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PUBLIC HEALTH

Lawyers are supposed to plan for the worst, so how can you ease COVID-19 anxiety?

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Are you someone who rarely, if ever, calls friends just to catch up? If you prefer texting to spontaneous small talk, you might want to rethink things—especially now.

Getting out of your own head and thinking about other people's concerns, rather than only focusing on your own, is a strategy to stay sober in the 12-step community. And it's a good way to deal with anxiety around the coronavirus, regardless of whether you have an addiction issue, says Bree Buchanan, president of the American Bar Association's Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs (https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/).

Thinking about other people, she adds, can include spontaneous phone calls.

"Right now I am making a list of women who I know are dealing with some difficult family situations, and some other women I just haven't spoken to in a long time, and wonder how they are doing," says Buchanan, adding that unscheduled phone calls just to chat may cause discomfort for some lawyers.

"When you get on the phone, you don't know how long they will talk, or what they are going to say. We're not used to reacting in real time. We've created layers and layers of insulation, and that's not how we thrive," says Buchanan, a former legal aid lawyer who handled domestic violence cases. She now works with Krill Strategies, a behavioral health consulting firm for the legal profession.

Another way to manage coronavirus-related fears is to write them down.



Image from Shutterstock.com.

“Then use your analytical brain to think about what is the actual likelihood of these things occurring, and what you can do to mitigate or prepare for these things you are actually worried about,” Buchanan says. “Also, if it’s something you have absolutely no control over, consider finding ways to let go of that fear.”

In light of various coronavirus restrictions, many of which were announced earlier this month, attorneys worry about what comes next, says Patrick Krill, a lawyer and the founder of Krill Strategies. He is a licensed alcohol and drug counselor, with board certification from the Minnesota Board of Behavioral Health and Therapy and the International Certification and Reciprocity Consortium.

“In many ways that’s the job of lawyers—to be thinking about the unknown. It’s a really easy mindset for lawyers to find themselves in, and over-indulge. We’re good at that,” says Krill, adding some lawyers by nature are often skeptical, and pessimistic. Those tendencies, he adds, might not be helpful with managing anxiety as we wait to see what happens next with the coronavirus.

“This is a really good time for anyone to step back and cultivate a little bit of optimism in themselves, with intent,” Krill says.

He advises practicing gratitude, with a focus on things in life that are good. Exercise is valuable too, and even if your gym is closed, you can still get outside for a walk or a run, Krill says. It's important to think about sleep hygiene too, he adds. If you wake up at 3 a.m., worried about COVID-19, don't get on your phone, or any sort of social media, because that will increase your anxiety.

What works better to get back to sleep, Krill says, is reading a book, meditation or prayer. He adds drinking a lot of alcohol—or eating large amounts of unhealthy foods—can also keep you from getting a good rest, because they often cause you to wake up in the middle of the night.

“Many people during times like this are going to have difficulties sleeping. We have to be more mindful of how we're approaching that, and it's probably more important now more than ever, given the role sleep plays in our immune system,” he says.

People with mental health conditions, including problems with substance abuse, may respond more strongly to stress in relation to the coronavirus, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html>). Meanwhile, according to a 2016 study on substance abuse and mental health in the legal profession

(https://journals.lww.com/journaladdictionmedicine/Fulltext/2016/02000/The_Prevalence_of_Substance_Use_and_Other_Mental.8.aspx)

Krill conducted with the ABA and Hazelden Betty Ford, 36.4% of the 12,825 attorney respondents demonstrated hazardous drinking or possible alcohol abuse or dependence based on the World Health Organization's Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (<https://auditscreen.org/>).

“Even if you're not a heavy or problem drinker, you want to be limiting your use of alcohol and drugs. It's not a good time to be in an altered state, and you could be compromising your immune system,” says Krill, who worries that stress around the coronavirus may accelerate some lawyers' alcohol use.

If someone goes to an Alcoholic Anonymous meeting and says they drank alcohol because they are stressed out about COVID-19, the crowd's response would be ‘That's just an excuse,’ and it's true, says Will Meyerhofer, a New York lawyer and New York-registered clinical social worker, who works with many attorneys—some of whom now fear that their work sources will dry up due to all of the coronavirus closures.

He adds that “acting out behaviors” aren't limited to overindulging with drugs and alcohol. They can also involve things like sex, overeating, playing video games all night when you should be sleeping and impulse shopping.

“If you use anything as an excuse to act out in an unhealthy way, that's just an excuse. Sorry, this is not a reason to start doing unhealthy, terrible things. If anything, this is a time to take care of yourself well,” Meyerhofer says.

As a healthy alternative, he shared something that worked for him: getting in touch with your inner child.

“Last night we were so tense, and there was so much going on. My husband complained, but I typed in ‘Family Guy fart jokes’ on YouTube, and we watched a montage of fart jokes,” says Meyerhofer, referring to the Fox animated sitcom known for being coarse and often offensive on a variety of topics.

The New York City couple also went across the street to their favorite bakery to buy chocolate chip cookies.

“My personal recommendation is to watch a silly movie, watch something with fart jokes, and if your favorite thing is to eat some chocolate chip cookies and have a glass of milk, do it,” Meyerhofer says.

Interested in other ways to manage mental health in light of the pandemic? COLAP created a list of mental health resources for attorneys during the COVID-19 scare, which can be found here (https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/resources/covid-19--mental-health-resources/).

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