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The high cost of lawyering

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"Lawyers who work harder [to make partner, to earn more money], and then tell themselves they don't have time now for family and friends, are on a very slippery slope. They may think they are only postponing the opportunity [to be a better parent, a more loving spouse], but in fact they are sacrificing that opportunity."

— WILLIAM H. REHNQUIST

I am now thoroughly depressed about my decision to become a lawyer.

Why?

Because I had the misfortune to stumble upon two recent reports concluding that the very skills that contribute to professional success of lawyers are detrimental to their mental health, their personal relationships and their overall physical health.

Yes, it's true: The traits we've cultivated so carefully — that allow us to represent zealously and meticulously our client's interests — don't serve us very well outside of the legal arena.

Imagine that.

As a result, compared to other professions, lawyers are more inclined to suffer from alcohol abuse, drug addiction and depression.

Alison Grant's recent article from The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer — "Cleveland bar raises awareness of lawyers' depression" — describes the conundrum: "[Lawyers] are praised and highly paid for being aggressive, intellectual and emotionally detached. ... Pessimism backfires in most pursuits — insurance agents make fewer sales attempts, swimmers take longer to bounce back from substandard swims. But law is an exception. ... If 'prudent' is substituted for the pejorative 'pessimistic,' it makes sense. A cautious, skeptical attorney sees problems that could hurt clients. But pessimism also harms family life and friendships."

In other words, as a group, we're not exactly the life of the party, as we repeatedly interrupt other partygoers, seek clarity in

the fact patterns of their jokes and pick apart the punch lines.

Apparently, we're not exactly a barrel of laughs at home either. According to Dr. Fiona Travis, those personality traits that are stereotypically lawyer-like contribute very little toward healthy a marriage.

In her blog post at Lawyer Avenue "Marry a Lawyer? Proceed

With Caution," Travis explains that the skills that serve us exceedingly well in the courtroom don't translate very well to the home front: "[C]ertain lawyerly goals and techniques are at cross-purposes with the behaviors that foster good marriages — for example, win (compromise), doubt (trust), cross-examine (discuss), argue (admit error), attack (accept fallibility in self and others), avoid vulnerability (concede), think for others (respect partner's opinions and ideas), deny weakness (allow for vulnerability), hinder and delay (cooperate)."

So what does it all mean to those of us who unwittingly drank the lawyer Kool-Aid in law school? Are our social and personal lives doomed for all of eternity? If we attempt to modify our behavior at home,

will we lose our edge in the courtroom, become financially destitute and despondent?

Is there a middle ground that will allow us to be mediocre, yet functional, both at work and at home? Is that even a viable alternative or is languishing in mediocrity a sentence worse than death for most over-achieving lawyers?

I don't know about you, but I need to think about the paradox a bit more.

I'm going to lock myself in my office with a bottle of wine, conduct extensive research on the issue, pick apart the fact patterns, examine each and every possible conclusion, then share the results of my research with the next poor, unfortunate soul who tries to tell me a convoluted, confusing joke.

That'll teach 'em.

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