

Keeping Your Sanity While Staying Sanitary

BY ROBYNN MORAITES AND DR. ANTOINETTE GIEDZINSKA

As lawyers across the state navigate how to keep the doors open and continue billing while homeschooling full-time, we at LAP have been rapidly converting a solely meet-in-person (individually or in groups) department into a virtual one. District bars and specialty practice groups are already asking for articles and CLE¹ about lawyer mental health in the age of COVID-19, while I have only just mastered video conferencing software and figured out an internal system to ensure our support group meetings and client appointments do not overlap using the software. And while lawyers are now being bombarded with CLE offerings on how the coronavirus affects every conceivable aspect of life, legal practice area, and the business of law, we at LAP have been bombarded with tools-to-help-you-help-your-client's-mental-well-being emails, webinars, and video based recovery meetings.² One of those articles is reprinted with permission below.

While LAP is often perceived as helping lawyers and judges who don't know how to effectively cope, what most folks don't realize is that as soon as LAP participants begin actively using recovery tools, they become incredibly resilient and actually cope better than most, especially in situations that parallel the COVID-19 pandemic. By that, I mean situations steeped in uncertainty (economic, personal, professional, social, familial) and situations where there is a sense of loss of control, not only to shape outcomes (as we like to think we do as lawyers), but loss of control over the process. This is where people in long-term recovery shine. In good news, these recovery tools are available to everyone.

The reason I chose this article to reprint is because it is relatable to everyone, not just those recovering from depression, anxiety, or a substance use disorder. And when the author speaks to our human inclination to predict or control, please remember that lawyers engage in these activities for a living. So, the loss of the ability to predict and to maintain a sense of perceived control can be

especially distressing. I say "perceived control" because no matter how successful we are as attorneys, we never are *actually* in control of anything other than our choice of attitude and how we respond to a situation. Sometimes it takes a situation like the coronavirus (or our own depression or substance use disorder) to realize how very little we actually control.

While this article might not provide "new information" per se, it is a good reminder of emotional resilience tools we all can use. Resilience is not an innate quality or trait; rather, it is a set of skills that we can use. I like that the article is taken from cancer quality of life literature. The article references many of the tools we emphasize and practice in recovery circles, but frames them in a slightly different way. My editorialized comments will appear in brackets. I hope you find something helpful here. Let me now turn the mic over to Dr. Giedzinska.

Coping with Uncertainty in Uncertain Times

Let's face it; right now in our world things are rather chaotic with the coronavirus. We are bombarded by news, websites, social media, and even our own family's take on current events, facts, fears, and conspiracy theories. There's a lot of information to manage: What to keep? What to accept? What to toss? What to downright ignore?

Even though many of us enjoy spontaneity from time-to-time, most of us prefer to know that the foundation of our lives is safely cemented in some form of structure and predictability (having this base actually allows for natural spontaneity to occur!). The recent health events have shaken many of our personal foundations because the greater social structure on which we depend is no longer safely cemented. What does this mean? It means we are currently living in uncertain times. Times are uncertain because we can't do what we humans love to do, and that is to predict.

When we feel we can predict, we feel



more in control. The ability to predict is ingrained in our psyche. For instance, "If I study really hard tonight, then I'll get a good grade on the test tomorrow." Or, "I'm headed to the grocery store and will pick up dinner, toothpaste, dog food, and toilet paper." See where this is going? Your grocery list is a prediction/expectation list. Right now in April [and May...maybe June] 2020, we can't predict what will or won't be in our local grocery store. Therefore, life is unsettling because it is uncertain, and it is uncertain because we don't know what to expect, and therefore can no longer predict with certainty.

How do we cope with this? How do we cope in uncertain times? There is a small body of literature that we can draw from to help us with this. It comes from the cancer quality of life literature, because many cancer patients live with uncertainty, and psycho-oncologists have a pretty good handle on how to help those folks traverse through the cancer journey with better coping skills. And we can borrow from that, because we are currently traversing through an uncertain journey in our world.

Coping strategies can be categorized in several ways. One of the ways to categorize them is in two groups: "problem-focused" coping and "emotion-focused" coping. Problem-focused coping strategies are usually

solutions oriented (i.e., feeling flu-like symptoms and deciding whether to go to urgent care or take pain relief medicine and take a nap, or calling the neighbor to ask if she can share with childcare duties this week). [Problem-focused skills and coping mechanisms are lawyers' stock-in-trade.] Emotion-focused coping strategies often embody more of an inward consideration and reflection (i.e., accepting the fact that there is no toilet paper left on the shelves, and realizing (or accepting) there is nothing you can really do about it). Emotion-focused coping can also be active, such as processing your frustrations about the toilet paper issue with a friend. You can't change the situation, but you can at least talk about it.

When the situation you are in has certainty to it or is predictable in some way, then the best strategy to cope, and to reduce anxiety and stress, is to be problem-focused. When you are actively involved in solving a problem, you are quite literally reducing your stress levels because you are taking charge of the situation, or at least contributing to its solution. In the cancer literature, problem-focused coping is helpful when patients have to choose between two really good treatments with similar outcomes and side effects. They become "active" in researching the treatments, gaining as much information as possible, weighing the treatment options against their quality of life, etc. The stress of having cancer at this point in time is reduced due to the patient actively participating in the solution. Problem-focused coping is oriented to changing the situation.

When the situation you are in does not have certainty or is not predictable, then the best strategy to reduce anxiety and stress is to be emotion focused. The reason why emotion-focused coping works in uncertain situations is because it is the opposite of problem-focused coping. Problem-focused coping requires energy. It is the "fight" in the fight/flight/freeze expression. It's getting things done because there is a problem to solve. But if you don't know the problem, or the problem is elusive, or the problem is a viral outbreak that governments are struggling with, then all that energy to solve the problem exponentially adds to stress and anxiety, it does NOT reduce it! Think of the idiom, "banging your head against a wall." The wall isn't moving, there is nothing you can do to break the wall, but you bang your head anyway because you are trying to solve the

Problem-Focused Coping	Emotion-Focused Coping
Best for situations that can be CHANGED	Best for situations that CANNOT be changed
Examples	
Decision making	Acceptance
Solving problems	Changing the way you think (reframing)
Conflict resolution	Exercising
Seeking advice	Spiritual prayer or meditation
Gathering information	Entertainment
Gathering supplies	Engaging in social media
Social planning	Social visits
Characteristics	
Expelling energy	Conserving energy
Goal oriented	Process oriented
Courage to change the things I can	Accept the things I cannot change
<i>And the wisdom to know the difference!</i>	

problem. All you get is frustration and a headache [and you feel exhausted because you have expended all your energy trying to fix/change/solve something you cannot change].

Once cancer patients have chosen their cancer treatment, they are often advised to "accept" the treatment process and ride its wave, trusting in their medical team. Emotion-focused coping is oriented to not changing the situation, but adjusting yourself to fit the situation. There is no problem to solve anymore; what's required of patients at this point is that they allow the medicine to treat their disease without fighting the process. The energy needed now is to nurture the self. Let's be clear: Emotion-focused coping isn't "passive coping" like we might think of one "curling up in a ball" or "sticking one's head in the sand" to avoid a situation. Emotion-focused coping is healthy and adaptive coping in times of uncertainty, thus allowing the current situation to unfold without fighting it along the way. It's about conserving energy. It's acknowledging that the situation cannot be changed, no matter how much you want it to change. Acceptance. There is an expression in Chinese referred to as "Wu Wei" meaning "effortless action," or, for us Westerners, going with the flow.

With our current climate, how might you discern your energy? What are you doing to actively engage in problem solving, to reduce stress only in those situations over which you have control? What are you doing to accept those situations in which you have no control? Are you fighting uncontrollable situations and creating more unnecessary stress? What flow can you go with to conserve your precious energy, and thus nurture yourself during this unsettling time? In the graphic is a table of takeaways. ■

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Endnotes

1. At the time of this printing, we will have already hosted our first CLE: "Calm in the Storm – Tools for Keeping Cool in the Corona Crisis," a free, one-hour mental health webinar with Laura Mahr, cosponsored by NCLAP, LAP Foundation of NC, Inc., BarCARES, and NC Bar Foundation. We will be hosting another one in the coming months. Look for the email and please join us.
2. Thankfully because we don't have the time to create a bunch of new content from scratch.