How can we implement wellness techniques when working in a big firm that values billable hours?

(Caroline Kingston) Great question. During my time in private practice at a billing firm, I would plan out each month on the first day of the month. Start with your billing requirement total (figure out the monthly number from the yearly total) and figure out what you therefore need to bill each work day. Subtract from the possible work days any days you know you will be out of the office (CLE, meeting with clients, marketing, personal days). Write that onto your calendar, with weekly totals that you keep track of each week. Then stick to that on a daily and weekly basis. Keep clear boundaries between work and personal time and try to keep a regular work schedule that allows you to get those billable hours complete. When you leave work for the day, make it your top priority to mentally separate from your work, whether that is through a social activity, exercise or play/rest activity. Make it a priority to keep up your hobbies and make time to see friends. If you are efficient and plan ahead to meet your billable obligations, there is room for wellness.

What can you do to get back on track once you have fallen out of your positive wellness habits?

(Katherine Bender) Falling out of wellness habits is analogous to falling off of a food plan or diet regimen. Some people respond with an “all or nothing” mentality. In the diet example this could mean thinking, well yesterday I ate a piece of cheesecake or (insert high calorie, high fat food choice here) so I may as well just eat whatever I want for the rest of the day/week...

Certainly, as law students we want you to know that falling out of a wellness routine does not mean that the routine can wait until you graduate!

We suggest and encourage you to simply give yourself the permission to start over. Make a plan that is realistic. Perhaps training for a marathon is not realistic but training to walk/run a 5k could be. Perhaps right now, an hour of time each day devoted to fun is too much, so aim for 20 minutes the first day and build up to an hour.
The idea is to not get stuck in self-defeat and self-criticism about falling out of your wellness habits, but to accept that it happened and to promise to make a different choice. Each time you make a choice for wellness, you are rebuilding your self-trust and self-confidence.

Let yourself move forward.

Q: What if we know we're depressed/anxious/suicidal and have tried all of the suggestions and it's not working and it's affecting our school work?

A: (Katherine Bender) If any student is currently suicidal, call 9-1-1, the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or visit the local emergency room.

If anyone feels that current treatment is not working then I would encourage the individual to talk with the mental health provider about alternative treatment options including but not limited to the following: a change in medication (dose, type), a change in the treatment provider (a professional with a different style, or theoretical framework, or different training), more intensive treatment (group counseling, intensive out-patient care, or intensive in-patient care), or various assessment instruments to gain a better fitting diagnosis. LawLifeline http://www.lawlifeline.org/msu/ has a tool to get students started on a self-evaluation; which can be followed by a visit to a mental health provider on or off campus.

If depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts are interfering with a student’s ability to perform in law school, I would strongly encourage the student to ask for help from the office of student engagement, the counseling center, or LJAP. It takes courage to come forward, but trying to treat mental illness without professional help can lead to substance abuse and suicide. Please ASK FOR HELP! Confide in someone!

Q: Could law school culture be part of the problem? Overall, what steps have law schools taken to help students?

A: (Caroline Kingston) There are some who theorize that the answer to this is yes. Law school training is set up with extrinsic goals, minimum feedback (one exam) and a competitive culture. Collaboration and connection are on the opposite end of the spectrum from competition, so it can make students feel isolated. There are recent trends in student affairs and at our own MSU Law to focus more attention,
programming and resources/support to positive wellness habits and to get students to helpful experts. The Office of Student Engagement has wellness as one of its top six goals.

Q: The first thing students hear upon arrival to law school is low job statistics, depression and rigors of law school. Why isn't there a program included in being a 1L to help with this newly added stress/cause of depression?

A: (Caroline Kingston) In the Office of Student Engagement we are currently re-examining what programming we create for students. This year, we have made wellness one of our top missions and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. We hope that this will continue to grow and grow. This year, wellness was a large part of the Online Orientation and we hope to expand that even further next year.

Q: Can we do more group zumba or yoga classes here at MSU Law?

A: (Caroline Kingston) Yes, the Wellness in Practice student group is currently exploring opportunities for this. Unfortunately, our first zumba class had very poor turn out, but we will try again and hope students enjoy this initiative.

Q: Can there be yoga classes provided at the law school for free or a small fee?

A: (Caroline Kingston) This suggestion will be taken to the Wellness in Practice student group!

Q: How would a person who has a permanent/chronic condition such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, answer the character & fitness application question about mental health (Question 54 on the Michigan Bar application)?

A: (Dean Alsup) A generic response to this question cannot be provided because every applicant must answer based on his/her personal situation. That said, if a person has a permanent/chronic condition, the applicant must ask him/herself whether that condition “impairs or distorts [his/her] judgment, behavior, capacity to recognize reality or ability to cope with ordinary demands of life.” In other words, does the applicant’s condition interfere with his/her ability to competently and
effectively practice law? A licensed professional should be consulted if the applicant is unsure.

Q: How does answering “yes” to Question 54 on the character & fitness application affect us in Michigan?

A: (Dean Alsup) Again, there is not a generic response to this question, because one applicant may answer “yes” and after review of the applicant’s condition, explanation and supporting medical documentation, it may be determined that no further questions need to be asked because their permanent or chronic condition is not severe enough to deny a character and fitness clearance. An answer “yes” by another applicant may trigger the need to do deeper probing before it can be determined whether the applicant’s condition is severe enough to deny a character and fitness clearance.

The important thing to remember is that an applicant who avails him/herself to treatment or counseling does not automatically mean that the answer to Question 54 is “yes.” In fact, applicants commonly incorrectly answer “yes”, because they think that any condition that has the potential of being permanent or chronic will automatically disqualify them; no questions asked! This is not the case and it is also why applicants are strongly urged to consult their licensed professional if there is any doubt.

Q: Should I worry about bar admission since I’ve sought mental health treatment through therapy and medication?

A: (Dean Alsup) There is no way to answer this question without knowing the totality of circumstances and a review of supporting documentation. However, merely seeking treatment is not what determines bar admissions. In fact, the failure to seek treatment is of greater concern than seeking treatment. The rationale is that an applicant who fails to seek treatment of a condition is a greater threat to potential clients than an applicant who has taken steps to address their condition.

Q: How can I ensure that my anxiety/worries I voice to my friends, peers and family aren’t dismissed just because I am being academically successful?
A: (Katherine Bender) This is an excellent question. One myth about depression/suicide is that it only affects people who are failing. I worked with a student once who shared that at the worst of her depression her grades were at their best, because her grades were one thing she felt she could control.

It is important to self-advocate and to explain that academic success is only one aspect of a student’s life: emotional wellness, socialization, and overall quality of life are all aspects that contribute to the well-being of the whole person. Dave Nee was academically successful, he was brilliant; but he silently suffered from depression until he died by suicide at the end of his law school career.

Q: **If you are susceptible to anxiety, should you avoid working as an attorney even if you are otherwise good at it?**

A: (Tish Vincent) There are many effective interventions for anxiety. Knowing that you are susceptible to anxiety I would advise you to address any anxious feelings with meditation, cognitive-behavioral techniques to intervene in the anxiety, and psychotherapy if your self-help methods are not sufficient.

Those with an anxious nature should see a therapist and be diagnosed. Anxiety can be caused by a number of different mental health conditions. Left untreated it is a common contributor to the development of an unhealthy relationship with addictive substances. Anxiety is such an unpleasant feeling that sufferers can turn to substances for relief.

With the proper diagnosis, treatment plan, support and medications anxiety is treatable and need not interfere with your legal practice.

Q: **As a law student, I know I need to be healthy, but how can I make time to do so?**

A: (Caroline Kingston) Plan ahead! I encourage students to sit down and actually draw out a daily and weekly schedule that includes time for rest/relaxation, healthy food preparation, exercise, play/fun, homework, class time, practice questions and student life participation. Start with some big picture thinking about what should be your ranking of priorities and divide your time in blocks equal to that prioritizing. An example of this would be 60% school, 10% student life, 30% wellness. Color code your schedule and put it into an app on your phone or use iCal and then stay on schedule.
Q: How do you communicate to lay persons (family, friends, etc) about the unique stresses and ups and downs of law school without sounding whiny or making it sound like nothing, so that they understand?

A: (Caroline Kingston) The fact of the matter is, people who have not been through law school will never really understand what it feels like on the inside. The best way to get deep empathy for your experience here, is to have people you trust to be honest with who are also going through this experience. You need that to meet some of your emotional needs. Family and friends can offer you other things and have known you the longest and so can meet other emotional needs, but you may need to re-set your expectations for how they can relate to your law school experience.

Q: My mother (back home) is too nosey and puts her expectations over mine. Should I confront her or ignore her? Her response is to nag more?

A: (Dr. John Taylor) By the time this question is posed there is commonly an established pattern of adult child-parent (in this case mother) tension if not outright conflict in the relationship. This often involves a parent who has trouble with boundaries and doesn’t view their adult-child as an equal. Thus, equalization is necessary, and it is not an easy process. That is, setting limits with the intrusive parent and sticking to them (e.g., not reacting to guilt-tripping voice messages, e-mails, letters) is necessary. To stay in the same relationship pattern is to remain in the one-down position which cultivates further resentment of the “nosey” parent. When the assertive adult-child changes the pattern the parent must act in healthier way to maintain the relationship . . . on equal terms. Here are some resources:

“How to draw boundaries with the invasive and intrusive people in your life” go to: http://voices.yahoo.com/how-draw-boundaries-invasive-intrusive-6602042.html

“My mother is ruining my life” go to: http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=40979&w=5&cn=0

“Coping with a critical mom” go to: http://www.prevention.com/health/emotional-health/how-cope-critical-mom

“I love my mother but . . . practical help to get the most out of your relationship” go to: http://www.amazon.com/Love-Mother-But-Practical-Relationship/dp/0736930590/ref=sr_1_12?ie=UTF8&qid=1359759735&sr=8-12&keywords=mother+daughter+conflict ( AMAZON.COM)
Q: Does the MSU Counseling Center allow couples to come in together?

A: (Dr. John Taylor) Yes, one student must be currently enrolled for the semester services are sought. Each person of the coupled relationship is required to have a separate individual mental health screening that takes about 30 minutes. While a couple may be seeking conjoint counseling it is important to see if this is the best direction to go in. For example, sometimes either one or both partner(s) may benefit from individual psychotherapy before couple’s counseling, or in conjunction with couple’s counseling.

(Caroline Kingston) There are also some couples counseling options at other campus resources:

MSU Couples and Family Therapy: http://hdfs.msu.edu/graduate/couple-and-family-therapy

MSU Family Resource Center: http://www.frc.msu.edu/

MSU Psychological Clinic: http://www.psychology.msu.edu/clinic/TherapyServices.aspx

Q: I have a friend who is struggling, but I find it difficult to help because it personally triggers my own issues. Can you give any tips to help me navigating getting someone help without me having to get too personally involved?

A: (Katherine Bender) Set firm boundaries. Remember, the flight attendants tell us to put on our own oxygen masks before helping others! Try saying, “I care about you and am glad you feel comfortable confiding in me; I am not certain that I can help you but I want to make sure you get the help you need and deserve; let’s walk over to the counseling center together and make an appointment.”

Another option (depending on your comfort level) could be, “Thank you for confiding in me; I know how you feel because I have dealt with this before and while talking with friends is helpful; I also know that talking to mental health professionals can be more beneficial for everyone.”

Q: I have a lot of anxiety about the job market when I graduate and the high workload and stress of a career as a lawyer. What strategies can you offer to assist me?
A: (Dr. John Taylor) There are several great websites out there specific to lawyers and newly minted initiates. These focus on mindfulness which essentially means focusing on what is important in the moment and disengaging from thoughts/worries we have no control over. We truly drive ourselves nuts focusing on worst case scenarios. Being proactive is important. Here are some recommendations:


“Berkeley Initiative for Mindfulness in Law” go to: http://www.law.berkeley.edu/mindfulness.htm


“The Mindful Law Student Podcast by Scott Rogers, M.S., J.D.” go to: https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/the-mindful-law-student-podcast/id333642406 (THIS IS FREE)

“Mindfulness for Law Students: Learned Hand Exercise Demonstration” go to: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTbhxHWnE3U


Q: How are the wellness needs of non-traditional students different from the average student? What can be done to meet these students’ needs?

A: Non-tradition students, such as parents, have unique needs and stressors that the average student does not face. There is an amazing resource on campus, the Family Resource Center, who I am in touch with to plan a specific wellness event with at the law college soon. Mature students also have unique needs and may be working while they go to school and so face unique difficulties with time management and the ability to get enough rest and down time. The Office of Student Engagement can help those students come up with an individualized course plan and the Academic Success Program can help create a weekly study schedule to help balance your many obligations and personal needs.
Q: When it comes to wellness, should you prepare for the worst case, but hope for the best?

A: (Katherine Bender) I am not sure that this particular mentality is best suited towards developing a wellness plan/practice. Sometimes a therapeutic intervention when dealing specifically with anxiety can be to discuss all possible outcomes, ranging from most to least favorable, however, when it comes to developing a wellness plan I would suggest a more pro-active or assertive approach. Plan ways to incorporate wellness into your everyday life (proper nutrition, exercise, meditation, good sleep hygiene) and if you miss a day, then pick up the next day.

Q: When will MSU Law subsidize the three free visits to the MSU Olin Psychiatric Clinic, similar to what MSU undergraduate students receive?

A: (Caroline Kingston) The Office of Student Engagement is currently working on a plan for this and hope to be able to make an announcement by the 2013-14 academic year.

Thank you to all who submitted questions at our event.

For more information or follow up conversations, you can reach our experts here:

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Caroline Kingston, Office of Student Engagement ckingston@law.msu.edu

MSU Counseling Center http://www.counseling.msu.edu/

State Bar of Michigan Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program http://www.michbar.org/generalinfo/ljap/

LawLifeline @ MSU http://www.lawlifeline.org/msu/

Suicide Prevention Hotline http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/