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SELF-CARE AS A POWER SKILL

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Many of our students hold damaging misconceptions about self-care. Some view acts of self-care as weak, needy, self-indulgent, or selfish. Others may deem acts of self-care even unproductive and, therefore, unnecessary. Our students often carry these misconceptions unconsciously. As a result, many of their attempts to engage in healthy habits—such as consistent sleep, mindful nutrition, or meaningful human interaction—are short-lived and rarely prioritized. Yet studies show that self-care, or attending to one’s well-being, correlates to enhanced academic performance, ethical decision-making, and creativity. Students who prioritize their well-being will one day become effective and powerful advocates. And they will be more likely to live professional and personal lives that are consistent with their values.

It’s time to reframe self-care as the power skill that it is— for the benefit of our law students and those sometimes-skeptical educators (including, at times, many of us).

Traditional legal education and professional culture does not prioritize self-care or well-being as integral components of advocacy training. As educators, however, we are uniquely positioned to empower students with the language of well-being. We can also introduce them to habit-formation tools and optimal mindsets that will serve their well-being.

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An In-Class Exercise on Well-Being

The 2017 Report of the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being² defines well-being as the ongoing process of seeking to thrive across all dimensions of life—physical, intellectual, emotional, social, occupational, and spiritual. Teachers of all disciplines can introduce this holistic framework to students through an infographic on a PowerPoint slide.³ Next, we can invite students to reflect on one specific domain: “Bring to mind one activity you’ve undertaken, or hope to undertake, that will help you thrive in one of the six domains. Type the domain and the specific activity into the chat box. I’ll start.” In the span of a few seconds, every student and the professor can participate in this exercise. The chat box will be populated with concrete and relatable examples, e.g., “Social—FaceTime with siblings. Physical—two-mile run. Spiritual—write in my journal.” Consider the possibilities. In holding space for this exchange, educators can bring awareness to well-being practices. Students will appreciate the new vocabulary, as well as the opportunity to share with and learn from their peers.

Easy Tools for Habit Formation

Educators can empower students with concrete tools on habit formation. Over time, these tools will help students prioritize their well-being. Much like our students, we are well aware of our “bad” habits—those maladaptive coping mechanisms that we fall back on when life isn’t going our way. Maybe we consume one too many Oreos, KitKats, or Doritos. Perhaps we scroll mindlessly through social media. Or we reach for the remote control and binge-watch a

² National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being, *The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change*, <https://lawyerwellbeing.net>.

³ The information is available from the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being, at https://lawyerwellbeing.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Lawyer-Well-Being-Definition2_EBB-2.png

Netflix series deep into the night—a night when our bodies and minds crave sleep.

Science tells us that our brains have the property of neuroplasticity and that we can create neural pathways that reinforce and support new, desirable habits. According to Kelly McGonigal, health psychologist and lecturer at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business, habits are developed with three essential "Es": (i) Ease, (ii) Environment, and (iii) Enjoyment.⁴

Ease refers to starting with manageable goals. We are more likely to engage in an activity if our goal is realistic. For example, "walk-run 10 minutes/day" is a more manageable goal for most than "run two miles/day." Similarly, "turn off phone 20 minutes before going to bed" may be a more easeful entry into this practice than "no screens for two hours at night."

Environment invites us to add a reminder of the goal to our physical surroundings. For example, if we hope to start walking or running every day, we may choose to place our running or walking shoes by the front door. If we aim to stretch every morning, we can leave a yoga mat next to our bed. A post-it on the bathroom mirror or a calendar reminder on a "smart" device are additional examples of environmental cues.

Last, Enjoyment refers to the process of intentionally adding elements of joy to our target activity. Examples include exercising to our favorite music or making a healthy meal with a close friend. Alternatively, we can add enjoyment by "rewarding" ourselves after we meet a daily goal. Over time, our brains will associate the activity with some level of personal enjoyment or happiness. As a result, we are more likely to stick with our fledgling habits.

⁴ Kelly McGonigal, Healthy Habits Course for Ten Percent Happier, Session 4. Course outline available at <https://www.tenpercent.com/habits>.

A Mindset that Empowers

Professor McGonigal’s advice includes a kind and strategic reality check: we will, in fact, fall short of meeting our goals and objectives. We will necessarily make “mistakes.” Our best bet is to take these setbacks as points of information and learning, rather than as opportunities to listen to our inner critic, get down on ourselves, or question our abilities. Carol Dweck refers to this approach as having a growth (rather than a fixed) mindset.⁵ Part of having a growth mindset involves knowing and internalizing the truth that any kind of learning process involves temporary setbacks—what some of us label “failures.” Curiosity is also critical to a growth mindset. When—not if—we fall short of meeting a goal, we can become scientists: That is quite interesting. I wonder why I had a pint of ice cream that night? Or I wonder why I binge-watched that show for four hours? We can inquire: What happened before I went into the kitchen? Or before I logged onto Netflix? Curiosity helps us learn from the setbacks and refine our processes for forming new habits. What could I do differently next time?

Conclusion

For maximum impact, educators should model the practice of self-care. We can normalize challenges by sharing personal anecdotes of our self-care strategies, struggles, and setbacks. We can tell our students how we attend to our own well-being, and whether the process is easy (a rarity) or whether it requires intention, structure, and kindness (always).

Self-care is a power skill that demands intention, structure, and ongoing curiosity and kindness. To instill in students the value of self-care as a strength, offer them a well-being vocabulary, tools for healthy habit formation, and a mindset that empowers. And lead by example.

⁵ Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: Changing the Way You Think to Fulfill Your Potential* (2017).