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BE KIND TO A LAWYER

Did you know that April 14 is International Be Kind to Lawyers Day? I had no idea such a holiday existed until recently, but I'm happy to celebrate it and encourage others to do the same. How did this day come about? According to the internet, a fellow named Steve Hughes of St. Louis, Missouri, started the holiday in 2019 because he got tired of hearing negative jokes about lawyers. Mr. Hughes is, reportedly, not even a lawyer. Can you imagine that--a non-lawyer who got tired of hearing negative lawyer jokes and decided to start an international movement to express kindness to lawyers!? I, for one, am glad he did.

Despite the public's low perception of lawyers, attorneys are good people. Not only are lawyers smart individuals blessed with many different talents, lawyers also serve others every day. We help our neighbors buy and sell their homes and businesses, prepare their wills, protect their interests, defend their rights, and provide them reasoned advice on a myriad of issues. I am proud to be a member of this noble profession. Unfortunately, as occurs in every profession, the conduct of a few lawyers serves to tarnish the reputation of us all.

Being a lawyer is not easy. "We are in the business of handling our client's most pressing problems," said Larry McDougal, the State Bar of Texas president. "That constant workload is stressful, and chronic stress impacts our mental health and can result in serious anxiety disorders and depression." The verdict is in on lawyer well-being. According to one study, 21 to 36% of lawyers qualify as problem drinkers, 28% of our colleagues report symptoms of depression, and the legal profession has a suicide rate 1.3 times the national average.¹

Stress and anxiety in our line of work is understandably high. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated these issues, particularly for solo practitioners and small firm lawyers, as well as women and minorities in the profession. Across America over the past 12 months, stress and anxiety relating to the virus itself, compounded by its effects on the business community and society in general, has been widely recognized. Remote working brings isolation, as well as increased challenges in separating our work lives from our personal lives. Lawyers with young children and those caring for the elderly and extended family members have felt an extra burden during these unprecedented times as they experienced additional challenges to successfully blending work and the added responsibilities brought on by the current unusual circumstances. Clients are under unique pressures, too, and that transfers into even more burden on lawyers.

The bottom line: it is time for lawyers to take care of ourselves and of one another. While we all hope that our clients (and possibly even complete strangers) will be kind to us on April 14th and every day, we can foster positive change by being kind to one another. Professionalism and courtesy, which never go out of style, are presently at a premium. We are blessed in this community with an extremely collegial bar. Never could it be needed more. Let's keep up this tradition as it makes what is often a challenging profession a little more tenable.

We can also be kind to ourselves by practicing self-care. That looks as different for each of us as we each do from one another. For some it is making time frequently for that run or bike ride. For others it is meditation, or a moment of daily mindfulness. Still others are revived by playing an instrument, cooking a nice meal to enjoy with family, reading a

good book or enjoying a hobby. I learned several years ago that one of the best things we can do to relieve stress is to find an activity in which we can be fully present; where we are so engaged that we cannot--and therefore do not--think about clients, opposing lawyers, judges, family needs and personal problems, and the worries, demands and challenges they bring to our daily lives, even if just for a short while.

For me, this goal is most often reached by spending time out-of-doors and active. Recently, however, at the behest of my teenaged daughter, I have taken up yoga, with surprising results. I find that when I am struggling to maintain my balance in a position where I must focus intently to prevent myself from falling in a heap on my yoga mat, my mind is cleared of everything except what I am doing in that moment. The result is that both my brain and my body are refreshed by the effort. But I am still learning this lesson. Each day brings with it a new challenge and a seemingly endless number of demands on my time. Most of those demands are good things, which often makes choosing myself a hard decision. Often times I fail, but I am committed to the goal. I may not succeed each day, but each time I do, I am encouraged to keep making the effort. And isn't that all any of us can ask of one another--that we make our best efforts? We should not expect anything more from ourselves.

Be kind to a lawyer this month, starting with yourself and your colleagues. If we lead, surely others will follow.

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¹ Krill et al., 2016; Mental Health Daily report of suicide by occupation.