

Practicing Well: Self-Evaluation

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It's no secret that practicing law can be stressful on many fronts. Some lawyers struggle with temporary stressors (i.e., a specific case), while others struggle with long-term stressors (i.e., private practice in general). It's easy to know *when we're stressed*, but it can be incredibly difficult to know why or how to manage that stress (which can be stressful in itself!).

We often hear that self-evaluation is an important tool, but it can be difficult if you don't know where to begin. Do you go online to find an evaluation approved by experts? Do you seek professional help from a counselor or other specialist? Both options are excellent choices, but some people find the most basic approach speaks to them the most. Below is an exercise that a lawyer shared with me when I was considering a job change a few years ago. I was admittedly skeptical of how simple it seemed, but it turned out to be exactly what I needed to make positive changes in my life (and has helped countless other lawyers evaluate their personal and professional lifestyles as well).

Start by spending 15-30 minutes making a list of everything in life that makes you happy, both personally and professionally. Be liberal with the list and include absolutely everything that comes to mind. Then put the list away and do not look at it for three weeks. After three weeks, go back and circle everything that your current lifestyle allows you to experience at a minimum on a bi-weekly basis. If at least 50% of the items on your list are not circled, something needs to change. There is no reason that you should not be able to regularly experience the things in life that make you happy!

You can even go a step further and put an asterisk next to the 10 items most important to your happiness, and if all 10 of those items are not already circled, that's an even bigger indicator that something must change.

On the flip side, this exercise can help identify sources of stress by making a list of things that cause you stress. Writing these down gives you an opportunity to identify commonalities and themes, which can be helpful in understanding the types of changes needed to manage and alleviate specific stressors altogether. This can be especially helpful when evaluating a significant job change. Often the same underlying issues can exist regardless of setting (i.e., the stress of billing time may not go away simply because you have switched law firms; the stress of demanding clients may not go away simply because you have switched practice areas; the stress of the litigation process may not disappear just because you are managing the litigation rather than litigating yourself).

It's important to understand what you are stressed about (and why) so that you can make appropriate changes to your lifestyle both personally and professionally. Although this may seem obvious, it can be incredibly difficult for professionals in the midst of an endless battle with stress to see the bigger picture. Even if you are perfectly content with life, do a self-evaluation anyway as it's always good to know what makes you happy (and will be an excellent resource if anything ever changes!).

About the Author

Patty Beck is a Claim Attorney with *Minnesota Lawyers Mutual Insurance Company*, where she manages litigation involving legal malpractice claims, advises attorneys facing existing and potential ethical dilemmas, and resolves

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Membership in the PLDF includes delivery of the *Professional Liability Defense Quarterly*, which is devoted to current legal defense and claims handling issues. Articles of topical interest spanning a wide range of malpractice defense subjects are presented to add value to effective defense preparations for the claims handler and defense counsel. We encourage member submission of articles proposed for publication to: Editor-in-Chief, *Professional Liability Defense Quarterly*, PO Box 588, Rochester IL 62563-0588, sandra@PLDF.org.

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