



Professional Perspective

Tips for Navigating Social Isolation

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Contributed by *Robin Belleau, Kirkland & Ellis*

Human connections are a key ingredient to good mental health, and those connections are more important than ever as a result of Covid-19 and social distancing. Isolation is a key ingredient in depression and substance abuse, which are significant issues among attorneys.

The 2016 study conducted by the American Bar Association and the Hazelden-Betty Ford Foundation found that 28% of lawyers reported symptoms of depression and 21% had symptoms of substance abuse.

Building and maintaining connections takes creativity, flexibility, planning and technology. But with the right tools, we can continue to cultivate and rely on our connections to work through this time together. This article discusses some strategies that you can implement to create and strengthen your connections.

Use your lawyer skills. Ask open-ended questions and avoid questions that elicit one-word answers. How often have you asked someone, “How are you?” and heard, “Fine” as the response? This response may or may not be truthful. “Tell me how your day is going” will create an opportunity for deeper connection. It invites a person to tell their story, and in more detail. This will provide you more insight on how a person is actually doing.

Actively listen and share. In the above-mentioned study, lawyers reported that they did not ask for help or share their concerns because of the stigma. Sharing your thoughts and experiences genuinely helps reduce this stigma. The more you talk to people, the more you will discover that everybody has something going on, and vice versa. Feeling like you are not alone can be liberating and can validate your thoughts, actions, and emotions. Likewise, sharing your story can encourage someone else to open up and ask for support.

Lean on your colleagues and friends to put things in perspective. Don't always keep your thoughts or feelings to yourself. Reach out to a colleague or a friend. They may see your situation from a different point of view or help you “zoom out.” When we are going through something, we often take a very myopic view of the situation. Lawyers are trained to issue-spot and often we cannot turn this skill off. A friend or colleague can help you see things more positively, and not always focus on the negative.

Think about what you would tell a friend in your situation. Lawyers tend to be perfectionists. We have many people judging us—clients, opposing counsel, judges—however, we are often our own harshest critics. Connections will show us more compassion than we show ourselves. Colleagues and friends can remind us that thoughts are not always facts.

Limit social media. Social distancing has driven more connections online. It is easy to end up comparing yourself to your social media connections who appear to have it all together, even in a time of crisis. Remember, what you see online is often not the whole story.

Connect over video or phone. Texts, emails, IMs, and social media just aren't the same as hearing a voice or seeing a face. Use technology to connect more deeply or re-create an in-person interaction as best you can. However, be mindful of the person that you are reaching out to. Not everyone, including lawyers, is comfortable appearing on a video or web-based platform, especially if it is a larger group. Introverts may not speak up and interact in a large group. Don't assume every lawyer is an extrovert.

Be deliberate about connecting. Give yourself something to look forward to. Make plans to connect with colleagues, friends, family, and others, and stick to them. If you make a plan, that person is going to expect you to show up and will hold you accountable.

We need connections throughout our whole world—with colleagues, family, friends, and through activities. Some connections are casual and some deep, but all are important. It is easier to ask for support from those with whom a relationship already exists. You know who the safe, trusted people are. Continue to make connections throughout every period of your life. As you grow and change, so will your connections.