

# Well-Being

By Tish Vincent

**R**esearch tells us that lawyers have higher levels of anxiety and depression than other similarly educated professionals. Research also shows that lawyers have a higher incidence of substance abuse.

The legal profession takes this research seriously. Now that the problem has been identified, what should we do to respond to it and improve our psychological well-being?

Professor and researcher Carol Ryff has identified six domains of psychological well-being:

- (1) Self-acceptance
- (2) The establishment of quality ties to others
- (3) A sense of autonomy in thought and action
- (4) The ability to manage complex environments to suit personal needs and values
- (5) The pursuit of meaningful goals and a sense of purpose in life
- (6) Continued growth and development as a person<sup>1</sup>

How can focusing on these domains increase a sense of well-being for individuals in general and lawyers in particular? There is something unique and powerful about being a lawyer. We can feel it and others can observe it. Recent attention has been called to the curious habit of lawyers referring to others as nonlawyers. Doctors and nurses don't seem to call out those outside of their professions.

What does this quirk of conversation tell us about the self-acceptance of lawyers? Every lawyer has his or her own memories and meanings associated with labeling people as lawyers or nonlawyers. When speaking to a group of law students, lawyers, or judges, I'm often asked, "Are you a lawyer?"

"Yes," I answer. Often the reply comes with a relaxed smile, "Then you know what it is to be a lawyer."

In conversations with law students, lawyers, and judges about the most difficult aspects of becoming and being a lawyer, a number of recurring themes emerge:

- High numbers of lawyers and law students
- The grading curve in law school
- Competition
- Fear of showing weakness
- Time pressures
- The need to win against a competent, educated, trained opponent
- Naturally aggressive, competitive personalities
- Diminished time for relationships and interests

How can lawyers strive for emotional well-being in the aforementioned six domains while navigating the challenges they've described?

We live and work in a competitive field. Pardon the analogy, but as I write this in early January I'm thinking of football teams going to bowl games. Each team is remarkable or it would not have gotten this far. Each team has a good chance of winning, but one will lose. When the game is over,

there is a winner and a loser—but there are still two excellent football teams.

To have a sense of well-being, lawyers need a philosophy about competition that is flexible and realistic. Whether it is losing a big case or a place on law review, we can't react by condemning ourselves. Accepting ourselves as vulnerable human beings and accepting the vicissitudes of the practice of law are necessary foundations for a sense of well-being.

With a philosophy to rely on when setbacks occur, might it be more likely that lawyers would make gains in the five domains other than self-acceptance? ■



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## ENDNOTE

1. Seifert, *The Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being* (Spring 2005) <<http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/ryff-scales>> (accessed January 26, 2017).

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