

Year-End Survival Guide



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Thanksgiving is over. More holidays are ahead. Offices will close, schools will be on break, and college students will return home. Calendars are filling with special events, professional and personal. There is shopping to do, maybe even decorating. Cooking becomes more complicated and time consuming. There is pressure to create magical memories for the little ones. Some will travel to visit relatives or go on vacation, requiring advance planning, pet-care arrangements, and packing. Others may be missing loved ones or dreading a visit from a certain annoying relative. Meanwhile, the clock at the office ticks louder and louder each day: the year-end statistics that drive annual income are taking final shape. Clients are in a panic, knowing their lawyers will be out of reach for some time, translating into higher demands and arbitrary deadlines. Let's face it, as the temperature outside decreases, the mercury in our stress thermometers rises.

In a profession already laden with high rates of depression and suicide,¹ it is critically important for lawyers to take some

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precautionary measures at this time of year to preserve their mental and physical health. Here are my top five ways for lawyers to survive the end of the year.

Nix certain expectations

Make a list of expectations, both personal and professional, you have for yourself this month. Don't hold back. Write down all the things you expect from yourself, even the little things. Set the list aside for 24 hours, then read it as your alter-ego wellness coach. If you were coaching a loved one to manage his or her stress, what would you suggest be lopped off the list? Would it be the expectation to top your highest-ever annual income, throw the best party on the block, or take an international trip of a lifetime? Ask yourself, What would happen if I didn't achieve this goal? What would happen if I did achieve this goal? Would it make a difference in five years and, if so, would the difference be worth the stress I am putting myself under? You might be surprised to see where you are putting your energy relative to the goals you acknowledge are most important in the long term.

Take shortcuts

Some things we cannot forego, like timely, high-quality client service. Other things we can contract out, delegate, or do with less

flair. Being Italian, for me elaborate food preparation is a cultural norm. As much as my family loves wedding soup at Christmas dinner, who has time to roll a thousand tiny meatballs by hand? My mother found a place that sells ready-made miniature meatballs. I can use the time I saved to get some exercise for stress management. And nobody will feel slighted because I didn't make the meatballs myself.

Plan ahead

Your calendar is your friend or foe depending on how you use it. Block out two chunks of time for every task that survived your expectations list. This way, when something truly urgent and unexpected comes along—and it will—you can use one of those blocks to handle it. Be realistic about how long tasks will take. If everything on your list doesn't fit on your calendar, further hone it and decline certain invitations or engagements. Take control of your calendar or it will control you.

Maintain healthy habits

During the holidays, skipping workouts, getting too little sleep, and exceeding reasonable levels of spending, eating, and drinking can be unavoidable. It happens to some extent no matter how disciplined you are. Don't beat yourself up when it does. We all

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need to break out of our routines once in a while, and doing so can focus our perspectives on how we might change our routines in the coming year.

Counterbalancing overindulgence may help. For example, there are countless opportunities to donate to worthy charities this time of year. If we matched our personal discretionary spending with a charitable contribution, imagine what we could accomplish. This is a good time to plug the Michigan State Bar Foundation, which provides civil legal aid for the poor, law-related education, and conflict resolution services. With approximately 80 percent of the civil legal needs of the poor being unmet each

year, you can be certain that donations to the Foundation will be put to productive, appropriate use. To read the Foundation's 2014 report, visit <http://www.msbf.org/~msbforg/2014PresidentsReport.pdf>.

Ask for help

The holiday season can bring about or increase depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. The State Bar of Michigan is blessed to have the Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program, which supports law students, bar applicants, attorneys (whether they are in good standing or not), judges, family members, colleagues, and other concerned parties.

The program offers consultations, assessments, short-term counseling, monitoring, referrals, mentoring, and education. Telephone consultations are free. All services are confidential. Contact the LJAP helpline at (800) 996-5522 if this service could benefit you or someone you love during this particularly stressful time of year.

The end of the year should provide us with a satisfying sense of closure and a well-needed break from the daily grind. May you all find peace, happiness, and wellness as another year draws to a close. Now, back to that expectations list—I have more honing to do! ■

ENDNOTE

1. See, e.g., American Bar Association, *Law schools take aim at mental illness* (November 2015) <<http://www.americanbar.org/publications/youraba/2015/november2015/law-schools-take-aim-at-mental-illness.html>> (accessed November 4, 2015).



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to keep all
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