

Do I Think and Act Like a Lawyer or a Normal Person? Can They Be One and the Same?

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Thinking and Acting Like a Lawyer

The transformation we undergo during law school – from average people to lawyers – brings with it transformations in ourselves, as individuals. During school, the professional training we receive turns us into skilled legal analysts and practitioners, and we learn ways of thinking and acting that are unique to the profession. As we go through this process, there are some personality traits, common to all of us, which assist in our formation and performance as lawyers. But these same helpful factors can also contribute to the stress we feel both personally and professionally.

See if you recognize yourself and your behaviours.

- **Perfectionism** – We spend large amounts of time on paperwork – reviewing agreements, dictating affidavits, preparing facts, making file notes, and docketing time. The more the pressure mounts, the more it seems nearly impossible to delegate these tasks, but worse, sometimes we can get to the stage of believing that nothing, even more general tasks, can be assigned to others, and that we have to do it all ourselves. We feel that we are the only ones who can make sure that everything is done just right. It's a huge understatement to say the stresses of perfectionism add to our daily pressures.
- **Conscientiousness** – Many of us fall into the trap of feeling that we absolutely must deal with a mountain of little things daily before we can find time for ourselves. Some of us insist on returning all telephone calls and e-mails from that day before going home, or cleaning all the files off the desk every night, or following up on three outstanding accounts every day. We may do this even if it means missing dinner with our family or skipping family events. When this happens, we can feel guilty and overwhelmed. And stressed.
- **Needing control** – We often believe that we can control and micromanage when other people do things, what they do, and how they do it. In reality, others work on their own schedule, at their own pace, and with their own personal priorities. Not recognizing this, and growing frustrated because of it, can add stress to an already busy practice.
- **Delaying gratification** – In law school, we quickly learned that there weren't enough hours in the day to do all the assigned readings, attend the mandatory classes, study, write essays, eat, sleep, and, somewhere, find some leisure time. When push came to shove, we decided we had to cut out some the “unnecessary” stuff – little things like leisure time, eating, and sleeping. We learned to survive – barely – but most of us suffered (and may still) sleep deprivation, and lived (and may still live) on a diet of

fast food, chocolate bars, soft drinks, and coffee. Our version of leisure time may be reduced to just that smoke break whenever the stress gets to be too much. The learned behaviour at the heart of this – prioritizing work over all – sometimes goes deeper, leading us to defer personal relationships to when we “get around to it.” Even if we manage to find the time to enter into a relationship, we may take our partner for granted, believing that he or she will understand the late nights, weekend marathon sessions, and missed social events. After living the poor-student lifestyle and surviving the lean years of a practice in its infancy, we may find it difficult to spend any money for fear of not having any. This kind of behaviour can lead to resentment of those around you and, in turn, more stress. In some cases, it can lead to rebound behavior in overspending, social relationships without boundaries, or neglect of daily obligations. The result is the same either way – stress.

- **Need for approval** – Whether we want to admit it or not, all of us need approval. In the case of lawyers, we need our clients to appreciate the hard work that went into their file, and our partners to know that we are pulling our weight. However, we're not always comfortable with praise and approval, and we may, in fact, dismiss or negate it when it is given. If a client complains or does not pay our account, we can get defensive, angry, and even aggressive. If a partner asks for an explanation of something, we come armed with information and statistics to justify ourselves. Innocent questions or differences of opinion can become major-league stressors.
- **Self-doubt** – Some lawyers feel like imposters. We may feel that we have fooled others into believing that we know what we're doing. We worry about some discovering how little we think we really know. So we try harder, doing more in the belief that no matter what we accomplish, it will not be enough.

Thinking and Acting Like a Normal Person

The personality and behavioural characteristics set out above may have helped us achieve the role of lawyer that we enjoy today. It may seem like these are depicted as completely negative traits, but knowing how to temper the extremes will lead to less stress and more balance in our lives both personally and professionally.

Here is the ying to the yang.

- **The courage to be imperfect** – Being perfect all the time is such a tall order that it's impossible to fulfill that lofty goal. Acknowledging the fact that you can only do your best (albeit with a high standard of "best"), allows for those times when all things don't go perfectly (pardon the pun). Learn to laugh at life's incongruities. Learn to laugh at yourself! Things, both good and bad, just happen sometimes.
- **Learning to have boundaries** - It may be more reasonable to make as many quality phone calls as you can before your normal day-ending time of 6:00 p.m. or 7:00 p.m. (many of you are probably laughing at the thought of leaving work so early!) Or tidying up your files on your desk rather than putting them all away so you will know

where they are in the morning. Or following up on one account rather than three if your day has been too full. It doesn't all have to be done today. Prioritize those things that, in life and death, must be done first. Anything you accomplish above that is optional and a bonus.

- **Knowing your limits of control** – One approach to control is to ask those to whom you're delegating a responsibility to outline how they will do an assigned task, negotiate when it is to be done, and set up a system for progress reports. This might alleviate the stress of worrying that your work won't get done properly without you over-controlling or micromanaging the situation. Making it manageable, though, means giving up some of the belief that you can control all of it all the time. Knowing how and when to delegate is a skill we need to learn to help control our own stress levels.
- **Feeling fulfilled** – When we delay gratification, we create resentments for the things we have lost. Setting reasonable boundaries to include work, family, nutrition, exercise, and leisure pursuits make all these activities enjoyable and complete in themselves. The trick is to set priorities for what matters most, and ensuring that one activity doesn't override the others. This requires tinkering, patience, and constant re-evaluation.
- **Self-approval** – Whenever we rely on others for our self-esteem, we'll end up disappointed. Recognizing our own strengths and weaknesses will give us a realistic sense of who we are, what we believe, and what we stand for, and help us realize that other people's opinions are just that – opinions, and not judgments.
- **Self-trust** – It took a lot of study, self-sacrifice, and intelligence to become a lawyer. There is no book called "Lawyering for Dummies," because no one can be taught both what we know and how to do it in a short amount of time and in just a few pages. Turning self-doubt into self-trust is a matter of perspective, and realizing that we are our own toughest judges and that, in the grand scheme of things, we are capable and competent professionals and persons.

What Does It All Mean?

There are always two sides to an issue – on the one hand, and on the other. As lawyers, we perform this analysis every day in situations that cross our desks and in our personal lives. Every trait listed above helped make you a lawyer, and, as such, are positive things. Without that perfectionism, control, and conscientiousness, you wouldn't have been successful. However, too much of any of those attributes can turn them from positive traits into liabilities. Balance is the key to being healthy and happy. Believe it or not, it is possible to be both a lawyer and a "normal person" with awareness, self-love, and boundaries. Ask someone you trust to help you with your personal inventory and journey.

If you want to talk to a peer support lawyer to have a friendly, understanding ear, please call the Ontario Bar Assistance Program (OBAP). OBAP provides assistance

to lawyers, judges, and law students who are dealing with issues of stress, burnout, addictions, and mental wellness challenges. To contact the Program Manager, Leota Embleton, please call 1-877-576-6227. To contact the Volunteer Executive Director, please call John Starzynski at 1-877-584-6227. Or visit the website at www.obap.ca.

Thanks to Dr. Mamta Gautam, President of the Ontario Psychiatric Association, for her inspiration for this article.