

BE WELL

Re-Thinking Your Approach to Happiness and Well-Being in 2023

"I don't call them New Year's Resolutions. I prefer the term: casual promises to myself that I am under no legal obligation to fulfill."

~ Anonymous ~

Another new year has begun and many of us may have started it by shining a critical light upon our lives with the goal of implementing changes for our greater good. As a result, some of us set high aspirational goals that may be difficult to achieve during the short and cold winter days. This is a seasonal time when our mood-stabilizing serotonin levels are already dipping, and we may feel mildly (or not so mildly) depressed. When we add the pressures of our challenging new year's resolutions to our uninspired emotional state, it can be a stressful recipe for self-inflicted frustration and disappointment.

Thus, this article is a proposal to re-think how we approach the new year, which may enable us to increase our overall well-being

by making better choices and creating new habits. The goal is to breathe new meaning and a greater sense of purpose into your life by making simple, small, but profound adjustments. Essentially, take active ownership of the directionality of your life in a sustainable paradigm – not one that will leave you feeling disappointed and possibly in worse shape than when 2023 began.

The "Re-Thinking Concept" was created by Adam Grant¹, an organizational psychologist and author who studies how humans find motivation and meaning in their lives. As attorneys, we are keenly familiar with the concept of intelligence, which is seen as the ability to think and learn information. But there is a different, and possibly more important, form of intelligence that may matter more in terms of increasing overall well-being: the ability to re-think and unlearn. We do not lose integrity by changing our minds. Instead, it can be seen as a mark of gaining deeper wisdom and understanding. It means you have actually engaged in

a deeper form of learning. Something that I regularly teach in my mindfulness sessions and CLEs is the difference between "knowledge," which I see as the gaining of new information, and "wisdom," which I perceive as the integration of knowledge through embodied experiential practices. Wisdom cannot be gained by merely acquiring knowledge. It only comes from integrating that knowledge through experiencing it. As Adam Grant explains, "your opinions are what you think today. But growth comes from revising those views tomorrow... There is strong evidence that letting go of ideas, goals and habits that are no longer serving you well, can improve your mental health and your success." The start of the new year is the perfect time to re-think and unlearn old assumptions. So, consider this inquiry: what is one part of your life that you would like to re-think?

Thus, to start our 2023 re-thinking process, we must determine the umbrella under which we will create our new plan for

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our lives, and there are few motivations that take priority over the achievement of happiness. In the United States, the pursuit of happiness is so prized that it is one of the three unalienable rights in our Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776), “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

We want to be happier humans in our personal and professional lives, but the sole pursuit of happiness has been shown to be detrimental to our overall well-being. Adam Grant points to psychological research studies, which found that the more people value happiness, the less happy they often become with their lives. There are four possible explanations why this occurs. First, when we are searching for happiness, we get too busy evaluating life to determine why our lives are not more joyful than actually experiencing it. And, as the practice of mindfulness teaches, the wisdom within any moment is gained by embracing and experiencing it fully - staying present with what is arising from moment-to-moment, as opposed to critiquing it. Second, we are striving for moments of peak happiness, overlooking the fact that present-moment happiness depends more on the frequency of positive emotions than their intensity. An example of this is to go on a trip, move to a new location, or get a new job, which is merely changing our surroundings with the goal of enhancing our levels of happiness. As Ernest Hemingway wrote, “you can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another.” As Adam Grant explains, our happiness often depends more on what we do than where we are. It is our actions, not our surroundings or things, that bring us meaning and belonging. Third, in our hunt for happiness we over-emphasize pleasurable moments and experiences at the expense of seeking a life of deeper meaning and pur-

pose in our life or work. The goal is to avoid searching for the ideal job that brings us a sense of happiness and instead pursuing professional endeavors and opportunities that connect us with a deeper purpose and sense of meaningful contribution. Finally, a fourth explanation is that many American’s pursuit of happiness can be an individualistic and solo endeavor that ultimately leaves us feeling lonely. To shift this paradigm, we can learn from cultures where people prioritize social engagement over independent activities.

I know that throughout my life the most meaningful professional experiences are those where I embodied my skills and experience in a way that benefited others. Finding ways to be in service to others has been the biggest gift I could give to myself. Adam Grant has a test to determine meaningful work, just ask yourself: “If this job didn’t exist, how much worse off would people be?” As philosopher John Stuart Mill explains, “Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness. On the happiness of others. On the improvement of mankind... Even on some arduous pursuit followed by, not as a means, but as itself, an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else... They find happiness, by the way.”

Being a lawyer can sometimes feel like a lonely and insular path that one must walk alone without support or help from others, even when we are following our passions and living a life of meaning and purpose. And this “do-it-alone mentality” can lead to unhealthy and negative coping mechanisms to prop up our stressful lives. So, as we look ahead in 2023 with goals of increasing our overall well-being, we do not have to upend our entire current professional paths to re-think some of the ways we move through the world. Major changes or resolutions are not the goal here but making smaller adjustments that can breathe new meaning into our days. One methodology is to become an internal ar-

chitect of your current job or role, known as job crafting,² a process by which a person changes their daily actions to better fit their values, interests and skills. The goal is to bring yourself fully to your professional roles, such that it may not be a part of your job, but it is part of you that you bring forth to share with others. We don’t have to stay tethered to old images of where we want to go or who we want to be.

The simplest way to start re-thinking our 2023 options is to question what we do daily. Start by applying three simple, but profound, levels of inquiry to the one part of your life you would like to re-think: (1) humility to reconsider past habits and modes of being; (2) vulnerability to question our present decisions; and (3) open curiosity to reimagine our future actions. The answers to these questions may lead to a deeper discovery of hidden motivations that can expand your planning from the familiar habits to a deeper sense of purpose and meaning. Re-thinking liberates us to do more than merely update our knowledge and opinions. It is a tool for living a more fulfilling life connected with others and yourself, while increasing our overall well-being as lawyers.

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****NOTE: I have begun to build a community of mindful legal professionals through the bi-weekly VBA virtual mindful moments sessions and am open to exploring in-person monthly options to support our overall well-being. Please contact me at anderson_samara@yahoo.com to discuss further.****

¹ Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don’t Know* (2021).

² Jane E. Dutton and Amy Wrzesniewski, *What Job Crafting Looks Like*, Harvard Business Review (March 12, 2020).

