

Finding Purpose: Resiliency through Spiritual Wellness

By Mary C. Aretha and Lynn B. Sholander

One in two.

That's how many attorneys reported feeling burnout during the first three months of 2021.¹ This means at least half of us have felt some level of physical or mental exhaustion as we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. We've felt it. And we're pretty sure you have, too.

That said, the recent burnout numbers aren't new. They're part of a long and growing trend in the legal profession — a profession that has historically glorified hard work and results, but all too often at the expense of wellness and work-life balance.

The outlook isn't all doom and gloom, though. Focusing on practices and tools that promote spiritual wellness can counteract the pressures and stresses many of us face as professionals.² A large part of this involves finding a sense of purpose or identity outside of work and connecting our work to that larger purpose.

Defining spiritual wellness

Concentrating on spiritual wellness can help us be more resilient and combat work-related burnout. Resilience “enables us to bounce back from adversity in a healthy way.”³ Although resilience can be achieved through a variety of social and psychological means, one key to achieving resilience is through spiritual wellness.⁴

When we refer to spiritual wellness, we don't necessarily mean religion. Spiritual

wellness may have a religious component — but it doesn't have to. Broadly speaking, spiritual wellness can be defined as a human connection with a higher power, oneself, others, and nature.⁵ Or perhaps more simply, spiritual wellness is when we “stop doing and start being.”⁶ Finding spiritual wellness is often a lifelong quest, but it can improve our lives in many ways. Some benefits of spiritual wellness include:

- Improving our relationships with others,
- Building confidence and resilience,
- Becoming accountable and responsible for our actions,
- Bringing positivity into our lives, and
- Instilling our lives with purpose and values.⁷

The importance of spiritual wellness for lawyers

What does this have to do with us as attorneys? Well, spiritual wellness can help us find our purpose outside of the law which, in turn, can improve our work-life balance and overall mental wellness. Attorneys tend to define themselves by their work. Spiritual wellness can help us look beyond our label as lawyers toward a higher purpose or calling.

Some may believe the very idea of spiritual wellness is inconsistent with the legal

profession. “Unlike many traditional ‘service’ or ‘healing’ professions, law practice has a competitive, adversarial reputation — deserved or undeserved — which can seem inconsistent with spirituality as popularly perceived.”⁸ But that doesn't mean that spiritual wellness has no place in the profession. To the contrary, it can prove particularly beneficial for lawyers — especially those experiencing burnout or other mental health conditions — for several reasons.

Satisfaction and purpose

“[A]ttention to spirituality has the potential to increase the level of satisfaction that lawyers perceive in their role if they view their professional calling in a spiritual sense.”⁹ Focusing on spiritual health can make mundane tasks more meaningful, and finding meaning beyond the task at hand can lead to a more robust career. In other words, “[v]ocation is life-giving; it reinvigorates us and helps us to link our work with those deepest spiritual values that give meaning to our lives.”¹⁰

Client service

“[R]enewed interest in spirituality can work a remarkable change in the way in which clients are served.”¹¹ Focusing on spirituality “can awaken in lawyers an appreciation of the many opportunities they

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have to serve clients and others as a companion, helper, and healer rather than as the much-maligned ‘hired gun’ or the disgruntled, distracted professional that the public so often perceives.”¹²

Professionalism and ethics

Recent studies suggest that more than half of all disciplinary proceedings and malpractice claims involve substance abuse, mental health conditions, or both.¹³ Finding meaning and purpose is one factor to achieving well-being and overcoming these mental health struggles.

Counseling

Finally, “attention to the spiritual life may also lead a lawyer to understand that there may be circumstances in which a client’s problems have a spiritual component that should be addressed if the client is to be served in a full, complete, and effective way.”¹⁴ In other words, there is often more to a client’s problem than the legal component. “The ‘legal problem’ may often be a byproduct or symptom of a client’s difficulty rather than the heart of the problem itself. A quest toward more holistic lawyering is better accomplished by lawyers who are attuned to the spiritual needs of their clients by grappling first with their own.”¹⁵

Tips for fostering spiritual wellness

Spiritual wellness is fundamental to lawyer well-being. But as many of us know, it can be hard to find time to concentrate on it. Lawyers are notoriously busy, and the thought of adding more to our schedules can be overwhelming. However, there are many ways to cultivate spiritual wellness, many of which don’t require large-scale lifestyle changes.

- **Set aside 10–15 minutes to focus on your core values.** As attorneys, it’s easy to become consumed with the minutiae of daily life and work while losing touch with the things that bring the most meaning to our lives. To regroup yourself, periodically set aside an uninterrupted period to inventory your core values, religious beliefs, or long-term purposes.¹⁶ It

may help to keep a written list of those items and review it regularly or complete a guided exercise designed to identify values and foster value-driven behavior.¹⁷

- **Practice self-reflection throughout the day.** Take note of your habits and rhythms related to work, sleep, self-care, and family life.¹⁸ Ask yourself whether these patterns are consistent with your long-term purpose, values, or faith.¹⁹ If they’re not, consider how you can make incremental changes to bring them in line with your fundamental beliefs or priorities.²⁰
- **Prioritize spiritual disciplines.** If you are a person of faith, set aside time — even a few minutes each day — to engage in activities that bring you closer to the focus of your belief.²¹ This may include solitary or corporate prayer, reading or memorizing sacred texts, listening to sermons or talks, observing a regular sabbath, or attending gatherings with other believers in person or online.²² It could also include less traditional practices such as prayer journaling, going on prayer walks, or listening to faith-based music. Even if you don’t practice a particular religion, consider setting aside some time each day to reflect on what brings you joy.
- **Practice mindfulness.** “Mindfulness is a type of meditation in which you focus on being intensely aware of what you’re sensing and feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgment.”²³ There are many ways to practice it, all of which are adaptable to the time and place.²⁴ Guided mindfulness exercises are available through smartphone applications like Headspace²⁵ and Insight Timer,²⁶ and there are many online resources for informal and structured mindfulness activities.²⁷
- **Regularly express gratitude.**²⁸ This can take many forms. As you go about your day, make it a regular practice to notice and identify everything for which you are grateful. Some examples include life’s basic necessities (food, water, and shelter); your family, friends, or support system; your health or the health of your loved ones; activities or items that bring you joy; or your personal or professional successes (and challenges!)²⁹ Expressing gratitude for these things doesn’t have to be time

consuming. You can express it verbally, in writing (e.g., a gratitude journal or note to a friend), physically (e.g., giving food or a small gift to a coworker), or mentally (e.g., by internally expressing thanks).³⁰

Conclusion

There are more resources aimed at fostering spiritual well-being for lawyers. A good place to start is the compilations from the 2020 and 2021 Well-Being Weeks in Law (available at lawyerwellbeing.net)³¹ and Anne Brafford’s “Well-Being Toolkit for Lawyers and Legal Employers” (available at lawyerwellbeing.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Toolkit-Full_Final_July-30-2018.pdf).³²

We hope you consider taking a few minutes every day to focus on your spiritual wellness. Doing so can help combat the burnout that many of us face. ■



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ENDNOTES

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