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Ten Tips to Enjoy Life as an “A” Personality Lawyer

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This article discusses how the “A” personality lawyer can improve his or her enjoyment of life while also improving his or her productivity and health. If you are a “B” type lawyer, you are probably already disgusted with this article, because you don’t see enjoyment of life as a project. But that’s just the way we A’s are. As a certified A, I will attempt to provide practical tips for immediate application, because we A’s want to know how to do things. I will also write this article in a format that makes it easy to skim quickly, because we A’s don’t have time to study or enjoy written material. Finally, I will attempt to keep this article short, because we A’s know that most points can be made in a few sentences and the rest is just author self-aggrandizement.

A LITTLE BACKGROUND

One day an educated B friend of mine asked me if I ever wondered whether I was *addicted* to adrenaline. She asked me if I didn’t really enjoy getting excited or even angry about the things that were occurring in my practice and life. She advised me that my excitement may create an actual rush of adrenaline in my body to which I had become addicted. About the same time, another friend gave me an article from a per-

sonal coach that urged lawyers to “change from an A to a B.” The coach made a good case for her argument that B’s were not only happier than A’s, they were more efficient. Well, this was sacrilege. We A’s have always justified our condition with the notion that we are more efficient.

My friend’s comments and the article caused me to take a look at what I was doing. I realized that everything in my pre-legal and legal training pointed toward this adrenaline rush. I had played sports all of my life. My biggest influences were football and wrestling coaches, who taught me there was “no gain without pain.” My idol as a boy was Dick Butkus, the Chicago Bear linebacker who wrote that he dreamed of hitting people so hard that their heads fell off. My law professors had taught me that I had to “marry” the law. My mentor in law practice taught me that I had to practice law “with a never-ending sense of urgency” and that I had to “stay awake at night” to be effective in litigation. Of course, being a natural A, I bought into all of this stuff hook, line, and sinker. I approached law practice like a linebacker. I stayed awake at night thinking about my cases. On more than a few occasions, I awoke at 3:15 a.m. with a panic attack, threw on

my blue jeans and a T-shirt, and hurried to the office, sure that something tragic had to be averted at that hour.

I enjoyed some success with this approach. I was able to start and build a good law practice that supports my family. I was able to contribute to the bar and my community through activities. I was able to enjoy many sports and other extracurricular activities. I was raising a good, happy, productive family.

But I also observed many negative side effects. First, some people complained that I was an “asshole.” This, of course, is a hazard of the trade, but it was probably also a symptom of a highly intense and personal approach to my practice and my cases. Second, my blood pressure was up for the first time in an otherwise fit body. But, more importantly, my enjoyment of my life was not where I wanted it to be. I found myself, for example, unable to enjoy Saturday mornings. I was unable to be “inefficient” on Saturday. I had to schedule everything so it was “productive.” If I did allow for nonproductive time, it was scheduled in an intellectual observation that I had to have some nonproductive time so I could have more productive time. Even though I was devoted to efficiency (and still am), I didn’t feel like I was in control. I

felt as though I was in one of those Star Wars fighters, with laser weapons firing in every direction. Life was fast paced, exciting, hectic, dangerous, and out of control. (You A's probably haven't read this paragraph because we A's don't care about someone's personal story. You want me to get to the meat of the matter.)

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Being the A that I am, I felt I must take steps to correct this situation. I determined to become a B. I have told many friends about this project. All of them laugh at the prospect of me attempting to become laid back about life. I remember one day early in my transition when I saw a lawyer friend in the hall. He said, "How're you doing, Mark?" I said, "Fine. I'm on a mission to become a B." Without missing a beat, he replied, "Well, if you're on a *mission* to become a B, you've already lost." His insight was more telling than I had imagined. Time has proven that I am not going to become a B. As a matter of fact, I haven't run into anyone who cares about me who really wants me to change. What they *would* like is for me to lighten up a little and enjoy life more while I am on my various "missions." The following are some simple steps I have taken to do this. These steps should be appealing to you A's out there, because they are practical and because they will actually improve your efficiency.

TEN TIPS TO HELP A's ENJOY LIFE

1. Practice slow motion.

A's cannot slow down. An A will be wiggling his leg when he talks to you. She will be reading her mail while she talks to a client on the phone, because she wants to see if she can do two, maybe three, things at once. Stop it; it is not productive.

To slow down, consciously start out each morning by intentionally going in slow motion. When you get up from bed in the morning, walk slowly. When you get into the shower, don't attempt to set a record for the shortest shower (we A's pride ourselves on short showers). If you are a man, use the process of shaving to really kick in the new slow-down attitude. Shaving is, after all, something that is best done slowly. See just how slowly and carefully you can shave. Buy an old-fashioned shaving kit and a good straight-edge razor, and create a ritual. After you shave, slowly pick out and put on your clothes. When I first started doing this, I realized I had a habit of dressing as quickly as I could. For example, instead of carefully pulling a shirt off the hanger, I would rip it off as I walked out of the closet, with the hanger flying. All of this was in an effort to get myself to work as quickly as possible so I could be as productive as possible. After dressing, cook your own breakfast. Life is first about survival. If you practice ceremoniously feeding yourself, you will be brought closer to the fundamentals of life. You will see that "non-productive" things such as cooking and eating are important and meaningful.

If you carefully practice your slow motion, you will achieve a meditation-like enjoyment of the morning ritual, and you will

actually find that you get dressed faster than when you were in a hurry. You will also be in a more productive frame of mind.

2. Dress down.

I find that my clothes have a lot to do with how I feel. I have observed that my double-breasted suits are like battle armor to me. When I am dressing, particularly for court, I feel like George C. Scott in the movie *Patton*, ceremoniously dressing for battle. (You may be laughing, but if you are an A, you do it too.) Well, battle clothes have a place. The problem with us A's is that we are *always* prepared for battle, even when we don't have to be. It's our mentality. But it is this mentality that drains us unnecessarily. To help you control your battle mentality, dress down as often as possible. Wear slacks and a golf shirt to work on all days that you do not have to go to court. When I started doing it, I was a little worried about how staff and particularly clients would view it, but it turned out well. In a funny sort of way, dressing down when you have a successful practice seems to convey success and control.

3. Make an anxiety or adrenaline list.

This exercise will really open your eyes and allow for some positive change. Our problem as A's and lawyers is that we are trained to see the catastrophe in everything. We are able to instantaneously run all of the possible scenarios in our minds to their furthest, logical, and tragic conclusions. This is important in some ways, but mostly it causes us countless unnecessary worries and difficulties. Another problem

we face is the adversary system. There is somebody on the other side who is trying to *get us*. This causes stress. To gain control of this, keep a running list of the things that are causing you anger, anxiety, anxiousness, or aggression. Write them down. At the end of the day, look at your list. I guarantee you will find that 90 percent of the time, you were overreacting. You will see that the thing that caused you anxiety was nothing, or even just plain silly. (This is a list and is guaranteed to work, so even the most hard-headed A should try this.)

4. Light some candles.

There is something about candles that is more than relaxing. Put candles in your office. When you think you are going too fast or are stressed, step away from your desk, light a candle, and feel yourself become calm. Try it; it's guaranteed. Scented candles add to the effect. If you really want to augment this effect, get potpourri, a fish tank, nice plants, and soft music. I have read and heard that classical music, particularly Chopin, noticeably improves not only relaxation, but also brain function.

5. Read.

Many books can help you enjoy life and understand your A condition. In my opinion, the best is *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff... and it's all small stuff*, by Richard Carlson. This book will help you put life's difficulties in a pleasant perspective. You will learn to see stoplights not as obstacles, but as opportunities to enjoy the moment. Another book, *Focus Your Energy*, by Thom Hartmann, will help you see the role of adrenaline in our lives and how it is misused

by A's. *The Achievement Zone*, by Shane Murphy, will help you see how truly great performance usually comes from a slow-motion state in which vision is increased. You will see that the panic-stricken pace we think is more productive is actually least productive. Finally, read books that help you place life in perspective. Two that are particularly meaningful to me are Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, about a psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz, and *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom, about an A who learns the true meaning of life from an old professor who is dying. (These last two books can be efficiently skimmed by any A within a few hours.)

When you schedule things, be careful how you do it. Create scheduling rules.

6. Create time space.

Most of us A's feel there is just not enough time. But time is a matter of perspective. Time is slow when we are sitting in a boring lecture, but fast when we are doing something enjoyable like skiing. Time is slow when your team is in the lead, but fast when your team has only a quarter left to catch up. Time is slow when you are going somewhere, but faster when you are returning. We have our own perspective of time within our control. Create time space for yourself by starting the day in slow motion. Then, when you get to the office, take 15 minutes of quiet time. You might meditate. You might read something of meaning. You might pray. I like to read the Bible, and I have some verses memorized that I say to myself. This quiet time helps put you in a *performance zone*. It also helps you

control time instead of letting it control you.

When you schedule things, be careful how you do it. Create scheduling rules. My rules are that I do not allow scheduling on Monday mornings or Friday afternoons, and I do not allow scheduling before 9:30 or after 4:00. I can have no more than three appointments a day and no more than two in an afternoon or morning. These techniques give me room to think and prepare. It cuts down on the hecticness.

7. Use a "to do" list.

Preparing for your day is the best way to improve efficiency and reduce stress. Preparation can range from a detailed schedule to a simple priority list. The simplest way to do this is to make a list of the things that you need to accomplish and then prioritize them in the following order: things that need to be done today, things that can be done tomorrow, and things that can be done this week. As you go through your day, stick to your list. We A's have a thousand things going through our minds, and we want to jump from one thing to the other. I have often found myself in the silly position of swaying back and forth between the phone and the materials on my desk, because I have just thought of someone I should call while I was working on something else. The list helps you focus on what you need to do and to control your day.

8. Enjoy the little things.

As a part of my daily ritual, I say the following to myself: "One, start each day with God; two, find enjoyment in the little things; three, help others, because

it is difficult to feel sorry for yourself when you help others; four, bury resentments of the past; and five, trust God for tomorrow." Stop what you are doing one day and make a list of all the little things you enjoy. One day I did this, and I realized I enjoyed almost everything I did from the time I woke up until the time I left for work. I realized, for example, that I really enjoy simple things like brushing my teeth or selecting my clothes for the day. Of course, there are many other little things I enjoy, like the look on my daughter's face when I wake her up.

9. Get a coach.

Michael Jordan had a coach. Tiger Woods has a coach. Why is it that we, as professionals, tend not to have coaches? A coach will help you see yourself and keep your objective in your pursuit of professional excellence. Coaches don't tell you what to do, necessarily; they simply hold up a mirror for you to see yourself. They will help you manage your practice and your life so you can enjoy it more.

Commit now to taking at least two days off from work a month.

10. Take time off.

Some experts theorize that the most productive work mode is to work three days on and one day off. This is especially true for professionals who rely upon their energy, creativity, and intellect. This is probably not practical for most lawyers, but we can take more time off than we do. Commit now to taking at least two days off from work a month. Do not do any work on these days, and do not even call the office. In addition, commit to limiting your work hours. I find that if we know we are going to be at work for a long time, we work at a different pace of efficiency than if we know our time is limited. How in the world can someone really be sharp for more than eight straight hours anyway? Finally, take off work to attend your children's activities and other family events. Go to your child's school play. Go to your child's track meet. Go look at a

piece of furniture with your spouse. Taking off a few hours cannot possibly make that much difference in a work life, but it can make a world of difference in your personal and family life.

WELL WORTH THE FIGHT

Follow these 10 simple tips, and I guarantee that you will see a marked change in your enjoyment of life without a reduction in productivity. As a matter of fact, you will probably be *more* productive. Be prepared for resistance from your old self. Be prepared for some anxiety that you are not doing the right thing. But fight through these fears and misgivings. The fight to break the old habits is well worth it.

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