



Is it Possible to Be Happy in Your First 10 Years of Private Practice?

Recently, Larry Krieger, a clinical professor at Florida

State University College of Law, and Kennon M. Sheldon, a professor in the University of Missouri Department of Psychological Science, conducted a study to determine what makes lawyers happy. Premised on self-determination theory (SDT), the study sought to determine the degree to which the basic psychological needs posited by self-determination theorists as necessary ingredients to happiness (that is, your own perception of how you are doing and feeling, also referred to as subjective well-being, or SWB) factor into what makes lawyers happy. SDT is a theory of motivation which posits, among other things, that, in order to feel good or happy or motivated, humans must satisfy basic psychological needs to feel (1) competent and effective, (2) autonomous, (3) authentic, and (4) related to and connected with others. To the extent those needs are not satisfied within a social context (such as the workplace), our own sense of well-being in that setting is damaged. Over time, these negative feelings can spill over into other areas of our lives.

The Krieger and Sheldon study, which employed survey data from a diverse group of lawyers in four states, analyzed what makes lawyers happy and to what extent those happiness factors correlate with the psychological needs posited by SDT. Turns out, we lawyers are human too. Krieger and Sheldon found lawyers who had the highest subjective well-being scores also scored well on feelings of: (1) integrity (authenticity), (2) connectedness (relationships), (3) competence (effectiveness), (4) internally motivated work (autonomy and authenticity), and (5) having a supportive supervisor (relationships). The lawyers who excelled in law school and held prestigious, high-paying jobs were not necessarily the happiest. In fact, these lawyers were generally the least happy.

Given the psychological components necessary for a high level of happiness, it is unsurprising that, according to a 2013 CareerBliss survey, the job of associate attorney ranks as the unhappiest in America. We associates generally experience the least amount of felt competence/effectiveness, possess little autonomy, often do work that we find doesn't express our own competencies or desires, may not have a supportive supervisor, or may feel disconnected to others in the profession and the community. The deck is stacked against us, but it is

possible to be happy in your first 10 years of legal practice. This article discusses the five factors that contribute most significantly to happiness and steps you can take to increase your happiness quotient today, tomorrow, and over the next few years.

1. Integrity (Psychological Need Served: Authenticity)

Work that feeds your feeling of integrity will increase your level of happiness. While many people use the word integrity as a synonym for honesty, having integrity includes, but goes beyond, being honest. In the classic *Seven Habits of Highly-Effective People*, Dr. Steven Covey describes people with integrity as those who stick with their true feelings, values, and commitments. Having integrity means having inside-out congruence, in which our daily habits exhibit our deepest values. It also means doing what you say you are going to do.

While in law school, before a holiday break, a professor once told me to "go and do the things that you enjoyed doing before you came to law school, and try not to lose sight of those things that make you who you are." At the time, I thought, "What? Of course I'll continue to do the things I like to do! Practicing law won't change who I am." Seven years into practice, I now realize how wise those words were. There have been times in my career when I jettisoned the things that matter most to me and neglected to spend time with the people I care most about for far too long. You may have done the same. You may also be doing work that you find morally or ethically reprehensible. Not to say that you are acting unethically or immorally, but the work you are doing, or who you are doing it for, may clash against your personal values. Such work damages your integrity. Yes, sometimes you will have to do things you don't like or don't agree with. (Or maybe you never do these things. If so, you either have exceptional integrity or you are inflexible; I'll let you decide.) There will also be times when work takes priority over other areas of your life. But it's important to develop a sense of what really matters and what doesn't and prioritize accordingly.

Understanding your values and priorities is a critical part of bolstering (or potentially repairing) your integrity. What matters most to you? Take five minutes to list all the things that matter to you, including your family, friends, activities, groups, work, etc. Then rank those things. (On my list, I have a few top priorities, a few second-tier priorities, a

Sara Louise Alpert is an associate attorney at Zuckerman Spaeder LLP in Tampa, Florida. Alpert represents individual and institutional clients in federal criminal and civil litigation and government investigations. Aside from her legal practice, Alpert passionately dedicates herself to improving the lives of others through community service, philanthropy, individual counseling, and speaking to larger groups. She may be reached at salpert@zuckerman.com. © 2015 Sara Louise Alpert. All rights reserved.

few third-tier priorities, and then some fourth-tier priorities.) Is most of your time spent on your highest priorities? If not, how can you realign how you spend your days? This list is also a helpful tool when approached about adding a new activity to your already-full plate. If it's an activity that will help you achieve your goals or fits in with your priorities, do it. If it's not, respectfully decline. Once you've identified what you value, strive to live each day in step with those values.

2. Connectedness (Psychological Need Served: Relationships)

Introvert or extrovert, we are social creatures. The degree to which we feel connected to who we are working with matters for our well-being, as does our connectedness to our family, friends, and community. Yet private practice can be isolating. We spend hours, if not days, at our desks staring bleary-eyed at a computer, nurturing a devoted relationship with our email inbox but not much else. Unsurprisingly, for many, the connectedness level to those around us is low. The good news is that you can work on this factor today and obtain immediate gains in your happiness level.

How can you increase your connectedness right now? Don't type to people—talk to people! Rather than have a discussion over email, pick up the phone and call your colleague, your client, your opposing counsel, your co-counsel. A phone call is not only a more efficient way to engage in a discussion, it's also a good way to connect with the human at the other end. Then, invite a colleague to lunch. Come back to the office and make some more phone calls. Call a family member to check in—even if it's only a five-minute call. Over the weekend, make time to see friends. Volunteer for a group you are passionate about. Get engaged in the local bar organization.

Aside from increasing your happiness quotient, the relationships that you nurture now will pay dividends later. Too often, associates believe that if they slave away at their desks, they will be rewarded. Maybe that worked 20 years ago (though I doubt it), but it is certainly not true today. To build a career, you must build a practice. To build a practice, you must build a business. To build a business, you must know people, and they must know you. So what are you waiting for? Connect yourself to those around you now.

3. Felt Competence (Psychological Need Served: Effectiveness)

It feels great when you know you're good at something. Star athlete? You're always ready for a physical contest. Talented musician? You will sing or play at a moment's notice. Excellent at arguing? You'll debate the color of the sky. And you'll feel good doing it. Not good at these things? *Forget it. Move on. Let's do something I'm good at.* It's frustrating to feel incompetent and ineffective. This is particularly true for overachieving young lawyers who are generally accustomed to feeling competent in intellectual pursuits.

Yet feelings of competence are often few and far between during the first years of legal practice. It's a shock to the system for many, likely causing more than a few budding lawyers to give up because they "just can't do it" or "aren't cut out for this." Sure, we expect we will know nothing when we first start out but believe we will get the hang of this practice-of-law thing after a couple of years. In your third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, etc. year, you'll likely still feel ineffective more often than you are comfortable with. Your supervisors may not afford you much autonomy. Or, even when they do, you'll still make mistakes. You won't see around the corner to anticipate issues or where a matter is going. The human condition will still surprise you. In short, you won't feel as good at it as you think you should.

Turns out, this practice of law is really what they say it is: a practice. It is not something you ever truly master, but you have to keep working at it to gain degrees of competence. For those of us who are used to quickly mastering concepts in school, it can be a long, tough road. But if you believe in your part in the justice system, enjoy the law, and relish the power of advocacy and your ability to help others, it may be worth journeying down that road.

To increase your felt competence, you need time. And you need experience. Unlike the other happiness factors, this is the one you have the least amount of control over. Seek out experiences, be patient, and you will get there. While you are journeying down that road, perhaps it will help to keep this factor in perspective and understand that you will increase your felt competence someday—just not today.

4. Internally-Motivated Work (Psychological Needs Served: Authenticity & Autonomy)

External factors, such as prestige and money, do not tend to correlate with happiness. In fact, Krieger and Sheldon found that legal-aid attorneys were some of the happiest! Work that piques your interest, that you enjoy, or that effectuates your core values is a critical component to happiness. Conversely, work that does none of these things correlates with increased depression. Have you found yourself in such a position? If so, you have two options: Change your job, or change your perspective. Assuming getting a new job won't happen instantaneously (or may not be an option for you right now), how can you change your perspective to find the internal motivation for your current job?

Try to remember what it was that attracted you to your current position in the first place. Perhaps you took a job as a corporate

GT GreenbergTraurig

1800 ATTORNEYS | 37 LOCATIONS WORLDWIDE*

GREENBERG TRAUIG'S AMERICAN INDIAN LAW PRACTICE

An International Firm of 1800 Attorneys and Government Law & Policy Professionals

Greenberg Traurig provides comprehensive, multidisciplinary legal and governmental affairs representation to American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian governments, associated enterprises, and other entities, as well as to private and public institutions that do business or invest in Indian country. Our practice encompasses litigation and dispute resolution; corporate and transactional structuring, advice and counsel; banking and finance; civil and criminal investigations and compliance; gaming and government; and governmental affairs representation at the tribal, state and federal level.

GREENBERG TRAUIG, LLP | ATTORNEYS AT LAW | WWW.GTLAW.COM

Greenberg Traurig is a service mark and trade name of Greenberg Traurig, LLP and Greenberg Traurig, P.A. ©2015 Greenberg Traurig, LLP. Attorneys at Law. All rights reserved. Contact: Loretta A. Tuell in Washington, D.C. at 202.331.3100. *These numbers are subject to fluctuation. 24773

transactions attorney because you found corporate transactions more interesting than criminal law. Why did you choose to focus on corporate transactions as an attorney rather than seek to be the business person doing the deal? What is it that you thought you could bring to the table? Focus on those aspects of why you are doing what you are doing. If you don't know why you are doing what you are doing, consider speaking with a professional coach to understand what you enjoy, what motivates you, and what you are passionate about. And remember that it's OK if you don't know what motivates you as you read this today. It's much easier to understand the external pressures that drive us rather than our own internal fire. But with some serious attention and introspection, you can connect with your own motivation and learn to connect that motivation with your daily life.

5. Supportive Supervisor (Psychological Needs Served: Relationships and Autonomy)

It may be that your internal motivation for your work has been crushed by a micromanaging supervisor. Of all the factors necessary for well-being, the autonomy engendered by a supportive supervisor tends to correlate most highly with happiness. A supportive supervisor facilitates your development. He or she allows you to have increasing levels of independence in completing your work. And, most likely, you have a good relationship with him or her. From this supportive supervisor, you are satisfying the psychological needs to be connected to others and have autonomy. Jackpot!

In contrast, the micromanager tends to contribute to your depressed and anxious state. With lawyers, the micromanagement (or abusive management) problem is particularly acute. As a species, lawyers tend to like to be in control and generally enter the practice without training in management. Most lawyers don't ever receive such training. Thus, supervisory attorneys tend to micromanage their associates. On top of this, law is competitive, and rather than feel supported by your supervisor, who may be only a few years your senior, you may be competing with him or her. While competition can be healthy, it is not necessarily so if someone engages in unfair or deceptive tactics for advantage, particularly when that someone is your supervisor and thus has a say in your advancement within your organization.

For those fortunate enough to have at least one supportive supervisor, count this as a blessing, and work on the other happiness factors. For those who are not so fortunate, what can you do to address such a critical factor to your own well-being? Try seeking out a supportive supervisor within your organization to do more work with him or her. It is critical to find someone who will mentor and sponsor you within your organization. If that is not an option for you, before giving up on your legal career, you may simply need to find new employment. Yes, this sounds like a drastic alternative, but the number one reason employees leave their job is because of their boss. Lawyers are no different. If you don't have the support or don't feel supported by your superiors, then it will be nearly impossible for you to succeed within your organization.

Before you make the jump to something new, however, this is your opportunity to consider whether the next position aligns with your authentic, connected, motivated self. Also, learn from the past. Before you accept a new position, seek to understand who your supervisor will be and why the position is open. Does this particular opening occur frequently because the boss has churned through many before you? If so, run in the other direction. But don't give up. There are many supportive attorneys out there who care about developing talented young attorneys.

Stay true to yourself and what matters to you in life, and it *is* possible to be happy in your first 10 years of private practice. Hopefully, increasing your understanding of the key components for happiness in your chosen profession will allow you to make changes to increase your well-being. It should also put the factors that may be harder to immediately change into perspective. You have more power over your happiness than you think. ☺

Editorial Policy

The Federal Lawyer is the magazine of the Federal Bar Association. It serves the needs of the association and its members, as well as those of the legal profession as a whole and the public.

The Federal Lawyer is edited by members of its Editorial Board, who are all members of the Federal Bar Association. Editorial and publication decisions are based on the board's judgement.

The views expressed in *The Federal Lawyer* are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the association or of the Editorial Board. Articles and letters to the editor in response are welcome.

Law Offices of Paul P. Young

Enforcing Judgments in all California Courts

626.744.1838

www.PaulYoungLaw.com

Practice area solely focused on the enforcement of civil judgments

- Enforcement of Federal & State Judgments
- Asset Investigations
- Creditors Rights (Bankruptcy)

"After over 14 years of not being able to collect on a client's large medical malpractice award, Mr. Young and his team were able to apply their expertise to collect the judgment in only five months."

A.K.

Contingency Fees Available after Full Asset Investigation

Attorney / Private Investigator

California Private Investigator # 27573