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## MARKETING THE LAW FIRM

JUNE 2023

# Mindset for Happiness: Retrain Your Brain

By Sharon Meit Abrahams

Recently, there has been a lot written about lawyers and their lack of happiness. This unhappiness extends to both their profession and their personal lives. The first week of May was the ABA's Well-being week, during which firms are encouraged to offer programming and activities that address the six pillars of the ABA Well-being Pledge. Some firms do participate, while others do not. However, regardless of what firms do, the root of unhappiness ultimately comes from within the individual and cannot be changed or affected by a firm's thoughtful and engaging programming.

Happiness is not a permanent feature or personality trait, but a more fleeting, changeable state. Progress on our professional and personal goals can make us feel happier and more satisfied with life. The pursuit of happiness can be a goal, but it is important to remember that happiness is not permanent, and it is normal to experience negative thoughts and emotions. It is important to identify and challenge negative thoughts.

## Negative Thinking

As humans, we have negative thoughts to protect ourselves from danger. For example, if you see fruit in a tree and wonder if you should climb on the limb to retrieve it, your negative thought might be, "If I climb up there, the branch might break and I'll fall to the ground." This negative thought is a way for your body to protect you from injury. When we have negative thoughts, our body produces cortisol, a hormone produced by the adrenal gland, that puts our physical body in a state of readiness to either fight or flee. In this case, the negative thought is helping you to avoid injury by making you less likely to climb the tree.

Fortunately, we no longer climb trees for fruit. However, we may still have negative thoughts that are not protective but limiting. For example, we might think, "That senior leader doesn't like me, so I will never make partner at this firm." This thought is not helpful because it is not necessarily based on reality. It is also limiting because it prevents us from taking action to achieve our goals.

We all have negative thoughts about the future, the present, and the past. Future thoughts are worries based on past experiences, the unknown, and general fear. Negative thoughts about the present are usually anxiety around the quality of our life and work and can come from a sense of a lack of control. Past thoughts float around in our heads when we rehash and ruminate on actions or outcomes that left us embarrassed or ashamed.

There are a number of negative thought behaviors that can be harmful to attorneys' mental health. The most common of these are:

- **Overthinking:** This is when we dwell on negative thoughts and worry about things that may or may not happen. Overthinking can lead to anxiety, stress, and depression.
- **Comparisons:** This is when we compare ourselves to others and focus on our weaknesses rather than our strengths. Comparisons can lead to low self-esteem, self-doubt, and a lack of motivation.
- **Negative Self-Talk:** This is when we talk to ourselves in a negative way, using words like "I can't," "I'm not good enough," and "I'll never succeed." Negative self-talk can lead to low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression.

## How to Challenge Negative Thoughts

Negative thoughts can be harmful to our mental health and well-being. Here are some tips for challenging negative thoughts:

### ***"STOP" Methodology***

The STOP methodology can be used in any situation where you are experiencing negative thinking.

1. Stop what you are thinking about. Say it out loud. "STOP."
2. Focus your awareness on the world around you with your five senses. Notice the difference between being stuck in your thoughts vs. experiencing the present moment through your five senses.

## Reframe Your Thoughts

Reframing thinking is a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) technique that involves changing the way you think about a situation.

1. When you catch yourself having a negative thought, reframe it in a positive manner. Example: "I can't do this job." *Reframe:* "They hired me for this job, so I must be capable."
2. Hold that positive thought in your mind for a full minute (even longer if you have time).

## Question Your Thoughts

This is good for attorneys who like to analyze and process things. Ask yourself these questions and write down the answers:

1. Is the thought true? Is there a basis for this negative belief?
2. Is the thought giving you power, or is it taking your power away?
3. What would your life look like if you didn't have these negative beliefs?
4. Is the thought glossing over an issue that needs addressing?

## Identify Your Thoughts

Identifying and labeling your thoughts can be helpful in challenging negative thoughts. One way to do this is to write down the thoughts as they come and determine if there are patterns.

1. Label the thoughts — angry, sad, frustrated, etc. Example: Underappreciated

2. Explain the thoughts — “I’m having the thought that ...” Example: I’m having the thought that all my work on the contract will be underappreciated. I feel this way because in the past the client didn’t understand how much work I put into the contract when he asked me to make significant changes.
3. Shelf the thoughts. Continue this practice of labeling, without attempting to soften, change, or avoid whatever thoughts you happen to be having. See if you can notice what it is like to have some distance between you — the thinker — and your thoughts. Example: In your mind place the word “underappreciated” in a jar and place it on the shelf.

## ***Give Yourself Positive Self-Talk***

Positive self-talk is the practice of thinking positive thoughts about yourself. It is a skill that takes time and practice to develop.

1. Write down 3 things you like about yourself. Do this daily, weekly or monthly.
2. Self-acceptance or acceptance-based behavior therapy helps you change your relationship to your thoughts, such that you become more skilled at noticing them mindfully and making a space for them without reacting.

## ***Feed Your Positive Thoughts***

When we feed our minds with positive thoughts, we are more likely to experience positive emotions, such as happiness, joy, and gratitude.

1. Listen to positive TED talks.
2. Listen to positive podcasts.
3. Watch positive YouTube videos.
4. Post positive sayings around your office/home.

By following these tips, you can challenge negative thoughts and improve your mental health and well-being.

## **Neurotransmitters**

Managing our thoughts can affect the levels of neurotransmitters in our brain, such as dopamine and serotonin. Dopamine is associated with feelings of pleasure and reward, while serotonin is associated with mood regulation and well-being. Negative thoughts can lead to a decrease in dopamine and serotonin levels, which can contribute to feelings of sadness, anxiety, and depression.

Dopamine is responsible for allowing us to feel pleasure, satisfaction and motivation. When we feel good that we have achieved something, it’s because we have a surge of dopamine in the brain. Here are two activities to do daily to give yourself a dopamine hit:

1. **Set goals and reward yourself for achieving them.** When we set goals and achieve them, we experience a sense of accomplishment. This releases dopamine, which makes us feel good. This releases dopamine, which makes us feel good. Crossing things off your list is the reward.
2. **Embrace novelty.** Novelty is anything new or different. When we experience something new, our brains release dopamine. This is why we often feel excited and happy when we try something new, such as a new food, a new activity, or a new place.

By ensuring you get a healthy hit of daily dopamine you find yourself having more positive thoughts and feeling happier throughout the day.

Serotonin is the well-being neurotransmitter which affects our mood, digestion, appetite, sleep, bone density, blood clotting and sexual function. It is also associated with positive emotions, a sense of well-being, and prosocial behaviors. Things that trigger or impact serotonin include:

- **Diet:** A healthy, balanced diet that includes plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains can help to increase serotonin levels.
- **Light:** Exposure to bright light, especially in the morning, can help to regulate serotonin levels.
- **Exercise:** Exercise helps to increase serotonin levels and improve mood.
- **Mindfulness, Meditation, and Gratitude:** Mindfulness, meditation, and gratitude are all practices that can help to increase serotonin levels and improve overall well-being.

No matter how busy an attorney you are, there is always something you can do to take care of your happiness and well-being. Your happiness and well-being are essential to your success, both in your practice and in your life.

## Resources

- State Bar associations have a Lawyers Assistance Program (or something similar)
- Your healthcare provider mental health coverage
- Your firm's Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Online therapy providers
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

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