



Overcoming the Surprising Pitfalls of Intelligence

BY SARAH MYERS

Individuals with higher academic degrees tend to be harder on themselves because they put more pressure on themselves to succeed, achieve, and perform. The need to justify one's intelligence and credentials increases as we “climb up the ladder.”

The practice of law is not for the faint of heart. It requires a high level of both cognitive intelligence (IQ) and emotional intelligence (EQ). Skills that demonstrate IQ in our profession include tier-level thinking (used to play chess), quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and the ability to follow procedural rules, conduct legal research, write briefs, and craft persuasive arguments. While these skills are important, research suggests that it's actually our soft skills and EQ that are bigger predictors of success in our profession.¹ Soft skills and EQ include time management, interpersonal communication, self-awareness (recognizing how you feel and how you are coming across to others), motivation (striving to grow and finding meaning, interest, and passion in your life), and self-regulation (managing difficult emotions).²

Despite personality differences among lawyers, everyone who practices law must have an above average IQ. But a high IQ alone does not correlate to being successful in “the pursuit of happiness.” Our emotional and physical well-being depends on our ability to balance our cognitive brilliance with our EQ and interpersonal relationships.³

The Problem with Perfectionism

Intelligence is a gift, if used wisely. As with any gift, it is how we use, develop, and direct it that matters. If a high IQ leads to angst, loneliness, frustration, and anger, then we are hardly using it well. Considering that attorneys experience some of the highest rates of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse among professionals, something is clearly amiss. Individuals with higher academic degrees tend to be harder on

themselves because they put more pressure on themselves to succeed, achieve, and perform. The need to justify one's intelligence and credentials increases as we “climb up the ladder.” This contributes to perfectionistic and workaholic tendencies that unfortunately compromise our IQ and EQ and make us physically ill. Some examples of indulging in perfectionism and workaholism are:

- working all the time; even when we aren't at work, we're still thinking about our cases, clients, coworkers, or other dynamics relating to the office or court.
- procrastinating out of the fear that something won't be good enough, leading to missed deadlines or panic-induced last-minute attempts to get things done.
- feeling overwhelmed by a long to-do list and avoiding calls or emails; we freeze and can't get started.
- becoming hyper-critical of those around us and feeling like we don't have the

help we need, leading to irritability or emotional outbursts.

- numbing or self-medicating ourselves with escapes like alcohol, gambling, drugs, or shopping, to avoid uncomfortable sensations or situations.
- comparing ourselves to others and feeling like a failure, or pushing ourselves in unhealthy ways to compete.

All of these tendencies lead to, and perpetuate, anxiety and depression. We worry about mundane concerns; focus on the negative and what's going "wrong" rather than solutions; feel hopeless or helpless; replay situations or conversations that didn't go well; and mourn missed opportunities or lament making the wrong choices. We all have multiple stressors we deal with daily, and some of them, like high-stakes cases, can have serious repercussions that depend on our abilities and intelligence, making anxiety or depression particularly problematic for attorneys.

Choose Your Mood

In our fast-paced lives, we often look for quick fixes and easy ways to feel better, physically, mentally, or emotionally. Changing (and healing from) workaholic or perfectionistic tendencies might not happen overnight, but there is a very simple way to feel better immediately: choose to feel better. Becoming resilient by developing grit

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and stress-hardiness means utilizing EQ skills like motivation, self-regulation, and self-awareness. It requires us to commit to what is important to us, and to focus on that when

we are stressed rather than getting derailed by disappointing or upsetting news, circumstances, events, or people.

When we are stressed, it takes effort, awareness, and motivation to interrupt our usual reactions. The next time you react in a predictably negative way to a stimulus or situation, ask yourself if that is how you *want* to feel. If it is, then carry on; but if not, mindfully choose a different way to feel in response to the situation. In so doing, you begin to "choose your mood." According to research, having a sense of control over your emotional state and actively choosing to view stressful situations as challenges rather than unsurmountable obstacles creates resiliency, improves health, and leads to professional success.⁴

Cultivating a Healthy Perspective

For most of us, being happy should not necessarily be the goal. While many people say they want to be happier, happiness is an unattainable ideal because it is so difficult to maintain. Instead, strive for moments of gratitude, appreciation, contentment, peacefulness, safety, love, or joy. As we increase our tolerance for more positive emotional states, the frequency with which we experience negative moods begins to lessen. Give it a try; you'll be amazed at how much better you feel when you can choose how you respond to the circumstances around you.

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Lastly, despite the importance of the work we do, don't fall into the trap of taking yourself too seriously. There is a vast difference in activity in the brain when we know something is important and deserving of our attention, and when we think it is "do-or-die" serious. The latter creates a panic response in the nervous system that mirrors the defense structure activated when

we are in a life-threatening situation. Relax, and slow down; smile and laugh more. Reserve that stress response for true emergencies, and in the meantime, focus on enjoying your work and the people around you. As Lao Tzu said, "If you correct your mind, the rest of your life will fall into place." For attorneys, correcting the mind means balancing the cognitive skills

of our IQ and the emotional strengths of our EQ to build resiliency and grit! 

NOTES

1. See, e.g., Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System, "Foundations for Practice: The Whole Lawyer and the Character Quotient" (July 2016), https://iaals.du.edu/sites/default/files/documents/publications/foundations_for_practice_whole_lawyer_character_quotient.pdf; Goleman and Boyatzis, "Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership," *Harv. Bus. Rev.* (Sept. 2008), <http://files-au.clickdimensions.com/aisnsweduau-akudz/files/inteligencia-social-y-biologia-de-un-lider.pdf>.
2. Deutschendorf, "Why Emotionally Intelligent People Are More Successful," *Fast Company* (June 22, 2015), www.fastcompany.com/3047455/why-emotionally-intelligent-people-are-more-successful.
3. Mineo, "Good genes are nice, but joy is better," *Harv. Gazette* (Apr. 11, 2017), <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/over-nearly-80-years-harvard-study-has-been-showing-how-to-live-a-healthy-and-happy-life>.
4. Maddi, "The story of hardiness: Twenty years of theorizing, research and practice," 54(3) *Consulting Psych. J.: Practice and Research* 173 (Summer 2002).



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