laptop screen displaying a dashboard with various charts and data.

Thinking and acting like a lawyer is very helpful when we represent and advise our clients. Our clients want us to be skeptical. They are paying us to identify risks. Our clients like the fact that we know how to argue their position. They want us to use our analytical skills to advise them on the best course of action. In many instances, our sense of urgency can be very helpful in getting deals done or in getting cases settled. Our ability to organize information and create structure is another mark of good lawyering.

But there are times when we need to wear a different hat.

The fundamental issue is that acting like a lawyer can interfere with relationship building. And relationship building is the foundation of all

business development and is critical in being an effective leader and in advancing our careers.

Social Connection Is Important for Our Mental Health

While I've written and spoken about the negative impact our lawyerly personalities can have on our careers, thinking like a lawyer can also have a damaging effect on our mental health. As we come into the holiday season, I thought this was a good time to revisit the topic.

Just as an inability to build relationships can undermine our business development, so, too, can it weaken our social connections. Social connections are vital to our mental health. They provide us with a sense of belonging and emotional support that can significantly reduce depression and anxiety. By fostering strong social connections, we nurture our mental well-being. Social connection enhances our resilience and overall happiness.

At times, thinking and acting like a lawyer can interfere with social connection. Strong social connections are built on trust. If we are skeptical with our friends and family, we risk breaking the bonds of trust. Similarly, with some exceptions, trying to win arguments is generally not a great way to deepen our relationships. A better way to build social connections is to become a great listener.

A lack of patience in our social interactions can also interfere with connections. Meeting a filing deadline may have urgency, but if we bring that constant sense of urgency into all our social interactions, that can create a lot of unnecessary stress.

Finally, consider the role of empathy. If you can understand another person's point of view and demonstrate to them that you understand how they feel, they are more likely to feel connected to you. Make people feel heard—even if you don't agree with them.

Use Mindfulness to Turn Off Your Lawyer Brain

Aside from taking off our lawyering hats and focusing on social connection, there are other ways to shut off our lawyer brains.

The psychologist Martin Seligman says that as a group, lawyers rank high on pessimism. That pessimism, whether it is innate or a learned behavior, helps us protect our clients from unnecessary legal risks. But pessimism can have a pernicious effect on our psyches.

Incorporating meditation or other forms of mindfulness into your day is a way to interrupt your default reactions. It is also a way to increase your ability to cope with stress.

For the past five years, I have been starting many mornings with a meditation practice. I have also made a more concerted effort to practice mindfulness more generally. These tools have helped me be more deliberate about my responses in stressful situations. Mindfulness helps to release stress. It also gives us the self-control we need to pause before opening our mouths to speak.

Through my meditation and mindfulness practice, I have come to an important realization.

I may not have complete control over my internal reactions (I, too, think like a lawyer), but I do have control over my behavior and my responses. This has taken years of practice for me. (And I'm still working on it!) Therapy and coaching have helped a lot as well. So has going regularly to the gym.

Our work as lawyers is often solitary, and for some of us, our days are filled with conflict. That is not necessarily a bad thing. By thinking and acting like a lawyer, we can help our clients achieve their objectives while effectively managing their legal risks.

But as you move about the world, find time to take off your lawyering hat. Become a great listener. Build social connections. Meditate, exercise, or find

some other outlet to manage your stress.

Thinking and acting like a lawyer is good for your clients.

Showing empathy, finding ways to build your personal relationships, and taking time away from work to recharge are good for your mental health.

The start of the new year is a good time to reflect on this.

If you are suffering from anxiety or depression or are feeling overwhelmed, there are many free resources around the country that are available to help you. In Massachusetts, we have [Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers](#). Their website states:

The mission of Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, Inc. (LCL) is to promote well-being and resilience in the legal community, improve lives, nurture competence, and elevate the standing of the legal profession. To fulfill this mission, LCL provides free and confidential mental health resources, addiction recovery support, and practice management services.

Check with your own state bar association to find a similar organization in your state. The ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs (CoLAP) maintains an online [Directory of Lawyer Assistance Programs](#). If you are interested in learning more about mindfulness, check out the [Mindfulness in Law Society](#). There are chapters all across the country.

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