

## Take Some Little Leaps

(or at least some little steps):

# Self-care in a Busy World

By William D. Slease



Several years ago my spouse gave me what has become one of my favorite coffee mugs. It was a gift, appropriately wrapped in a box. When I opened the box, the first thing I saw on the mug was a large elephant. I wondered if my spouse was commenting on: (a) the speed with which she thinks I process things; (b) my changing physical appearance; or (c) maybe both. But then I turned the mug to the other side and saw its message “One Step at a Time.” It was a good reminder for someone who often tries to take on a major task or project in one giant piece, unnecessarily making it appear overwhelming and impossible to accomplish. Slow down, break it down, and take it “one step at a time.”

Last month Briggs Cheney talked about the challenges faced by solo and small firm lawyers in

finding time to devote to their own self-care; to their well-being. For a solo or small firm lawyer, trying to take on such an important but undeniably major task in the face of a busy practice and a busy life can seem, well, impossible. But perhaps by taking what he called “little leaps of faith,” or what I call “taking it one step at a time,” the seemingly impossible can become not only possible, but rewarding. Those small leaps, those small steps, can improve our mental health, our physical health, and our overall enjoyment of the practice of law. Indeed, I submit that they can make us a better lawyer; they can result in us “flourishing.”<sup>1</sup>

So for the busy solo or small firm lawyer, what little leaps, what small steps are we talking about? Here are a few suggestions, in no particular order of importance (except to say, doing something, anything is important):

- **Spend just 10 minutes out of your week doing something physical.**

A 2018 study revealed that just 10 minutes of any kind of physical activity in a week appeared to make a positive difference in one’s happiness.<sup>2</sup> Just 10 minutes! So maybe skip the extra check of your smartphone and take a walk around the block. And no surprise here, but if you can devote more time, say 10 minutes a day, your mental and physical health will be that much the better for it.

- **Meditate at your desk.**

We’ve all heard that meditation can be beneficial to our well-being and a 2018 study confirmed that to be true. That study found that meditating for 13 minutes a day for 8 weeks led to a decrease in anxiety and negative moods, and an increase in working and recognition memory, and enhanced attention.<sup>3</sup> But we’re talking little leaps and small steps here, and many of you will say “I don’t have 13 minutes each day to spare.” Fair enough but no problem; try a shorter meditation that you can do anywhere, anytime, including at your desk, using a simple five-finger breathing exercise: Hold one hand in front of you with your fingers spread wide. Using the index finger of your other hand, trace the outside of the hand with the spread fingers breathing in when you trace up a finger, breathing out when trace down. Trace your entire hand in one direction, then reverse it and do it again. That will take all of two minutes, if that, and yet will leave you less stressed and more aware in the moment.

- **Take your dog (or cat, or ferret or monitor lizard) to work.**

According to a study published in 2012, employees who brought their dogs to work had lower levels of stress throughout the workday and were more satisfied with their jobs.<sup>4</sup> Plus, when Fido needs to be taken outside for a bathroom break, you might just be getting a start on those 10 minutes of exercise.

- **Leave your smartphone behind.**

Unsurprisingly, researchers have found that work technology like smartphones, laptops, and tablets, when used at home break down the work-home boundary and allow work stress to intrude on your home life and your much needed downtime.<sup>5</sup> Unplugging can lead to lower levels of fatigue, less burnout, and greater life satisfaction.<sup>6</sup> And of course, while it is important to meet your professional obligations to your clients, shutting down your phone before bed, turning off your laptop, and spending some quiet time does not mean you are failing as a lawyer. It means that you are recharging for another day which will make you more effective for those clients.

- **Call a friend.**

We are all social beings. Connections with others, even in the midst of a pandemic, are critical. It doesn't have to be a long conversation, but pick up the phone, or schedule a virtual get together with a friend, and then talk about anything other than the law. That will help not only restore the social connection we all need, but give some perspective on how important and rewarding little things outside the practice of law can be.

- **Give yourself a “compassion” break.**

I saved the big ask for last. Most solo and small firm lawyers that I know work long hours and are loathe to take time away from work; even a day. But hopefully most would not head into the office (or sign into the virtual office) if they were feeling physically ill to the point they could not effectively function. Taking a day off would be expected. So why not allow yourself the same break when you are mentally or emotionally exhausted. Take a “compassion day” for yourself, or perhaps even just an afternoon. Do something unrelated to the law and without your work tools (the smartphone, the laptop, the tablet), even if it's as simple as sitting at the park, hiking in the foothills, fishing with a friend. It's not every day and all your work will be waiting for you tomorrow. But hopefully you'll be more refreshed, more productive, and ready to tackle the next project with a renewed sense of purpose.

This list is not meant to be comprehensive or exclusive. Each of you can find a few minutes in your day, and hopefully more than a few minutes, to find something that resonates; that puts back in your emotional tank. Make it a priority; put it on your calendar so it becomes just as much a commitment as that next client phone call. You owe it to yourself, to your family and friends, and yes, to your clients, to be a healthier lawyer and, therefore, a happier and more effective lawyer. So take that little leap, that one step today; and then take the next one, and the next one, and the next one. Who knew that making a little leap, or walking like an elephant, could be that easy?

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The American Psychological Association Dictionary defines “flourishing” as “a condition denoting good mental and physical health: the state of being free from illness and distress but, more important, of being filled with vitality and functioning well in one's personal and social life.”

<sup>2</sup> See Zhang, Zhanjia & Chen, Weiyun. (2019). *A Systematic Review of the Relationship Between Physical Activity and Happiness*. Journal of Happiness Studies. 20. 10.1007/s10902-018-9976-0.

<sup>3</sup> See, Basso JC, McHale A, Ende V, Oberlin DJ, Suzuki WA. *Brief, daily meditation enhances attention, memory, mood, and emotional regulation in non-experienced meditators*. Behav Brain Res. 2019;356:208-220. doi:10.1016/j.bbr.2018.08.023

<sup>4</sup> See Barker, Knisely, Barker, Cobb, & Schubert, *Preliminary Investigation of Employee's Dog Presence on Stress and Organizational Perceptions*, International Journal of Workplace Health Management, March 23, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> See Park, Youngah Mental break: *Work-life balance needed for recovery from job stress*, Kansas State University, K-State News (Feb. 5, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

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