

FOR YOUR PRACTICE

Lawyers Concerned For Lawyers

Overdoing it only works for so long

BY DR. JEFF FORTGANG



Dr. Jeff Fortgang

Q. I've been learning my own money since before college, and learned well how to rely on myself, doing well in college and moving into a bookkeeping/accounting job for a large corporation. Last year, approaching my mid-40s, I decided to pursue something that might give me a greater sense of accomplishment, and started law school at night. It's going very well academically, and I'm also generally keeping up with the work at my job, but I'm getting less sleep and starting to see myself making accounting errors I never made before, as well as sometimes forgetting side tasks. I have always prided myself on the excellence of my work product, so that is distressing. My teenage son (I have shared custody with my ex-wife) has also let me know that he's been feeling less prioritized, and I'm not even keeping up with my laundry or returning calls or emails from friends. I seem to be easily irritated these days. What prompted me to contact LCL is that I've now also had a panic attack (so I learned at the ER — thought it might be a heart attack). Should I be looking into some kind of counseling or medication?

A. Before considering various forms of treatment, let's recognize, as I'm sure you do, the central problem — from what you describe, you are overwhelmed because you're over-extended. You are justifiably proud of your accomplishments and self-reliance, and of taking on the challenge of law school with a high level of success. The problem is that you're just one person.

Many concerns are vying for space in your mind, and at the same time you are not getting enough sleep. This combination of factors is likely contributing to your increased error rate on the job, and before long the effects may well start to affect your studies. We know it's easier said than done, but getting back to a consistent bed time might make a huge difference in how you feel and might even reduce the chances of another panic attack. (If you're using caffeine to counteract fatigue, that can also add to anxiety symptoms.)

It won't come as news that your life is out of balance — too many demands versus too little replenishment, relaxation and pleasure. And so we come back to my recurrent recommendations — more exercise, meditation, artistic exposure (e.g., music, theatre, photography, museums), and maintaining your social supports (not only online). Your response will be, "Sure, but where do I find the time?" Some thoughts on that:

- If you are feeling more "centered" and getting enough sleep, the hours that you devote to work will be more efficient.



- As someone who has long relied so heavily on doing things for himself, it's time for you to experiment with relying on others and delegating. Even if money is tight, think of the benefits of having someone else help with cleaning, laundry, errands, etc. One of the people to whom you might be able to delegate is your son — allowing him to assist in this way (and make a few bucks in the process), and also to join you in pleasurable and exercise-related activities during any time that is freed-up, could be relationship-enhancing.
- Perhaps you can identify some tasks that are less important, and on which you could allow yourself to perform at a "good-enough" level rather than applying standards of excellence to everything you do (again, as a way

to shift some time and energy toward more balance).

And yes, seeing a therapist/counselor would help, including as a means of helping you follow through on the kinds of lifestyle changes that will allow you not only to progress toward life as an attorney but to enjoy the process. ■

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Dr. Jeff Fortgang is a licensed psychologist and licensed alcohol and drug counselor on staff at Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers of Massachusetts, where he and his colleagues provide confidential consultation to lawyers and law students, and offer presentations on subjects related to the lives of lawyers. Q&A questions are either actual letters/emails or paraphrased and disguised concerns expressed by individuals seeking LCL's assistance. Questions may be emailed to DrJeff@LCLMA.org.