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Associate Burnout: *What It Looks Like and How to Avoid It*

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Special to the Legal

And you thought law school was tough? You had the late-night studying for exams, the stress of the being called on in class, the pressure to keep up with everyone else and then the anxiety associated with taking the bar exam. Well, the stress has only just begun! You have now landed yourself a coveted position with a terrific law firm, one that you think fits your needs or maybe one that just actually offered you a position that provides you with a paycheck.

Regardless of the reason, you are finally setting off on your journey. You have worked long and hard to get to this point, and you are hoping it all pays off. You are ready to begin your new position with your brand new law firm, but have you thought about the fact that working long and hard to get there also means working long and hard to stay there? One does not become a lawyer to have an easy-going, flexible and carefree schedule.

You went to law school because you were an over-achiever. You went to law school because you did well in school and probably did well in almost everything you set out to do. You most likely want to excel in your new career, too. The question now becomes how do you accomplish being the best at what you do without burning yourself out completely? This article is not going to provide all the answers, but it will hopefully provide you with some pointers or at least some things to think about as you begin to embark on your new life in the law firm world.

WORK HARD/PLAY HARD

As law students, you were used to working hard, as law school is no walk in the park. The situation does not change much once you begin your journey as an associate. It is important to remember to work as hard as you can while you are at the office



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and when you are not there, leave it behind! Efficiency in the office is the key. If you want to fool around and waste time while you are actually present in the office then you will lose a great deal of billable time and, unfortunately, lose a great deal of your “fun” time. If, at the end of the week, you are wondering why you only billed three hours each day, then you need to re-evaluate your actions while in the office.

Do you choose to get in later in the morning? When you are there, do you take an hour to get yourself coffee and read the newspaper before you get started, and then take a two-hour lunch? This may be your choice, but understand that these actions eat into valuable time you could be spending at home. Getting in early to the office and being productive right from the start is a great way to make a good first impression, and a good way to start billing hours right away at the beginning of the day. If you get in at 8 a.m., then maybe it is more likely for you to be able to leave by a reasonable hour in the evening. This will allow you more time for “you” time, time to spend with your family and/or friends or just doing something you enjoy like running, going to the gym or taking an art class in the evenings.

If you don’t find the time for “you,” then you will lose yourself, and this will inevitably negatively impact your performance at work. Most law firms have figured this out. They have adjusted their

culture to allow associates time for themselves because they know it makes them more productive (good for the firm) and happier (good for the firm AND the associate!).

IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT THE CASES

One of the biggest mistakes associates make is they think the only work they should be doing is the work assigned to them by partners. You may be practicing exactly in the area of law you want to be in, and you may think it is very exciting and love every minute of it. But, if you are doing it day in and day out, then even the most exciting area of practice can wear on you.

In addition, you want to make sure you are getting as much experience in other areas of the law as you can. The market these days is difficult, and if you don’t have a wide variety of experience you may end up in an area of the law that is not so lucrative for a law firm. Without other types of experiences, you may be put in a difficult position.

Most law firms have pro bono opportunities that involve areas of the law that are very different from what you may ever see in regular law firm life. Take advantage of those opportunities, as they will not only diversify your experience, but may provide you with an additional challenge that changes your daily routine and makes things a bit more exciting. Alternatively, get involved in bar association activities, or sign up for CLE courses in an area of law that interests you. Write articles for publications, as this provides you with great experience and exposure but it also “shakes things up a bit” for you. It takes you out of your routine of boring legal research or document review, and helps you see there are many other parts of “practicing law” than just working on the cases you are assigned.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

If you are feeling overwhelmed, out of sorts, lost or over worked, then you need to talk to someone! Don’t let it go! As law students, we complained all

the time about how much work we had. We were always able to find a sympathetic ear to hear our woes, and it made us feel a whole lot better. We complained to our classmates, our family and our friends about how difficult it was to get through it, but then once we started with a law firm we just clammed up! Why?

There is no reason to stop talking about what most concerns you. If you fail to communicate how you are feeling in your new position, then you limit yourself with respect to finding ways to rectify any problem you may be having.

Most law firms implement a mentor program. If your firm does, then use it! Schedule meetings with your mentor, go out to lunch, or send a quick e-mail just to let him or her know how you are feeling. As an associate, you have to remember that you are one of the most valuable players on the team. A law firm needs happy and healthy associates!

If your firm does not have a formal mentor program, then find your own mentor. There are lots of willing and able shareholders/partners that want to know how you are doing. They have all been there; they know what it is like to go through the transition of student to full-time associate. Find someone you feel you have a connection with, someone you have worked closely with, someone who is willing to listen.

MISERY LOVES COMPANY

If you are feeling overwhelmed, overworked or confused, odds are pretty good that other associates may be feeling the same way. Talk to your fellow associates and find out how they are coping. They may be able to give you some really good suggestions about how to manage the stress, or they may be a very good sounding board for you. Schedule a run with someone, get together for a play date if they have children around the same age as your children, or get together for dinner one night.

Get together outside the office environment, and get to know who they are. You will work very closely with these individuals for perhaps years to come, so gaining their trust outside of the workplace is important. Take the time to know who they are and what they are about — and let your colleagues know who you are. Your work environment will seem much more manageable and friendly if

you actually learn more about the people you work with — and you may like your job a whole lot more.

YOUR GLASS IS HALF FULL

Okay, being an attorney is not always fun or exciting, and it is really very difficult work. No one ever really tells you this in law school. It is a tough job with long hours and lots of stress, but it can pay off. You need to think positively about what you are doing. Although you may not be in a position yet where you feel as though it was worth it to go to law school, if you hang in there long enough you will eventually see the rewards.

The rewards are not always financial, but can be emotional. You will see your hard work paying off for a very appreciative client, for example. You may impact people's lives in a way you never imagined. Continue to see the positives in your work every day. Maybe the positive is that you actually have a job, when many of your classmates are still looking. The positive may be that although you hate the case you have been assigned, you love working with this particular partner and he teaches you a lot about practicing law.

DON'T FORCE A SQUARE PEG INTO A ROUND HOLE

Be aware of who you are and what your needs are. Your first choice of firms or jobs right out of law school may not be the best choice for you. Once you have discovered the firm's culture and you see you are not a fit, then do not kid yourself that you will be able to force yourself into that mold. If the firm is really not for you, then you will know early on. Obviously, the more you can find out about a firm before you take the job, the better off you'll be. Talk to former associates; find out why they left in the first place. Find out if there are part-time associates or part-time partners and how often people work on weekends. Do others in the firm seem to have a life outside of the law? Are their lives balanced, and does the firm encourage this balance? These are all questions you should be asking yourself before taking the job and questions you need to continue to ask yourself as you begin your tenure at your new firm.

You will not always have control over the decisions you make. Clearly, there will be times when you will be required to work the weekend or put in

extra hours at night — this is what being a lawyer is all about. The key, however, is to work hard during those difficult times and reward yourself later.

Your time will come. You will be assigned cases you don't want to work on in areas of the law you never thought you would be working on. However, stay focused on the fact that every experience is a good experience, no matter how bad it might feel in the beginning. You will learn from everything that you do. You will make contacts for your future, learn an area of practice that challenges you and that you love, help people through a very difficult time in their lives and all of these things will help you to be a better person.

It isn't easy being a lawyer, and it isn't supposed to be. It is why law school is hard to get into and hard to get through. Those of us who made it through and passed the bar are ready for the challenge and are tough enough to handle anything that comes our way. This is, ultimately, what clients want — they want someone tough, someone to help make the decisions they cannot make on their own.

You are up to the challenge. It may take some time to get there. Along the way, just remember to take some time for yourself and relax when given the opportunity. The best advice to new parents is similar to the best advice given to new lawyers ... nap when you can ... if the baby is sleeping, then you should be too. Take the time when you have it — don't burn yourself out, or you will never find out how much fun being a lawyer can be! •