

WARRIOR WELLNESS: STRENGTHENING YOUR PRACTICE BY STRENGTHENING YOURSELF



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Take a moment, place your feet on the ground, sit up straight, and take a deep breath.

I have struggled to write this article.

Danced around it, avoided about it, and worried about the delay I created after making several promises on deadlines. And, yet, an important component of my life's purpose is bringing wellness to my comrades, lawyers in the trenches, fighting for justice, fighting for people, fighting for communities. For several years now, I've led lawyer wellness trainings for public defenders' offices.

And, yet, this article caused me to hesitate. The dancing and worrying stem from wanting to get it right; from a desire for wanting to say just the right thing, so that you, the reader, have the ah-ha moment you seek; so that our Tribe will be stronger. The wellness work I've been doing for the past few years—that I imperfectly struggle to do every day—has, in spite of my imperfection, made my life better. I want that for everyone.

Isn't that what we do every day as lawyers? Strive to "get it right" while not knowing what the exact formula is to get it right? That striving causes us to focus on others, rather than ourselves. The delays and procrastination feed anxiety. And the striving "to get it right" cycle, including the physical and mental strain it creates is a part of the problem that underlies the need for this issue of *The Warrior* and underlies that path that led me to develop and lead lawyer wellness sessions.

Here is how I've started this article over and over—on paper and in my head—for the past several weeks:

The phone rang and I probably shouldn't have answered it. Not yet 8:00 a.m. and I had stopped by the office, picked up files for the morning appearances, and was driving to court. The previous three weeks I was tied up in an attempted murder trial. The verdict came back the day before. What else would I do but head to the office and then handle court appearances?

Answering the phone, my secretary's voice was stern, '*Where are you? You need to pull over.*' I began to argue that I'd be late to court. She interrupts, '*The prison called. Mark killed himself.*'

Even as I write those words, a lump rises up in my chest and my eyes water. The first person I'd fought for who died of suicide. A man I'd spent countless hours getting to know...gone.

And thoughts flow to the story of Mark, a young man I represented for more than two years, the young man whose trial I'd been tied up in for the previous three weeks. He is often with me in my thoughts still. Perhaps because of that call from my secretary.

And so I put my feet on the floor, sit up tall, and take a deep breath.

The very fact that the emotional memory stays with me, more than 15 years after Mark's suicide, illustrates why we as lawyers, why I as a human, need to intentionally build conscious self-care techniques into my daily routine.

I chose to be a trial lawyer so that I could right society's wrongs, and speak up for those the system has ignored, tossed aside, or harmed. Mark's case and the impact it had on me is one of thousands of cases in an almost thirty-year career, and every

one of those lives has impacted me in some manner. The people, their stories, the harms to them, the harms created by them, the injustice in the system I get to see over and over and over can build up. At no point during law school did they teach how to deal with the emotion of this work, the stress of long hours, the impact of compassion fatigue or second-hand trauma.

And yet, the news of Mark's suicide wasn't enough to slow me down. The experience of delivering Mark's suicide notes to his mother, his wife and his two children was not enough to make me pause to take care of myself. Standing in the pulpit at Mark's funeral, delivering a eulogy to a scantily-filled church wasn't enough to slow me down. I believed I was *supposed* to get going, keep moving. Ignore the emotion. Ignore the tears that fell, not just falling for Mark after a point, but falling because I felt each of the people, all of the cases, each argument with a prosecutor, and every time a judge handed down an unjust sentence, every emotion-filled call from a mom/girlfriend/sister of a client, and all those times I felt that I had somehow failed because my goal for a case—or a client's goal—went unmet.

(After writing that last paragraph, I pause. I put my feet on the ground, sit up straight and breathe.)

Several years passed before I really identified the practices that now are the foundation of my wellness practice. It took the death of both parents (two years apart) and the loss of one of my closest friends to really get me to acknowledge that I couldn't breathe; that something was off; that I wasn't taking care of myself and need to, yes, pause and breathe.

And, so, all of this—the procrastination, the clients and their stories, the work itself, the emotions tied up in each step of it—became too much. Eventually the internal weight did become too much. Impacting my personal life, struggling to get through my work life, all finally led me to the intentional practice of caring for myself. And through intentional self-care, I have found a more easeful, relaxed, healthy way of being.

What is Lawyer Wellness?

Simply but truthfully, it is wellness for people who happen

to be lawyers. We get caught up in our title, in our profession, as our complete identity. We are so much more than our job, though. We are people who deserve to thrive, who deserve to live rich, full lives.

Life is hard, and not just for lawyers.

Take a moment, place your feet on the ground, sit up straight, and take a deep breath. Just that. That is a key to wellness: pausing and breathing. That is, at its base, all you need to do.

Another pause. This time to step away from the lawyer part of this wellness work. In the morning, before court, I suit up, literally. As I walk to the office and then to court, the armor tempers upon me. I must remember to release the armor daily. To allow the person, the human underneath to step forth, to exhale, because she is the real me.

So, in a first step to daily wellness, I encourage you to connect with you, the real you that is underneath the lawyer you. And know that we are talking about wellness for the all of you, not just the lawyer part.

Keep Wellness Simple

The goal is to lessen the load, not add to it. The keys to wellness are simple steps and many of them you are already doing. Take a walk at lunch, perhaps even with friend-colleagues, and talk about your favorite vacation. Go to bed thirty minutes early. Take a long hot shower or soak in a tub when you get home—to wash off the day. When you pull up to your home, turn the car off and take three deep breaths before getting out of your car. Simple steps to be more connected with the strength that is you.

What are you taking in?

What we take into our bodies impacts our wellness.

Oftentimes, when thinking of what is consumed, the first focus is food. And that is important. Let's look, first, though at what other consumables we take in:

The very first murder case I tried, my co-counsel and I would come back to the office after court and play a couple of rounds of a video game called "Doom." It had gruesome



graphics as we blew up some kind of monster that was trying to attack us. Horrible images that simply served to build upon the intense emotion of each day of testimony dealing with the deaths of three people.

The cases I work on often have violent images or stories connected to them. Dealing with the images, stories, emotions of those involved in the case are all stressful. When I step away from the work, do I consume things that merely add to the stress? Is what I am ingesting through sight and sound feeding unhealthy ways of being? The news rarely provides a place for healthy rejuvenation. Violent movies and television can provide a way to “check out,” but do they aid in what you really need to relax? Will more impact on your adrenal system feed you or deplete you more? I’m not saying cut them out altogether—although perhaps you will.

Perhaps commit to only listening to the news for a few minutes a day. The way the news is reported is on a loop, anyway, providing very little new to what is reported in a day. Consider ways to build laughter into your world—listen to a comedy station on Pandora as you drive home, instead of NPR. Take a hot bath as a replacement for an hour in front of the television.

Social media: What does Facebook do to aid wellness? For me, it varies. When I am in a grouchy, irritable space, Facebook simply adds to my grumpiness. Seeing all the happy photos and events that people are sharing can, frankly, make me feel *less than*. And, I know all too well what a time-suck it can be. So, when you wonder where you will find time to meditate or go to the gym, or for a walk, examine how much time you spend looking at social media.

The Power of Mantras

Words have power. Self-talk can empower a person. Too often, lawyers engage in negative self-talk. We rework a brief or cross-examination, thinking that “*I could have done better... If only... I would have won.*”

Take a moment, breathe. Think of a mantra for yourself. “*I’m a Rockstar!*” “*I’m amazing!*” “*I’ve got this!*”

My mantras change week to week. I like variety. And, frankly, we are so much more than just one mantra. Whatever positive comes up, that’s where I focus. Find one that works for you. Say it to yourself throughout the day. When you are brushing your teeth, look at yourself in the mirror and think the empowering statement. Even if you don’t believe it initially, the power of it lands on your psyche and builds you up.

Meditation

Meditation is simply breathing, grounding, taking a moment. When I teach meditation to lawyers, I like to do it in my suit to show that you

need not be a cross-legged guru sitting on the ground in order to meditate. I meditate in the grocery store line, waiting for my case to be called in court, at a stop light, and, well yes, sitting on the floor with my legs crossed.

A matter of simple pausing for even just a minute can make a difference. Building up to doing meditation for fifteen to twenty minutes per day will bring you a sense of ease, strength, and calm that will be the foundation for all you do. The simplest form of meditation is focused on the breath. Feel grounded—feet on the ground, your butt on the seat, pulling your shoulder blades back, with eyes closed or focused on the ground. Inhale. Feel the air through your nose. Exhale. Feel the air through your nose. Thoughts will arise. Let them float away like a cloud. Don’t attach to them.

Gratitude practice

Pick a time during the day—perhaps several times during the day—and say something for which you are grateful. For a period of time, I would awake in the morning and before getting out of bed, I would say five gratitudes.

“I’m grateful for this warm bed.

I’m grateful for another day.

I’m grateful that I can have eggs for breakfast.

I’m grateful for my feet.

I’m grateful for my family.”

It can be anything, no matter how big or small. Sometimes I say them out loud. Other times (like at work) I may say them to myself. In every moment, there is certainly something for which to be grateful. Gratitude practice takes my energy and focus to something positive that is real. Gratuities remind us that we have so much around us. And gratitudes take my focus away from the unsettling, unpleasant moment or feelings that can grab me, and shakes their hold loose.

Gratuities are for all times. Walking out of court, after a judge has taken a client into custody, my gratitude may simply be, “I’ve got two feet beneath me.”

Community: Isolation Versus Solitude

The constant buzz of energy around work sometimes calls for me to find some solitude. When I get in a funk, get out of balance, I tend to isolate. There is a difference between isolation and solitude. Understanding how each feels for me allows me to tap into solitude for re-energizing and avoid isolation, which feeds depression, imbalance. When I know that I simply need a breather, that’s when solitude is called for—a walk alone or curling up on the couch to watch a romantic-comedy helps. If I turn off my phone because I am hiding from others or myself, that is isolation. When the desire to isolate arises, when fed it will simply make my mood worse. That’s when reach-



ing out to my crew makes a difference. Just a quick phone call to a friend—oftentimes one of my TLC brothers or sisters. Just to hear their voice—and sometimes have them say, “What’s up?”—is all that’s needs to begin to right my ship.

My TLC family understands the toll the work can have, allowing me to engage without being battered with a bunch of questions. And even if I just get the voicemail when I call, just reaching out makes things a bit better.

Transitions

I once heard that injuries for athletes often occur during the transitions. And injuries happen during the transitions in yoga: people focus on the final pose and don’t pay as much attention during the process of going from one pose to the next. What are the transitions in daily and what can we do to ensure each transition builds wellness, rather than making us vulnerable to emotional injury?

The time going to and from court.

Getting up in the morning.

Going to and from home.

Awareness and intentionality during these times can add to your day. We can be aware

of what’s going on when the judge is on the bench. Walking to the car, we let our guard down, the shield lowers a bit and those emotions can float to the surface. Space—perhaps on the road driving or getting ready for work—can create too much headspace, too much brain time. Going home, when I haven’t debriefed, unloaded, breathed in deeply, can add to the stress if I focus on what seems to be more demands.

When I take that breath, I can remember that my homelife isn’t a demand. It’s a place of love, community and caring. And I get to be there. It’s not always easy and I don’t always get it right, but home is my respite.

Acknowledge that Our Own Life Story

Underlies All that We are and All that We Feel

Every morning that I wake up, I am just an older version of the person I was yesterday. By that I mean that there are events in my life that inform who I am today. What I do, and have done, to work through them matters. One of the reasons I was called to this work—a realization of just a couple of years ago—was that I found myself unable to speak up within my family. And so, I stand beside others, speaking up on their behalf.

Knowing my own life’s story allows me to understand how it informs the responses I have to day-to-day living. Working through life events have allowed me to define the ways in which they empower me, rather than letting them control me. Through self-awareness, I can better know why I am responding to things in a particular way, seeing where it is from a place of healthy existence or imbalance that needs tending to.

Everyday wellness work

Many people think that we *get* well and then all *is* well—we can stop taking the emotional antibiotics that got us well. But wellness practices are a daily focus for me. I can tell when I haven’t been doing the things that keep me balanced, healthy and happy. Here are some clues for me:

- Feeling grumpy and easily irritated.
- Feeling fatigued or tired.
- Eating crappy food.
- Drinking too much alcohol.
- Can’t sleep at night.
- Can’t get out of bed in the morning.

Those are the easy signs. When they creep up, I pause. If I want to right myself, I pause. I say that because this wellness practice for me is imperfect. I am human, which means I can rattle off a litany of wellness techniques that could fill a year’s worth of Oprah’s “O” Magazine and still my wellness practice needs to be nurtured every day, in easeful, simple ways.

So, I tell readers what I must remind myself: Be patient with yourself. Know that you deserve to live a beautiful,

full life. Sometimes I find it hard to do something for me. So, also, remember that your family deserves to have the best you. If you can’t connect with that, embrace that fact that the rules of professional responsibility mandate that we are zealous advocates, responsive to clients.

And so, I put my feet solidly on the ground, sit up in my chair, and take a deep breath...and exhale. ☺

Laughter with friends is the best food for my soul. A long walk, practicing my ukulele or cooking up a pot of gumbo are just a few ways I live. Traveling to see friends often fills my weekends. All serve as an exhale between the challenges of criminal defense work.

At no point during law school did they teach how to deal with the emotion of this work, the stress of long hours, the impact of compassion fatigue or second-hand trauma.

