

How to Not Fail, Die or Go Crazy Practicing Law

By A. Harrison Barnes

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ATTORNEY SEARCH



How to Not Fail, Die or Go Crazy Practicing Law

By A. Harrison Barnes

Summary

As an attorney, your first priority must be your health, then your job, then your family and personal life. Make sure you keep your priorities in this order or you will fail.

The practice of law at large law firms brings many attorneys to their breaking points. Each week, I hear stories of attorneys failing, quitting the practice of law, going off the rails, and even dying. But it does not have to be that way. I have studied attorneys for years—the ones who are happy and succeed and the ones who are not happy and do not succeed—and in this article I will explain what the happy and successful ones do so you can do this too.

But first I will give you a few examples of “attorney meltdown” stories I encountered just last week...

On Saturday, my wife and I went out for dinner with some attorney couples I know. Before we sat down, one of the attorneys started telling me how much he hated being an attorney. He was passionate about the subject. He did not like his partners. He hated the work and could not stand it. There did not seem to be anything too abnormal about this until it came time to sit down. He stood frozen holding the back of his chair unable to sit down. He said the room

was spinning and he was afraid to sit down. It was 7:00 pm and his wife took him home. He had apparently (unbeknownst to her) been drinking since 9:00 am. When he got home, he was screaming nonsense, took off his shirt, and declared he had “had it” and was leaving her. He walked down the road aimlessly for an hour before his wife found him.

On Monday, I was on talking on the phone with an attorney I know just as she was about to enter court. She did not sound good and was under a lot of work-related stress. She said she would call me back after court to discuss some career-related stuff. Incredibly, she had a heart attack in court and was rushed by ambulance to the hospital. She texted me from the ambulance that she would not be able to call me back. This woman is someone who consistently puts her career first and does whatever she can to succeed. All she does is work, and she emphasizes this over her health, family, and other things.

In addition to the above examples, I also spoke with many other unhappy “at-their-wits-

ends” attorneys last week. One of them was fired for only billing 1,800 hours during her first year of practice. She was told that “work had slowed down” and the firm needed to let the “least productive associates” go. (Least productive meant, apparently, the associate who billed the least and not the one who was the most efficient.)

This attorney was the *order of the coif* from a major law school and practicing at a top firm and had less than two years

of experience. But without a job and having been fired, I knew it was going to be very difficult for her to find a new position. She did not know if she wanted to stay with the practice of law.

Another attorney actually did decide to leave the practice of law. He had been first in his class from a top five law school, but decided to throw in the towel from his law firm (and from law altogether) because he felt a partner was having him do an unnecessary assignment and bill more hours to a case than necessary. I was unable to get him to stick with the practice of law. He told me his “father had committed suicide” and he “was afraid he was going to end up like him” if he continued with the profession. I was very upset by this situation and found myself sitting and staring at the wall for long periods of time. It was not right, and I hate it when people go off the deep end.

As a legal recruiter, I continually encounter attorneys at their breaking points. This is manifested in a number of ways, including depression, health issues, suicide, escaping

into substances, and so forth. From my experience, it seems like attorneys have more issues with physical health, emotional stability, substance abuse, marriages, and so forth than people in any other profession. But the good news is that even though being an attorney is very hard and demanding—and not everyone

is cut out for it—there are ways to deal with it and “crack the system” like a puzzle you finally figure out how to complete.

“There are ways to practice law without failing at it, without dying prematurely, and without going crazy!”

There are ways to practice law without failing at it, without dying prematurely, and without going crazy!

I am the first to admit that when I was practicing law, I certainly did not have the system cracked. What I saw around me made no sense. I saw partners getting fired, associates getting fired, people going crazy, and so forth. I said to myself: “Does it make sense to play a game where I do not understand the rules and the rules make no sense?” I was so perplexed by these questions that I have, to a great extent, dedicated my life to helping people understand the rules of the “game” of practicing law successfully, happily, and without undue debilitating stress. I love and respect the profession of law and I want to help talented attorneys thrive in this profession without succumbing to depression, unhappiness, substance abuse, failure, and more.

Make no mistake about it: The rules for governing how you cope with the law firm world are a “life and death” matter and something that can and will have a major impact on your life. While I am certainly not a

psychologist, I have studied these issues for my entire career and I have well-reasoned ideas about what attorneys must do to stay sane, successful, and happy. In fact, many attorneys **are** quite successful and happy. They just follow different rules and approach their legal careers much differently than the majority of attorneys who ultimately go off the rails.

The Keys to Happiness and Success in Law and Life Are Priorities and Energy

Most of the problems experienced by attorneys stem from (1) attorneys having incorrect priorities, and (2) attorneys failing to follow systems for managing priorities.

Attorneys also routinely misdirect their energy, and this is not just a career-killer. It is also a soul-killer and even a life-killer. The most powerful force you have to offer your profession (and the world) is your energy. You can channel your energy in many different directions, but how you decide to do so will determine what will happen to you. If you do not have a system for how you will channel your energy in a positive manner, then in all likelihood your energy will get sucked and drained away from you, and as a consequence you will fail, underachieve, be unhappy, or die practicing law. It is as simple as that. You need priorities and you need systems to manage those priorities so your

energy is channeled in a positive as opposed to negative manner.

Most Attorneys Incorrectly Make Work Their Number One Priority

Everyone has various priorities in their lives: Their health, their job, their friends, their romantic life, travel, accomplishment, recognition, recreation, spirituality and more. Even though work is unquestionably important—especially for attorneys working and hoping to succeed in large firms—attorneys who fall off the rails generally have made work and career their number one priority to the detriment of everything else. This is the reason that practicing law has such a bad rap and one reason why so many people fail at it. *Work is simply not the first priority for happy and successful attorneys.*

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When I started practicing law, I was amazed to discover that every single attorney I worked with had been divorced at least once. I was at a very good firm, which was comprised

primarily of high-achieving graduates of Ivy League law schools who had started their careers in major New York law firms (mainly **Cravath, Swaine, and Moore**). Not only were the attorneys divorced and suffering from a myriad of personal issues, most were also unhealthy. They were overweight. They smoked. They were pale and appeared to never get out in the sunshine (our firm was located in Los Angeles). The firm had its own

gym, but as far as I knew no one ever used it. One time I heard that someone used the gym, but it was a rumor and never confirmed.

Out of some the people I worked with, one is in jail for running a \$100-million+ Ponzi scheme (<https://www.justice.gov/usao-md/pr/federal-jury-convicts-final-conspirator-278-million-investment-fraud-scheme>), another is in jail for allegedly murdering his wife (for insurance money) and then trying to kill his second wife (<http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-man-charged-wifes-killing-cruise-ship-20150512-story.html>). Yet another died of a heart attack in his mid-40s (he also had the honor of being the only attorney ever to make partner in the firm in 3 years) and one of my fraternity brothers who became an attorney ended up killing himself. These people all took success extremely seriously and wanted to succeed at all costs. But as these examples illustrate, when people emphasize their careers over all other things bad things happen.

While I was working as an attorney, I began to understand why so many attorneys at my firm were divorced. I was so exhausted when I got home at night that I simply had no energy for my relationship with my wife. How could anyone have time for a normal relationship when he or she is at work all the time? In my case, even when my wife was not already asleep by the time I got home, instead of appreciating the little time we had together in a positive manner, I would sabotage things by being wound up and combative. I did not intend for this to happen, of course, but I had nothing left to give her. All of my energy was consumed by my work—either literally being at work or being

worried about work all the time. I worried all the time—about my cases, missing deadlines, getting fired, not advancing, and so forth. It was an extremely stressful, demanding, and difficult time in my life.

It is true that at times practicing law was a lot of fun, but the overwhelming stress involved in doing a good job in such a demanding environment leaves little time for a proper personal life. It leaves no time to take care of yourself and your body and mind either. But you need to make the time!

As a sidenote, and to emphasize how making work the number one priority causes damage in other areas of one's life, I keep finding out about the wives of male attorneys having affairs. (Maybe it is because I know so many attorneys, but there seems to be something to it because I hear about it so often.) I was on an airplane recently coming back from a wedding and saw the wife of a partner I know at a major American law firm carrying on a full-blown affair before she spotted me (she was shocked). I had known her for years since she was young. Her goal had always been to marry a successful man, and she did. She was with him all through **Harvard Law School** and supported him as he worked long hours in his firm and eventually became a partner. He certainly is successful—but he is also never around. This is quite par for the course, though, and something that is very common with the wives of attorneys. Their husbands are never around, and when they are around they are often unpleasant. While it is not a nice thing to say, it is what practicing law with a major law firm does to many attorneys who make their career the priority.

If you make your career the priority, this will have repercussions that are quite serious for your health and personal life. It always does. You cannot have a healthy life if you are driven to work all of the time. If you are trying to work all of the time, then you will suffer and your life will suffer. None of this is to say that your career is not important—it is—but you cannot succeed if you are emphasizing your career all the time. *At some point, this emphasis will have the opposite effect, and you will become less successful the more you emphasize it. Emphasizing your career too much destroys your health and your mind.*

As another aside, it is noteworthy that no area of the country tears down young attorneys more than New York City. New York City is a brutal area that puts huge demands on attorneys physically, mentally and so forth and often offers very little hope of advancement. People do succeed there, of course, but it is not easy and it is a place that seems to magnify the worst of everything.

The Priorities of Successful and Happy Attorneys Are (1) Health; (2) Work/Career; and (3) Personal Life

The priorities of the most successful (and happy) partners and associates are health; work and career; and then family, friends, and personal life.

HEALTH COMES FIRST

It may seem crazy to a young, struggling large law firm associate who is trying to bill a ton of hours and can't fathom how he or she would find the time to eat a healthy

meal or get some exercise, but if you really want to succeed and be happy over the long run in the practice of law you must put your HEALTH before your CAREER. The simple fact is happy and successful attorneys make their health their priority—and this includes psychological health as well as physical health. *They do this because they understand that without their health they have nothing! It is the fundamental building block upon which everything else they do in their lives and intend to do in their lives rests.*

They exercise, try and watch their diets, sleep regularly, and emphasize these things as the priority of their lives. For psychological health, some attorneys practice yoga or mediation. They immerse themselves in saltwater isolation tanks, go on retreats, become active in their faith communities, and engage in various spiritual practices to help find peace, balance, perspective, and to help restore their positive energy. I did not understand this for the longest time, but the more successful attorneys I have spoken with, the more I have come to the conclusion that the most successful attorneys all make their physical and psychological health a priority.

If you do not take care of yourself and your health, it becomes impossible to have any other priorities. Without your health, you cannot work on your relationships, career, and other interests. While taking care of your health may sound like a selfish thing, it is the least selfish thing you can do. Without your health, you simply cannot take care of the other things around you.

One of the most successful attorneys I know makes about \$7,000,000 or \$8,000,000

each year practicing law. He became very successful at a young age and ended up getting divorced when he had two young children. He got addicted to cocaine and other substances until things got out of control. He went to rehab and a few months later relapsed and went back again. The next time he stayed with it and finally addressed his issues. He made his health a priority and since doing that ten years ago has become one of the most successful attorneys in the country. He is happily remarried and having a very good life.

It is never too late to make your health a priority. When you do this, everything else falls into place!

When you are healthy, things do not stress you out as much. Exercise, in particular, provides a good release. You look better and feel better when you are fit and healthy. You have more energy to give your job and more energy to share with your clients, your profession, your family, and the world around you. You become a positive force and not a negative force.

CAREER COMES SECOND

The second priority of the most successful attorneys is their careers—even above family and friends. If an attorney does not make his or her career a priority, then he or she will fail. It may sound cold-hearted to put career before family and friends, but if you do not take care of your career, you will not be able to support your family. Law firms are extremely

competitive places, and because they are so competitive attorneys always need to make sure that they are succeeding.

FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND PERSONAL INTERESTS COME THIRD

After your career, you can concentrate on your family, friends, romantic life, and other things. You need to make each of these things part of your calculus, but if you intend to be a successful attorney, they simply cannot be your number one priority. Your health must come first—as without your health you have nothing. Your career must come second—as you will be unable to support these personal things in any material and substantial way if you are not secure in your career.

Why is it so important to make time for your family, friends, and personal life? How do you do this with all of your other responsibilities and priorities?

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The Characteristics of the Most Successful and Happy Attorneys

We have now talked about the priorities of successful and happy attorneys. There also are certain common characteristics shared by successful and happy attorneys. Some of these characteristics overlap with priorities, but because they are so important—and because if you want to be a happy and successful attorney you should strive to adopt as many of these characteristics as possible—I will list them out specifically:

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1. **Have family or friends around them who support and care about them.** This is not always the case, but it is the norm. The most successful attorneys have built support systems that give them a purpose to do their work and to do it well. They try and maintain the health of this system and take it seriously. They do their best to make time for their family whenever possible.
 2. **Have active romantic lives.** For the same reason, the most successful attorneys have well-balanced romantic lives. This gives them the same kind of boost and motivation that other successful attorneys get from being around family and friends.
 3. **They are physically fit and healthy.** This is not always the case, but it most often is. The most successful attorneys make time to exercise and take care of their bodies. They almost always have a system for doing this.
 4. **They are psychologically calm, happy, and balanced.** Successful attorneys understand the importance of maintaining their psychological health. Whether it is through mediation, therapy or something else, successful and happy attorneys cultivate a calm, happy, and balanced state of mind that gives them perspective and keeps them happy.
 5. **They are energetic and enthusiastic about their work.** The most successful attorneys like their jobs and bring a lot of energy to their work. They view work as something that is important and they take it seriously. They do not let it overwhelm them, however.
 6. **They are positive and not negative about the practice of law.** Once an attorney allows him or herself to become negative,

the attorney starts seeing the world and everything around him or her in a negative way as well. The most successful attorneys stay positive.

7. **They make time for vacations, and fun activities.** The most successful attorneys have this balance, and it gives them something to look forward to and makes them happy.

These characteristics are to a large extent about **positivity, energy and balance**. You can do all of these things as an associate or as a partner. If you can bring this positivity, energy and balance to your life and career, you will be much happier. You will have a better life and a better career as an attorney.

You Must Have Systems in Place to Manage Priorities and Develop Positive Characteristics

To be healthy, happy, and well balanced as an attorney, you need to have systems. You must plan and work systems into various parts of your life to take care of yourself. *You can only survive and prosper if you have these systems. You use systems to drive you forward and give you a balanced life.*

I make sure that I set aside two hours each day to exercise. I have been doing this for years. I have not missed a day in at least a decade and this keeps me productive and charging forward.

I started to make exercise a priority in my life when I was practicing law and noticed that the most successful partners all had daily exercise regimes. Some would duck out every

day at lunch with exercise bags. Others would go to a pool and swim at 6:30 each morning. Some would run before or after work. They all seemed to have systems for getting this into their lives, and they took it seriously. You need to move around and do things for your body each day. You cannot succeed and be as happy and productive as possible if you do not take care of your body.

The most successful and happiest attorneys also have systems for watching their diets, so they have more energy and look better. They watch what they put into their bodies and do not abuse substances. In the best law firms, the highest-ranking partners are almost always quite fit and not obese or overweight. They need the energy to perform at a high level.

As already mentioned, I know that some attorneys who will read this will say to themselves: “I can’t possibly make health my priority—I have too much work to do!” If this is truly the case (and not just a matter of mismanaged time), then you need to find another job. *Your health is all you have. You need to make the most of the situation you are in and do everything you can to stay fit and healthy.*

“Your health is all you have. You need to make the most of the situation you are in and do everything you can to stay fit and healthy.”

Different people respond to situations differently. Bill Clinton’s brother, Roger Clinton, Jr., has not led the most successful life and

was arrested for such things as cocaine possession and has struggled most of his life. In contrast, Bill Clinton became president. Both grew up in similar environments with an abusive, alcoholic father. Similarly, Jimmy Carter’s brother, Billy, was an unsuccessful gas station owner and college drop out. Jimmy Carter became a nuclear engineer and the President of the United States.

In these cases, Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter did better jobs than their brothers of making the most out of their environments. You must do the same thing and make the most out of your environment. The most important thing you can do to make the most out of your environment is to prioritize the right things. You need to prioritize your health first and then your career and other things next.

To do this—to make the most of your environment—you need systems to rely on to help ensure you stick with your priorities and maintain your characteristics. You cannot simply say you are going to get healthy one day. You need to make a plan and start TODAY—get a gym membership, find a pool, take up power walking, join the CrossFit community, go to a yoga class, find a meditation class, find a therapist if you need to work through some issues before they get out of control, check in with your faith community to see what resources are available, or do something else—and then get on a schedule to keep doing it on a regular basis. Whatever it is, you need to take actions to make sure this is a systematic thing that you are working on each and every day. You need to make your psychological and physical health a priority and your career next.

Moreover, as already discussed, you cannot make your family and friends your second priority. Your personal life must come AFTER your work. I know of countless attorneys who thought they were making the right decision by making their family a second priority. But they were misguided and suffered the consequences. They ended up losing their careers, which had a negative impact on the very people they wanted most to help.

One attorney had two children with learning disabilities. The attorney did not like how the school was treating his children and he made the decision to spend some time (with his wife) interviewing new schools. He probably missed at least 10 to 15 days of work over a period of several months doing that. He was a graduate of a top law school working at one of the most competitive firms in Los Angeles. He was fired. The firm was pretty clear why they fired him: “Our clients spend a lot of money on our work and demand we prioritize their work. You need to make your job your priority.”

Sadly, this is how it works.

Another attorney I am working with now was an *order of the coif* graduate of a top five law school. She is trying to find a position that will allow her to work four days a week so she can spend time with her child. She’s not having much luck. If she were interested in working full time, law firms would be lining up to speak with her.

I know of a man who took the generous six-week paternity leave policy his firm provides. Before he took paternity leave, he was only a few years from making partner and had a ton of work. When he returned after his paternity

leave, no one would give him work, and he had to find a new job.

In a large law firm, you need to make your family and other things (besides your health) come third. You need to set aside time that is yours for having a balanced life and not let work overwhelm you. You must have a system for how you approach everything: Your family cannot be first, or even second—unless you do not want to work in a large law firm.

Admittedly, the life of a large law firm attorney may not be for you. I am certainly not advocating that the priorities it requires are correct, but if you want to be a successful attorney at a large law firm your priorities must be as follows:

1. Health
2. Career
3. Family, friends, and other aspects of the personal realm

CONCLUSIONS

Most attorneys do not give themselves credit for the difficulties of being a lawyer in a large law firm. It takes tremendous devotion to do

“Your job is very, very important. However, your life, health, and happiness are more important.”

the work they do each and every day. It is not easy to do—day after day and year after year. It is extremely difficult, and no attorney can stay employed unless he or she was able to repeat this cycle of action each and every workday. The associates and partners

who succeed and are happy have systems for billing hours and getting things done, and this keeps them employed and constantly paid.

People are unhappy and do not like practicing law for a variety of reasons, but in most cases, the lack of happiness comes when attorneys make work their number one priority instead of health. You need to put the same level of discipline into taking care of yourself that you do into going to work each day.

Your job is very, very important. However, your life, health, and happiness are more important.

Your priority needs to be your health. I have found that when this priority works everything else seems to fall into place. Your second priority needs to be your job. Your third priority needs to be your family and then everything else. The same discipline you put into your job needs to be put into all of the other areas of your life as well.

Additional Article Resources

Please see the following articles for more information:

Why Most Attorneys Are Unhappy

Surround Yourself with Positive People

Why Do So Many Attorneys Ask "What's the Point?"

The Top Five Ways to Be Positive (When Everyone and Everything around You Is Bringing You Down)

Another Big Law Attorney I Know Just Died Young

The Power of the Positive

Seven Reasons Why Practicing Law Might Be More Stressful than Spending 18 Months in a POW Camp

Concentrate on the Positive, Not the Negative

25 Reasons Most Attorneys Hate the Practice of Law and Go Crazy (and What to Do about It)

Your Job Is about the Transference Energy

Physical, Psychological and Spiritual Suffering and Your Career

Two Fatal Deficiencies That Prevent 99% of Attorneys from Achieving Greatness

Law Firm Diversity: They All Talk the Talk, But It's Harder to Walk the Walk

The Similarities between Human Trafficking and Practicing Law: Why Control and Energy Are So Important to Your Life and Career

Take this GIFT for Granted and Your Legal Career Will Be Dead

Supermodels, Your Body, and Your Mind

Four Union-Like Rules of All Law Firms You Need to Know About

Lessons of Stars: How to Be a Star in Your Life and Career

The One Simple Rule for Succeeding in a Law Firm

Top 14 Ways Attorneys Can Avoid Burnout from the Stress of Practicing Law

The Importance of Discipline

Depression, Health, Boredom, Interesting People, and Self-Esteem