

Who needs resilience?



The traditional perception is that, as a lawyer, life will follow a straight, upward trajectory from law school to articling at a wonderful firm, followed by personal fulfillment and financial success – with no bumps along the way.

That's the kind of thinking I've often heard expressed by lawyers, and what causes young Canadians to continue to apply to law school in droves. Essentially, the mantra, "resilience is for failures. I'm fine" is absorbed early in the process. But even if it is true at the outset, I don't think many people feel that "fine" as their years in the trenches of legal practice increase.

Lawyers take pride in being strong, fearless, and confident. In fact, it's a perceived professional strength not to show emotions or hesitate, nor give the impression one is surprised by an unexpected turn of events. In the courtroom and in client meetings, we are the all-knowing experts who can solve problems with the stroke of a pen or a clever turn of phrase – even if we're dying inside: petrified, exhausted, unsure, or wondering what's going on at home or the long term care residence. The most important thing is to act like a success: we have all heard the career advice, "fake it 'til you make it."

Resilience means coping positively with stress and adversity. But if nothing ever goes wrong (supposedly), who needs it? Better to count on being lucky, do the right thing by keeping up a good front, and everything will be fine.

Lawyers may think they are resilient if they just act like they are ok, or hide, while all is falling to pieces around them. But that's not resilience: that's overconfidence at best and denial at worst.

It doesn't help when professional friends and colleagues on Facebook and LinkedIn (and increasingly some trade publications) show off their recent adventures climbing mountains, running marathons, and working to erase world hunger. Where exactly do they get the time, energy, and motivation? When did it stop being enough to do a great job as legal counsel, with integrity and patience? It seems to me that a carefully executed file or well prepared client is enough to declare the day a success and worthy of feelings of satisfaction as the sun goes down. Otherwise, worrying that you are lacking balance and richness in life (read: achievements that give bragging rights to top those of other people) can itself add to your misery. We are in a spiral of projected over-achievement that never seems to stop growing.

So, do you need to be resilient? Yes, you do. Far from life being a heady round of adventures worthy of a copywriter's efforts and professional photography, we all experience disappointments, unexpected frustrations and bumps in the road. I have found that I need to actively find ways to manage my feelings and stress in a positive way, and humbly help others to do so as well, on occasion. So, to me being resilient means accepting that there will be bumps along the road, when not everything runs perfectly, and then finding resources to help manage those difficulties.

This issue of *LAWPRO Magazine* focuses on the unique stressors faced by lawyers and law firms, some of the repercussions of not dealing with these factors and strategies to address them. Read about ways lawyers and law firms can access help, or change their approach or their environment, so that they can offer their best selves to clients, family and friends. And if that includes climbing a mountain, running a marathon, or "just" doing a really good job of looking after a client, that is great, too.

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