



# 5 Simple Steps Every Lawyer Can Take to Improve Mental Wellness

Written by Terry DeMeo, Allison Wolf

Every year it seems the pace of life speeds up. The days and months pass by in a blur of deadlines, emails, and stress. There is so much that feels out of our control and this contributes to our sense of anxiety. What is so important in these times is to grasp what is ours to manage and influence, and the most important of these is our own wellness.

Members of the legal profession are suffering in one main area—mental wellness. The stats mentioned in [this exploration of lawyer wellness](#) make that clear.

Mental wellness can feel like something that is out of control. It is all too easy to feel helpless under the weight of anxiety and depression. What's important to know is that in many cases, you are not helpless, and indeed mental wellness is something you can influence and change for the better. We have done this for ourselves, and we have helped others. Here is what you can do to invest in this essential aspect of your wellbeing.

To get started it is important to get one thing clear. Namely, that **you are not alone**. Everyone faces stress and anxiety. We all have dark thoughts, self-doubt, and fears. This mental terrain is simply part of being human, and these challenges are faced by everyone you know. There is nothing wrong with you. In fact, stress is often an important signpost of meaning.

**Lives of meaning and purpose come with stress.** In a [joint study](#) published in the Journal of Positive Psychology in 2013, University of Florida and Stanford University researchers asked a large group of adults between the ages of 18 and 78 to rate how strongly, they disagreed or agreed, with this statement: "taking all things together, I feel my life is meaningful."

Overwhelmingly those people who reported experiencing a high degree of stress were also most likely to agree with the statement "taking all things together, I feel my life is meaningful." The researchers concluded that lives with meaning and purpose come with stress.

Stress is also a part of the learning curve for any new skill. When we make a commitment to take action on something that is new or different, when we are unsure of the outcome, or wonder if we are up to the challenge, we experience stress. To move into action requires courage. Through taking action we develop competence, and over time we become confident.

**Courage comes first. Confidence follows. Stress is a natural part of the territory of learning and growth.**

On the other hand, stress can also be a useful sign that something is out of alignment. It is a message that a change is called for. Though uncomfortable, these feelings serve as alarm bells that help propel people into action.

Just like we can positively impact our physical health by eating well and exercising, we can positively influence our mental wellbeing by prioritizing this and giving it our attention.

Here are five simple steps every lawyer can take to improve mental wellness today.

## 1. Talk to someone

Fears, shame, and negative thoughts begin to shrink when taken out of the darkness in your head and brought into the light when shared with others. The simplest first step to investing in mental wellness is to speak in confidence with someone we trust about our experience.

It may take a few tries to find a coach or counsellor you resonate with, but persevere. Having a trusted counsellor to listen and offer guidance is an invaluable support.

## 2. Adopt two important mindsets: positive stress, and growth

### Positive stress mindset

The [positive stress mindset](#) recognises that our stress response is not a maladaptation but rather a highly evolved physiological response that helps prime us for high level performance. Stress research of the past decades has shown that much of what we thought about stress is wrong. Our stress response helps protect us from post-traumatic stress disorder, increases mental acuity, promotes the formation of memories, and helps us recover from stressful events.

It is time to stop getting stressed about feeling stress and instead take advantage of our stress response for good.

To begin to acquire your own positive stress mindset read Kelly McGonigal's important work, [The Upside of Stress: Why Stress Is Good for You, and How to Get Good at It](#), and watch her Ted Talk—[How to Make Stress Your Friend](#).

## Growth mindset

The second important mindset to acquire is a growth mindset.

The growth mindset is the discovery of Carol S. Dweck, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University.

In 2006 Dweck and her grad student were puzzled by why some students were so caught up on proving their ability, and others could just let go and learn. Their research uncovered that two opposing mindsets are responsible. These mindsets are deeply held beliefs about ability—**fixed ability** that needs to be proven, and **changeable ability** that can be developed through learning and practice. She wrote about her findings in the book [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#).

With a fixed mindset, people believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. They spend their time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing them.

Dweck found that with a fixed mindset every situation is evaluated with questions like: Will I succeed or fail? Will I look smart or dumb? Will I be accepted or rejected? Will I feel like a winner or a loser?

With a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities are things that can be cultivated through effort.

Dweck writes: "The passion for stretching yourself, and sticking to it when it is not going well, is the hallmark of a growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives."

All of us can benefit by taking action to adopt a growth mindset. To get started read Dweck's book and watch to her [Ted Talk—The Power of Believing You Can Improve](#).

### 3. Don't believe everything you think

Instead of simply believing what you think, notice what you're thinking and analyze your thoughts. Give your thoughts the same scrutiny you'd give to unprovable statements from a client.

For instance, imagine you are on a weekend outing with your kids, at a park, when you begin to worry about whether you should have hired a particular new associate and whether he capably represented a client in a hearing last week.

That worry might lead you to have thoughts like these:

- *I bet he didn't prepare enough.*
- *I bet he did a terrible job.*
- *We're going to lose that case.*
- *That client is going to be really mad.*
- *I hired the wrong person.*

It's important to recognize that nothing has happened, except in your head. Your thoughts are purely speculative, yet they create feelings of discouragement and anxiety for you—You're distracted from your children and feel terrible.

**Rather than automatically believing the content of your thoughts, analyze them as if a client were speaking to you.**

Notice that you are thinking things that are unprovable and purely speculative. Wow! I'm having thoughts that we're going to lose the case and I hired the wrong person. Do I have to believe that right now? Not really. Do I have proof? No. I can't know that right now, in this moment we're going to lose or that I hired the wrong person. Until I know for sure, I'm not going to speculate about it, especially now, while I'm with my children on this outing.

**When we employ legal skills to challenge our own thinking, as we would if a client were speaking to us, we can often free ourselves from the unpleasantness and anxiety generated by thoughts that have no proof.**

There is a branch of psychotherapy called [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy](#) that does exactly these kinds of exercises. Clients are guided to reframe their thoughts from the negative and speculative to the positive and provable. You can also do it on your own.

## 4. Stop trying to multi-task

Multi-tasking is an illusion—it is impossible for the human brain to focus on multiple things at once. We may think we can simultaneously check email and text a friend during a boring meeting and still catch the essence of the meeting, but [we truly can't](#).

Multitasking [actually causes harm to our brains](#). It weakens both our brains' short term memory (the ability to temporarily store information while we're working on a particular matter) as well as long term memory (the capacity to store and recall information over the passage of time).

Multitasking has also been linked to negative structural changes in the brain—in one study, multitaskers had measurably decreased grey matter in brain areas that are associated with emotional regulation, motivation, and cognitive control.

To improve mental wellness, stop trying to do it all at once. [Use a timer](#) to block out times for specific tasks, group similar tasks together during your day, and try to work on one task for an extended period as much as possible.

## 5. Get moving.

Finally, and we all know this—**exercise is crucial to well being**. It's important for both emotional health as well as physical and cognitive health. Regular exercise helps us lift out of depression and anxiety, make new brain connections, and enhances learning, memory, and cognition. One study found that subjects [showed marked improvement in depressive symptoms](#) within ten to twelve weeks, after just 45 to 60 minutes of aerobic exercise or resistance training with weights three times a week.

And, in case you haven't heard, [sitting is the new smoking](#).

To get up and move throughout the day:

- Try standing during phone calls.
- Get a standing desk or elevate the one you have on blocks.
- Walk to nearby meetings.
- Take the stairs instead of elevators.
- Get up every half-hour and stretch or go for a short walk.

You might increase muscle tone and burn a few calories, but you may also find big improvements in your mental health from a few relatively small adjustments throughout your day.

As you begin to implement changes to your routines however, it's important to start small. Pick one thing at a time. Start with something that seems easy. Increase the frequency and then add another habit or practice. Remember that small steps can lead to big changes.

**Authored by:**



## **Terry DeMeo**

Terry DeMeo, J.D., MCC, is an attorney and Master Certified Coach, known for her versatility and wide-ranging experience. After almost 25 years as a civil rights, criminal, and domestic relations litigator, she became a full-time coach, focusing on lawyers and other licensed professionals. She specializes in the areas of professional development and relationships. Terry is certified by several coaching programs in both general and relationship coaching, a certified mindfulness and stress management practitioner, a certified provider of the Myers-Briggs Typology Instrument, and has completed graduate coursework in somatic clinical psychology. An instructor for the Martha Beck coach-training company, Terry teaches courses in coaching skills, practice development, and coaching ethics. She is a member of the International Coach Federation.





## Allison Wolf

Allison Wolf is one of the most senior coaches for lawyers in North America. She has helped countless clients over the past 16 years develop thriving legal practices, and before that served as director of legal marketing for award-winning law firms. Allison's specialty is uncovering the thinking traps and gaps holding her clients back and helping them acquire the mindsets, skills, and habits for growing successful and rewarding legal practices. Allison received her Certified Executive Coach qualification from Royal Roads University in 2004, and, to round out her education, completed life coach training with Martha Beck in 2014. She is the president of Shift Works Strategic – Coaching for Lawyers, and founder and managing editor of Attorney With a Life a resource site for lawyers.

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