

Building Healthy Habits for 2024

By TANYEE CHEUNG

As attorneys, we can often get lost in the demands of our profession, but the ushering in of a New Year provides us with the opportunity for reflection and renewal. It's a great time to tackle the perennial challenge of balancing a demanding career with personal well-being. Making time for our own well-being is not only good for ourselves and our family but also for our clients. Better well-being is correlated with greater productivity, and it can create a better work environment and also boost retention. By prioritizing wellness, we can enhance our professional efficacy as well as our personal satisfaction. There can be little doubt that wellness is not only desirable but necessary for a sustainable practice. But how do we turn this awareness into action? One of the best ways we can improve our well-being is by building new, healthy habits.



1 Slow Down! Mindfulness and Stress Management

The legal profession is inherently stressful, with high stakes and long hours.

Mindfulness practices can be a game changer. Techniques such as meditation, deep breathing, and yoga can be integrated into daily routines, even for the busiest attorneys. Utilizing apps like Headspace, Insight Timer, Waking Up, or Calm for guided meditation sessions can be a convenient way to start. Many of the apps provide a free trial period at no cost so you can test them out to see which one most resonates with you.

None of these practices need to be hours long. Short, guided meditation sessions in the morning or deep breathing exercises during breaks can make a significant difference. You can take a couple of minutes, a few times a day to meditate or do some mindful breathing. Just noticing the tension in our bodies can help us begin to release it. Find a time that works for you. It can be first thing in the morning, during your lunch break, or at the end of your day. Better yet, do a few minutes at each of these times.

In the fast-paced world of law, stress is a constant. However, embracing mindfulness can significantly alleviate stress and improve concentration. Beyond immediate stress relief, mindfulness fosters a greater awareness of thought patterns and emotional responses, leading to better decision-making and emotional regulation and better interactions with opposing counsel, colleagues, and clients. The benefits of these practices extend beyond stress relief, improving cognitive functions critical for legal practice, and building better relationships.



2 Move It! Physical Activity

Physical activity is a critical component of overall well-being, and we all know the benefits of regular exercise. Not just about maintaining physical fitness; it also boosts mental health, enhancing cognitive function and emotional well-being. As a busy attorney, I know regular exercise can be a challenge, but did you know that even moderate breaks in a sedentary day can be a huge benefit?

Research has shown that a sedentary lifestyle, characterized by prolonged periods of sitting or inactivity, can lead to several adverse health outcomes. These include an increased risk of heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, certain types of cancer, and even a higher risk of mortality from these conditions.¹ Create a habit of standing up at your desk every 20 minutes and try and take a walk around the office every hour. If you are working at home, break up your day with household chores. Consider doing laundry, vacuuming, or loading the dishwasher every half-hour to give yourself a mental time out and a physical boost.

Once you have conquered the sedentary life, move onto finding an activity you can fit in once or twice a week that brings you joy. You don't need to lift weights with a personal trainer every day to get the benefits of physical activity. A morning walk, 15 minutes of yoga, or even a mini dance party can be a great boost. The benefits of regular exercise extend beyond the immediate. It improves endurance, which is essential for the long hours typical in legal practice and is a natural stress reliever, releasing endorphins that can improve mood and reduce feelings of anxiety and depression.



3 Eat it! Nutrition

Nutrition often takes a backseat in a hectic schedule. For lawyers, it's much too easy to skip meals and find ourselves turning to a candy bar or chips during the workday. Long days can lead to coffee consumption and late dinners, both of which interfere with sleep, another important lever to maintaining energy and focus. Trying to find ways to eat healthier may seem daunting but there are some simple changes that can have big impacts.

Decrease sugar consumption—Diets rich in refined sugars are associated with a heightened risk of several chronic diseases, including diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and even certain types of cancer. One of the easiest ways to decrease your sugar intake is to stay away from sugar laden beverages. Swap out a club soda with puree fruit for a healthy carbonated

alternative that counts toward your water intake. If you use sugar in your coffee or tea, decrease the amount of sugar by half a teaspoon per week. Skip dessert and opt for a small square of dark chocolate as your evening treat.

To help avoid skipping meals, consider bringing your meals to work. While it may seem like there is no time to prepare meals, creating a meal plan and prepping on the weekend can save you time, money, and calories. Buy a bag of salad, some cranberries, and nuts, and then add your favorite protein. Grill chicken or shrimp for the week or consider ordering from a healthy meal delivery service.

Changing nutrition habits can be a pivotal step towards a healthier lifestyle, and these easy habits can be a great start to help you on your way.



4 Turn Off: Sleep

The demanding nature of the legal profession often leads to long hours and inadequate sleep. The National Sleep Foundation recommends that adults (and that includes attorneys!) should aim for seven to nine hours of sleep per night.² Insufficient sleep can lead to decreased cognitive performance, mood swings, weight gain, hypertension, and more severe health conditions over time.

One of the best ways to boost your sleep is to create a pre-sleep routine. Limit screen time before bed and check emails sparingly if possible. Turn off electronic

devices at least an hour before bedtime to reduce exposure to blue light, which can disrupt sleep patterns. I often put my phone to sleep mode (which minimizes notification except for “designated people” and emergencies (which are calls from the same number twice). I tell my team that if they need to reach me, to call my phone twice in a row. Developing rituals like meditation, deep breathing, or light stretching before bed can also get your body to “anticipate” sleep. I listen to some quiet meditation music to wind down.

As we enter 2024, we should each consider a new habit that can contribute to our well-being. Building new habits is a journey of small, consistent steps. There are several great books that provide insight and inspiration in habit formation. A few favorites include *Atomic Habits* by James Clear, *Mindset* by Carol Dweck, and *Rewire* by Richard O’Conner. Remember, the greatest investment you can make is in yourself so start creating that new habit today.

We would love to hear from you on personal favorites and what has helped you create sustainable healthy habits! Write to tcheung@fdh.com if you would like to share your story with our readers! ■



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1 Johns Hopkins Medicine. (n.d.). Sitting Disease: How a Sedentary Lifestyle Affects Heart Health. Retrieved from <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/sitting-disease-how-a-sedentary-lifestyle-affects-heart-health>

2 National Sleep Foundation. (n.d.). How much sleep do we really need? Retrieved from <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/how-sleep-works/how-much-sleep-do-we-really-need>, <https://legal.thomsonreuters.com/blog/why-sleep-is-essential-for-attorneys-well-being-and-performance>