

Are you well?

By Emily Morrow



SOME YEARS AGO, OUR dear friend Ernest was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and, after receiving treatment, decided to let the disease take its natural course. He lived for about six months more in a remarkably rich, full way. He remained intellectually engaged, was dignified in dealing with his illness and its physical effects, was receptive to others' needs and interests, and continued to make friends. Visiting him was a joyful experience, and he seemed remarkably sanguine about his prognosis. I asked him about his intentions for this phase of his life and he said "I intend to be well until I die". He achieved that goal remarkably well. I learned a great deal from him.

John (not his real name) is a successful lawyer. He is highly compensated, married with three children and regularly competes in triathalons. He is fit, energetic and has no medical problems of which he is aware. However, John lives in an internal world of constant stress, anxiety and potential conflict. He works with, but does not trust, his professional colleagues, perceives life as a "zero sum game", infrequently praises his team members (but can be exceedingly blunt with his criticism), gets frustrated with his family and rarely sleeps well. Despite his seeming good health, he worries constantly about having medical problems and is convinced that "the other shoe" will drop sometime soon in his life. He is anxious and feels on edge.

Most of us consider ourselves to be in good health most of the time. We seem to be disease free, pass our annual physicals, are able to do our work and find time to enjoy ourselves. Life continues without our paying particular attention to it. We exist in a state of relative inattention to our well-being.

What is wellness?

What does it mean to be "well"? I like the World Health Organisation definition of "wellness" as being "an active process of

becoming aware of and making choices towards a healthy and fulfilling life ... A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". Interestingly, using this definition, our friend Ernest, though terminally ill, was extremely well and Sam is unwell despite his robust health.

Much has been written about the fact that lawyers, as a profession, tend to be a pretty unhappy group, many of whom do not enjoy their work nor find it particularly satisfying. Indeed, many lawyers live with chronic, ambient levels of depression and anxiety that adversely affect their physical, intellectual, emotional and psychological well-being.

No doubt this has to do with stress, the adversarial nature of the law, being a high achiever and so forth. It's a perfect environment for being unwell.

Characteristics of wellness

That said, what are some of the characteristics of being a truly "well" person and professional? What choices and attitudes predictably correlate with a sense of well-being, regardless of one's external environment?

In her books, *Choosing Happiness; Life and Soul Essentials* and *The Universal Heart*, Australian psychotherapist, Dr. Stephanie Dowrick (www.stephaniedowrick.com) describes the characteristics associated with wellness, regardless of one's physical fitness or health. Her list is one of the best I have come across, and I think about it frequently personally and when working with clients. Consider the list Dr Dowrick suggests:

Celebrate others. Be pleased for other people, express sympathetic joy and choose to live in a world of abundance, even when it appears there may not be enough to go around.

Trust. Be trusting of others and be trustworthy yourself. Trust in the essential goodness of life, yourself and others. Acknowledge life is full of risks and the unexpected, but do not let that dominate you.

Respect/dignity. Treat yourself and others with respect and never create mental

anguish for others by stripping them of their dignity. Always leave another with his/her dignity intact.

Aliveness. Seek to feel alive from the inside by having a stable sense of who you are. Although you may care what others think of you, do not be overly dependent on it.

Boundaries. Have a good sense of your own and others' boundaries and practice restraint. Seek "self-mastery" by not being chronically awash in your own emotions.

Win and lose. Realise that you do not always have to win and avoid the cheap triumphs over others that temporarily make you feel better. Lose gracefully and appreciate others when they win.

Goals. Choose to set goals and feel capable of achieving those goals.

Caring. Care about the well-being of others, not for the purpose of being admired by them, but because it is intrinsically right to do so.

Influencing and kindness. Recognise your power to influence others, but do not abuse that power. Be kind whenever possible and acknowledge that it is almost always possible to be kind.

Be wrong. Be willing to be wrong about things and avoid the need to make others be wrong to feel like you are right.

Accountability. Seek to be accountable for that which is yours and avoid blaming others.

Befriend yourself. Make friends with others and with yourself by having an attitude of being your own best friend. Be good humoured, encouraging, forgiving, while feeling sorrow when appropriate.

Consistency. Be the same person when you are alone as when you are with others, such that there is no significant difference between the two.

Emotional awareness. Be aware of your own emotions while not being enslaved by them.

Contentment. Feel satisfied, content and that you have enough, because in reality, you usually do.

It's an interesting list, isn't it? It's also a list of characteristics that can be at odds with what we associate with success as a lawyer.

Can one be a top lawyer and be comfortable with being wrong sometimes, kind, content and celebrating others? Can one be assertive and exercise influence while intrinsically caring about what is best for the other? Is it possible to simultaneously be a tough and realistic advocate and trusting?

You might say it is hard to do so in one's professional persona. Perhaps it is easier to achieve in one's personal life. However, when I think about the most successful "go to" lawyers who live great personal and professional lives, most of them live in a way that is consistent with this list. It takes insight about yourself, some self-discipline, a certain level of objectivity and a strong belief in the value of others, but it is very possible to do.

Obstacles to wellness

Dr Dowrick also discusses the likely obstacles to wellness, and I found these equally compelling.

Fear. Although fear is no doubt part of our DNA, it is unhelpful when it surfaces unnecessarily. Predictably, the best antidotes to fear are wisdom (remembering what worked well in the past and letting that guide your present thinking), and knowing how to calm yourself down.

Resentment. When one says "yes" too often, one can begin to feel overwhelmed and like a martyr. Resentment results. Do stand up for what you need, while expressing sympathetic joy and support for others. Put the oxygen mask on yourself first and then attend to the needs of others.

Panic. Panic can be triggered by seemingly small occurrences to which we overreact. If one can accept what is occurring and realise that one's needs do not have to be met immediately, one can minimise feelings of panic and remain calm even during intense times. Developing this capability is critical in the practice of law when every event can seem fraught and critical.

Self-hatred. Self-hatred can present as self-pity, accompanied by feelings of shame and contempt, even when one is successful and highly respected by others. The best "antidote" is to identify the source of one's pain and how to heal it. Look to yourself and your own attitudes and behaviour, rather than to that of others, when seeking both the cause and the cure of the pain.

Arrogance/self-righteousness. Feelings of being "better than" others can be temporarily satisfying. However, in the long run, they separate us from ourselves and others, causing a disconcerting sense of isolation. Approaching oneself and others

with a sense of co-operation and humility is the best way to avoid arrogance. We are all in this thing called "life" together and we generally do best when we forgive our own inadvertent trespasses and those of others. Do be discerning and have high standards, but don't be unnecessarily critical.

Powerlessness. Ultimately, feeling empowered has less to do with one's situation at any point in time and more to do with the attitude one brings to one's circumstances. Understanding the reality of a situation and finding something intrinsically meaningful about it offsets feeling powerless. Consider a young lawyer who feels chronically overwhelmed by the demands of his/her work and struggles to find a sustainable work-life balance. This lawyer could experience great despair and helplessness. However, by choosing to see his/her situation with some objectivity and identifying what is important and meaningful in life, this individual's subjective experience could be radically different.

Eruptive emotional states. Having a strong emotional reaction to something can be entirely consistent with a sense of well-being, especially if that depth of passion gives rise to joy, contentment, generosity and the like. However, if that same emotional intensity often gives rise to anger, frustration, dissatisfaction, unhappiness with others and so forth, then it is clearly at odds with a sense of well-being.

What can you do?

If you find that the attitudes you bring to your work and your life are frequently consistent with the characteristics of wellness, then you are to be commended. Cultivating those attitudes can take some effort, especially when living and working in the often uneasy and adversarial world of the law. Life is often a series of "poor approximations". None of us has chosen to live in the cloistered world of a monastery. Practising law is a constant challenge.

If the obstacles to wellness are frequently

part of your life, you may want to ask whether those attitudes are serving you well. If fear and resentment cause you to be unhappy and uncomfortable with yourself and others, perhaps you might express trust and celebrate another. Appreciate a colleague or congratulate someone and tell him you are pleased about his success. Choose to wait and see what happens, while trusting that the outcome will be positive without your anxious intervention.

Although thoughts and attitudes are ephemeral, they nevertheless have great emotional intensity and reality. By choosing to observe one's thinking and the way one's thoughts coalesce into attitudes, one can change those patterns of thought. Remind yourself of the characteristics of well-being when habitual obstacles present themselves. Pay attention to the sometimes subtle changes in your thought patterns and your behaviour.

This business of being a lawyer and working in the law is not easy. As my mother used to say, like old age, "it's not for sissies". So, give yourself the benefit of the doubt while being discerning about how you think and act.

Do your best work in your practice and do it with a stout heart and in good faith. Seek to be well and to answer "yes" to the question: "lawyer, are you well?" It's worth the effort. After all, if you are not well, what else really matters?

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