

How Can You Avoid Drama and Find Happiness as an Attorney?

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director

You need to push the drama out of your mind and concentrate on tasks before you want a great life and career.

There is no other way.

You need to avoid the news, participating in drama, and getting involved in things that do not advance you. You need to get outside of yourself.

Internal peace and focus cannot exist when you allow drama to come in.

One of the smartest people I have ever known is not one of the brightest in terms of IQ. He cannot engage in complex arguments or take difficult tests. Nor can he take part in competitive socializing and come up with business ideas. When I first met him, people around me considered him to be not that intelligent or sophisticated. Despite this, I can say with 100% certainty this made him one of the smartest men I have ever known. When I first met him, it amazed me that he did not seem interested in the same sorts of drama that other kids were. He was not critical of other students, his teachers, or the parents. In high school, I was in an incredibly competitive environment in a boarding school. Kids I knew coped with stress by smoking, drinking, and smoking pot. Some even used harder drugs and would sneak off into the forest near the school to smoke crack cocaine.

Through all this, my friend never drank, smoked, used drugs, or participated in any drama. He was happy with average grades and not being from a wealthy family. He was content not having a nice car, not having nice clothes, and doing his best but still being average. I found him fascinating. Everyone else I knew always had "reasons" to be upset. I knew one kid was so upset with getting 1580 on his SATs (instead of a 1600-- which was a perfect score at the time). The second time he took the SATs, he hid a dictionary in the bathroom to cheat and get a perfect score.

He did get a perfect score, but he told the wrong people what he had done. The school found out and made sure he did not get accepted at any top, [top colleges](#). The only school he got into was [the University of Michigan](#) -- as an in-state student.

Over the years, my friend lost both of his parents from smoking. One of his siblings died of a drug overdose. One of our friends died of alcoholism. Another smoked so much pot he could barely form words when he got older. Yet my friend did not get involved in the drama and powered through. I would be the first to admit that I never expected a ton of stuff would happen for this guy. I figured his even-keel approach to life would be his downfall and doom him to a life of mediocrity. I was wrong. By the time he was in his 30s, he had a remarkably successful business and known as a leader in his profession. He is happily married and is doing very well. He has had a much better life than most people I know because of his ability to tune out the drama around him.

See also:

[Understand the Nature of People, Jobs and the Environments You Commit To](#)

[Why Attorneys Need to be Exploited to Succeed](#)

This summer, I hired a first-year law student. She ended up being a better attorney than many attorneys I have worked with. All without the bar and without even completing law school.

I am amazed by this. I hired her because she ranked as one of the top five students in her class after her first

semester. As a first-year law student, she was a summer associate at Sullivan & Cromwell. She applied as a transfer student to schools like [Harvard Law School](#) and others and was accepted. What made her unusual, though, was not this stuff. What made her incredible was how she did her work. Throughout the summer, she had many opportunities to get involved in drama. She did not take part nor take the bait. She had complicated assignments and could have complained. But instead, she figured stuff out and turned in flawless assignments.

When [Sullivan & Cromwell](#) canceled their [summer program](#), I offered her a job. It paid a fraction of what she otherwise would have received.

She could have complained about this and felt sorry for herself. She could have chosen to not work as hard. She could have been resentful or more. Instead, she decided to give the job her all and do her very best she could. She was the sort of person that would do her job and did not care about all the nonsense going on around her.

The world needs more people like that. The world hires and advances people like this all the time. Almost every attorney is worrying about and doing something other than their job. If you are smart on top of that, then that is good. Concentrating on what is in front of you and not getting involved in all the drama is the best thing you can do. I remember working with an attorney once who went to a top 10 law school. He ended up with an excellent job in a [top law firm](#) after law school. As have many attorneys, he decided he did not like the hours and the meticulousness required of the job. He didn't like the people, the practice area he was in, nor the location of where he was working. He did not want the same life the partners had---blah, blah, blah. He left the firm and took a job as a [government lobbyist](#). He believed he would finally be appreciated and not have to work as hard. He was paid well, and he got to work in Washington, DC.

He took the job about six months before the presidential election. Then the unthinkable happened -- his party lost. When his party lost, he was out of a job. No law firm would hire him, of course. [Why would they hire someone who left a law firm after a few years to do something completely different? They would have to be idiots not to realize that the attorney did not want to be there. He got lucky. A top law firm in the Midwest offered him a position as a staff attorney.](#) They paid him about 55% of what they pay their full-time associates.

He begged his way into the job and told them he had made a mistake taking the lobbying position. He told them they would not regret hiring him, and he would work very hard and would be a great hire. I could have told them what would have happened though: He was resentful from the second he got there. He called me and told me how wrong it was that his firm was paying someone from such a great law school such little money. He did not like that many of the partners went to local law schools, and he did not believe they were as smart as he. He felt the work he was doing was demeaning and not important enough. He didn't like that for him to be considered for a full-time associate position, he had to work there at least a year.

He also told me that he tried to get the firm to transfer him to a "more cosmopolitan" city on more than one occasion. I am sure that went over well with the attorneys he begged for a job there. If you are working for a partner of an [Am Law 100 law firm](#) with 10+ years of experience, they are smarter than you. Regardless of where they went to law school. They stayed in a law firm and rose through the ranks and impressed people. No one cares how you did on the LSAT.

This attorney then listed all the wrong things with his job and the law firm. He would call me from home during the workday and tell me something like, "These yokels do not care where I am!" I knew none of this would last long. Within a few months, he called me even more panicked because the law firm had fired him.

He demonstrated he was more [concerned with other things like money](#), where he worked, and his title. He should have [been grateful](#) and tried to get the best experience possible out of his firm.

Would you have hired him if you were a law firm? Successful and happy people tune out background noise and do their jobs. [The young law school student who lost her summer job was happy despite her plans falling through](#). And, my friend, whom I doubt even scored in the top 75% of test-takers on the SATs (if that), are examples. Too many people worry about stuff that has nothing to do with their jobs. The guy that lost his staff attorney job should have worked hard. If he had done his best and built up political capital, he would be an associate now. He would have gotten ahead. Plus, he would have gotten excellent references if he ever needed another job. Better yet, he could have put down roots and committed for once. Most people never do this. They are too concerned about appearances than they are about doing the work in front of them.

See also:

[Can I Move to a Government Job then Come Back to a Law Firm?](#)

[How Easy Is It to Relocate If You Went to a Second-Tier Law School?](#)

In law firms all over the country, some people think they are too good to be there. They believe they should not be overworked. Many feel they are beneath doing certain sorts of assignments. [They always find reasons to be unhappy](#). They never commit because their minds are always somewhere else. You could provide these sorts of people anything, and they would never commit or be happy. They never have and never will. The best law firms are operating a continuous game to weed these sorts of people out. I was in Aspen the other day and sitting with my children behind a table of snobs from New York City. They were discussing the pros and cons of wine and tequila. They seemed to know everything there was to know about each. Things like the production, cost, taste other factors about each. I could not believe how much they could distinguish between one brand of wine and tequila. A \$300 bottle of wine was trash because it was "too earthy," a specific tequila was not "smooth enough" for the cost. On and on they went finding reasons to not enjoy each drink. Because they were comparing it to something better.

Meanwhile, my children were sipping lemonade and having a great time and all the better for it. I have puzzled for the longest time over something that I see quite a bit of. Attorneys in large cities seem to drop out of the practice of law. It is at an alarming rate compared to people in much smaller markets. If you want to practice law for a long time, it seems you should practice in the smallest market possible. I have wondered about this for the longest time. In the largest legal markets, people are made all too aware of their inadequacies. One inadequacy could be as simple as the car they drive. They might not like their clothes, neighborhood, or the schools their kids attend. Or they might not like where they went to school, their law firm's prestige, their bonuses, or more.

See also:

[25 Reasons Most Attorneys Hate The Practice Of Law And Go Crazy \(And What To Do About It\)](#)

[Why You Are Unhappy Practicing Law: You May Only be Happy When You Reach the Point of Giving Orders and Not Taking Them](#)

The farther down the rabbit hole you go, the more there is to worry about and cloud your mind. Such things as your social group or who likes you in the firm. Then there are your clients, your spouse, law school, college, clubs, and who knows what else. Let us even go farther down the rabbit hole and start to worry about some more stuff. How about the fact that your boss is a Republican (or Democrat)? How about what they are saying on CNN, or Fox News? How about who said something two decades ago that you find offensive? How about the fact that some people are upset about what someone said two decades ago that you are now upset about? How about the fact that there are some statues in your town that depict historical figures you do not like? Your entire town appears racist having these 100+-year-old statues there. Or your firm is representing a company that is not politically correct in some way, and you do not approve.

If you think I am talking about make-believe situations, I'm not. These are reasons for not being happy various

attorneys have told me. You can keep going with all this if you like. There is plenty you can [be angry](#) about and consume your mind with if you want. My friend, who became so successful, would not even understand what all this stuff was about. He probably does not even understand the difference between Fox News and CNN. One night a knowledgeable doctor my ex-wife and I were friends with came over to our house for dinner. She had gone to Princeton and was a Varsity athlete in several sports. Now, she was making a great living as a neonatal surgeon. I wondered how she could concentrate on doing surgery on babies for eight-plus hours at a time.

She could not contain her anger over the tone of a news network she had listened to "out of curiosity" on her drive. She was astonished that the coverage seemed so biased against her political party. She talked about it as if she was up against Communism or Nazism. In a rural market, nearly everyone drives a pickup and rides horses on the weekend. They send their kids on a bus somewhere to a local public school and are happy for the cases that walk in the door.

These attorneys are not clouding their minds like attorneys in major cities are. They certainly do not spend hours complaining about \$200 bottles of wine in fancy Aspen restaurants. The further you go from this sort of rural attorney, in my experience, the more unhappy you become -- unless you are smart. As an attorney, your job is to keep your mind clear and focus on your clients' needs. The more you worry about other stuff, the more you clutter your mind, upset yourself, and worry about crap. I am going to say a few offensive things-- but I may also prove a point because it relates to my own experience. A powerful older man I know in Malibu with a younger wife always needed to approve of his new wife's friends. He believed he wouldn't have a happy marriage if his wife spent time with the wrong people. People who were too materialistic, gossipers, unhappy, and overly focused on what other people were doing.

He told me he had seen too many marriages die when wives started getting influenced by the wrong people. He had met and married his wife in a rural southern state, and she thought the world of him. Many men move with their wives from all over the country to Malibu--a beautiful place to live. There is a man from Nebraska who owns a large fertilizer company and his younger wife on my street. There's also a man from rural Virginia who made much money in some sort of stock play. There are probably countless similar stories. happily. They would be happy married to a successful man who loved them. The women often grew up poor to lower-middle-class.

[Never Focus on the Money: Focus on Your Higher Purpose and Contribution
You Need to Enjoy What You Are Doing](#)

When they started associating with women they met in Malibu, they began to see the world in a new light. Their husbands were no longer generous but now were selfish. Their husbands were not rich enough. Their husbands were not nice enough. Their husbands did not travel in the right social circles. Their husbands did not take them on the best vacations. Their husbands did not get them as nice of cars as their friends had. Their husbands spent too much time working. Their husbands did not know powerful enough people. Their husbands did not live in the right part of Malibu. Their husbands might leave them for a younger version. Their husbands drank too much. Their husbands were not fit enough. Their husbands did not respect them enough. Their husbands made them sign prenuptial agreements that were too constraining.

If there were no prenuptial agreements, it gave the women power they would wield to get what they wanted. And if they did not get what they wanted, they would be quick to consult divorce lawyers. I do not know how much of that is accurate, and I am not trying to take sides in this issue--I'm reporting what he told me. I know, though, that people control our perceptions of the world we are around.

His idea was these women viewed their husbands as the greatest thing that ever happened to them. Until they moved to Malibu and met other women that had a negative influence on them. Women from a lower economic and social strata might be awestruck and very happy to have her husband. However, she may see

all the problems with him if in a different environment.

Women and men both have their points of view. I am trying to point out all the issues that happen when you see things through one point of view. And how your perception changes because of your environment.

There is another funny story in my old neighborhood that is still going on to this day. A woman I know was gorgeous when younger and grew up poor in a small town. She ate lunch for free at school, and her parents would take her to thrift stores in town to buy her clothing.

She married a man from Los Angeles who, after years of struggle, started a clothing company that became a major brand. For years, this man cheated on her and treated her as second fiddle, but she never dared to divorce him or stand up to him. However, when he sold the company that he started for hundreds of millions of dollars, she realized she was entitled to half of the money. She ended up divorcing him and walking away with almost \$100,000,000 when she was in her mid 40's.

At this point, you would think everything would be fine, and she would live happily-ever-after. But she did not. She made best friends with a decorator from a wealthy background and saw the world in a certain way. The decorator introduced her to the most expensive tastes possible. She bought a few homes (for too much money) and remodeled, decorated, and redid them at an incredible expense. She did the same with her office.

She rented an office next to me in Malibu and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars redoing the interior. (There were only two offices in the building). She brought in artisans from Italy to paint the walls. She hired equally expensive contractors to do other work. Her enthusiasm for the best the world has to offer would be fine if she had a major corporation. But, it was only her, and she had a five-year lease. Her rent for the office was \$10,000 a month when it was only worth \$5,000 a month. Within a few years, she moved out of the office because there was nothing for her to do.

I rented it for a while, but it was so loud and over-the-top that it made my employees uncomfortable. The people that came in were uncomfortable, and it was bordering on ridiculous. Everyone whispered in the office because it was the sort of place that commanded you to. I rented it with the furniture and learned later that the conference room table had cost over \$250,000 and was once a dining table in a French Castle.

She then bought a house for \$7,000,000. She put at least \$20,000,000 into electronic systems, more Italian craftsmen, expensive cabinets, beautiful fixtures, and other costly things.

I went over there once and walked into a bathroom off the kitchen, and it was unlike any experience I ever had. The lights slowly dimmed up, and a separate light then came on a bit brighter and illuminated the toilet. When I reached down to open the toilet lid, it opened and realized I was about to pee, so it also raised the toilet seat. The toilet flushed itself after I peed and sprayed some sort of mist into the air that smelled good. I have owned nice toilets but had never seen anything like that - it was not something you can find in the United States (I tried after experiencing it). I walked over to a dimly lit sink, and the faucet turned itself on with water that was just the right temperature. I washed my hands, and hand towels were waiting in a small warmer next to the sink.

I walked out of the bathroom and told the woman: "I've never seen a bathroom like that!"

"The electronics in this house and many of the fixtures have been in magazines and won awards," she bragged to me.

None of this would've been a problem if the home were in a neighborhood of \$25,000,000 homes. But it was

not - it was in a neighborhood where most homes cost no more than \$10,000,000. Her investment was not something she would ever be able to recoup.

She bought another house on a hill for \$10,000,000 and spent at least \$10,000,000 fixing it up and redoing the inside. After years on the market, it sold for \$12,000,000. Remodeling this home and fixing it up took years of her life--the same with the house with a nice bathroom.

She decided to start a restaurant and decorated it at an incredible expense. She hired mixologists to create unique cocktails. She hired expensive chefs. She let her decorator spend over \$1,000,000 on the small restaurant before the concept ever proved itself. Within a few years, the business failed.

Today the home with the fancy bathroom that won all the awards is for sale for at least ten million dollars less than she has into it.

She bought a \$3,000,000 home for her decorator to stay in for free while working for her. When she realized that the decorator had "taken her for a ride" and spent all her money on work that had no financial return, she got angry. She kicked the decorator out of the house.

You may think all this is inconsequential to your legal career, but it is relevant. This woman lost most of \$100,000,000 she got in her divorce because [others influenced her](#) to see the world a certain way. She believed that everything needed to be a certain way. She latched on to someone else's perceptions of the world--a fancy decorator's--and based her life around seeing the world his way.

She was very discerning and was able to see how you could make certain environments a particular way. But, seeing the world through the lens of another hurt her tremendously. Her perception was changed. How much happier would she be today if she was grateful for what she had? Had she not needed to see the world and projects in front of her through someone else's eyes?

I lived in a small fraternity house through most of my college years at the University of Chicago. In the class that graduated the year before me, there were about seven guys. Two of them [committed suicide](#) within a decade of leaving school.

One of these guys was the happiest guy I had ever met when I met him when I toured the college as a prospective student. And later, when I attended college and joined his fraternity. His name was Curtis Ford, and he was from a small town in Oklahoma. He was the valedictorian of a small high school and came to [the University of Chicago](#) with great dreams.

The problem was, he was ill-prepared to compete with the likes of the kids who were there. By sophomore year of college, most of his high school classmates were already married and starting families.

Curtis could not get good grades at the University of Chicago because he was "psyched out" by the academic environment. He did not drink in high school and had been a star athlete. He started drinking at Chicago, and let himself go. His bad grades messed with his self-esteem, and he felt terrible about himself. He started [drinking too much](#) and started using too many drugs. When he was a junior, the school asked him to leave. He went from feeling like a superstar to having his self-esteem crushed. Most of his fraternity brothers ended up attending top medical, law, and graduate schools. The drugs and alcohol continued messing with Curtis' mind, and he killed himself.

I do not doubt that if Curtis had not gone to the University of Chicago, he would still be alive. Others influenced his perception of himself and his value. He saw himself as a loser and not the winner he was, because of the people around him and the feedback he was getting. Instead of fixing his academic issues or

trying harder, he gave up. He allowed people to brand him as a loser, and a country bumpkin. His high school classmates were more than happy to see themselves as successful because they married at twenty-something, had jobs, and were starting families.

See also:

[Another Big Law Attorney I Know Just Died Young](#)
[Attorneys, Life Events And Stress: Causes And Palliatives](#)
[Attorneys Have Problems with Drinking](#)

How you perceive the world, and issues around you determine what happens to you and your life.

A similar thing happened to another one of my fraternity brothers from the same class. He, too, came from a background that changed his perception of the world and made him feel like he did not belong. His parents were from Cuba, and he grew up poor. The school also crushed his dreams. He started drinking and using drugs and then killed himself when he felt like he did not measure up.

To reach your potential, you need to put your head down and not worry about others. You need to realize that you are going to fail. You are going to have problems, and not always get what you want. You cannot perceive the world and your surroundings in a way that hurts you. You need to keep your eye on the ball and press forward.

I see people leave the practice of law all the time because they refuse to settle for nothing but the best. I recently worked with a very talented girl who left her position at a great law firm, [Schulte Roth & Zabel](#) in New York, to go in-house. Her company went out of business, and she wanted to return to a law firm.

When she left Schulte, she was making several hundred thousand dollars per year. She had grown up poor and managed to excel in a cheap in-state college and then get into [Columbia Law School](#), where she excelled. She became a snob and had all sorts of excuses for not considering one firm or another.

She would only work in a law firm that was the same or better than Schulte Roth. This was a tall order since she was now in-house doing work in a different practice area.

I got her several interviews with smaller law firms that were willing to hire her. Yet, she was not interested in these firms because she did not view them as equals to where she was coming from. She also cared about how her peers would see her if she went to such an inferior firm. I finally got her an interview with a major firm. I believe it was [Sherman & Sterling](#), and they interviewed her once, then twice, then three times. Meanwhile, she had run out of money and no longer had an apartment. She was sleeping on her friend's couch while waiting and hoping the Sherman & Sterling offer would come.

After several weeks of waiting, she could wait no longer. She moved hundreds of miles away to live with her parents. She decided she was giving up on the practice of law because she could not work at a prestigious law firm. She ended up going back to school and doing something unrelated, instead of working in a less prestigious firm. Her new choice of a profession was something that "looked cool" in her peers' eyes and others. She was basing her life decisions and career on how others would perceive what she was doing.

Weeks later, Sherman & Sterling called and said they wanted to interview her again for the job. They had been unsure if they had the work. At that point, she was already in school training for something else. She had not wanted to see herself as an attorney. Instead, she saw herself as not employable with the very best firms.

When I was a young lawyer, all these discussion boards came out where greedy associates from all over the

country would compare notes. I noticed that people started spending all their time on these instead of working. These boards made them feel inadequate, angry, and more.

Today, there are sites like Top Law Schools, Above the Law, and others that feed rumor and speculation. They have all sorts of gossip and other information that shape how people perceive the world. Things like one law firm is more prestigious than another, one law school is better than another, one person is a racist, one person is a cheater, and so forth.

People's lives become what they focus on. We base our self-esteem and how we see ourselves on how we perceive others to see us.

Years ago, I flew a cross-country trip from New York to Los Angeles. For whatever strange coincidence, I was sitting next to a woman who was older than me and also lived in Malibu. She started asking me about where I lived, what I did for a living, and so forth. She then said something to me that was nice, but I took the wrong way: "You seem very successful. You should be proud of yourself," she said.

That was a nice thing of her to say and something I should have taken nicely, but I did not.

"Thank you," I said to her. "I do not feel successful. I don't have private jets, and I'm not as influential as people I work with like Tony Robbins and other celebrities I know, and my wife is friends with," I told her.

She paused for a moment and said, "You have many issues I am not going to get into. Deep issues."

I thought that was a real insult and puzzled over what she had said for several years. That was well over a decade ago when she said that. Despite everything I had done, I did not feel successful because of the people I was living around. I was not playing the game at the same level of life.

When I met my second wife, she lived with her parents in a \$1,400 a month apartment in Santa Monica. At the time, I was doing very well and had a multimillion-dollar house and a company with over 800 employees. I helped her family financially with some things, hired her brother, hired my second wife to work for me, and even hired her sister. The family and my wife thought I was the greatest thing that ever happened to them. I also paid for a beautiful and relatively expensive wedding.

She was the happiest person in the world I had ever met, had an infectious laugh, and was so much fun to be around. The first time I took her on an international vacation, she was so excited to travel, she could not sleep all night. Everything I did for her made me the best person in the world in her eyes, and her perception was that I could do no wrong. She told me daily how grateful she was for what I had done for her and her family, which made me feel good. I wanted to do more and contribute more. I was happy, and so was she.

A few years after I got married, I moved with her from Pasadena, California, to Malibu. She started making friends with wives of professional athletes, celebrities, and business titans. Pretty soon, her perception of me changed. I was not like the celebrity husbands and people she was spending her time with and socializing with.

I did not own private jets.

I was not famous and on television and in the movies.

I was not a household name, nor was I extraordinarily rich.

I was not interested in playing social games and trying to move up this social ladder.

She was not working and surrounded herself with friends who perceived the world differently. Many of her friends had nothing to occupy their minds other than rumors or speculation.

Pretty soon, my wife became unhappy with herself, her surroundings, me, and many people. Her perception of herself and me had changed - I had not changed, but her perception had. She started going to therapy and became a different person than she was before. She spent all her time on the phone gossiping about other people.

At first, she left me out of it and would just share all this information - then, at some point, I became the topic for her and her friends. She locked her phone and became secretive. She started going out to her car to talk on the phone. She went out with her friends at least three or four nights a week. She became very competitive about which parties (and even birthday parties) people invited her to.

Not getting invited to a particular party became very upsetting to her. She would snap at me and resent me because I was not trying harder to be friends with the husbands. I was nothing like several of them and wanted nothing to do with them.

I noticed that many of her friends, who were initially delighted with their husbands, started having affairs. Now, instead of locking their phones, they all started using Snap Chat to share secrets without getting found out. One time one of my wife's best friends had a meltdown at her son's birthday party. She went into the bathroom crying because a girl she wanted to impress socially stayed at the party for only 30 minutes.

Most of her friends were not working and became very concerned about social situations. They allowed how others saw them control their self-perceptions. They, too, became unhappy and different people.

And if you think the women have issues, do not even get me started about many of the men. The issues with many of the men I have met take on a whole new level. I have never seen so much drama and issues in my life - but it is a business-related type of drama that is beyond extreme.

The husband of one of my wife's best friends recruited an attorney working for me by paying her three times what I was paying her. I had done some work for him as a favor and sued a former business partner for him and collected over \$500,000 for him. I wrote the lawsuit, followed up with a terrifying letter, negotiated an initial offer of \$10,000 to \$500,000, and charged him \$14,000 to do this -- I could have charged much more.

He met my in-house attorney when I had her work through the terms of the settlement agreement of his lawsuit after I negotiated a settlement for him. He put a down payment on a home with this and was so impressed with the work I did he stole an attorney that worked for me so he could do the same thing himself.

When I confronted him with this and told him I thought this was unbelievable, he told me I should learn to pay the people who work for me more money. He also said that he was in the marijuana business, knew a lot of dangerous people, and that if I did not go away, he would have someone teach me a lesson.

A few days later, my cars were vandalized in my driveway -- no idea if there was a connection -- more drama.

A neighbor couple came over one night, and I told them I was selling my house. The man called the people buying my home, and the real estate agent on the other side, and said to them that his house was better and that mine was overpriced. He told them they should come to see his instead, and he would offer them a better deal. He also only wanted to pay a 2.5% real estate commission to the realtor and fought with him about this. After this, I stopped being friends with him. Before this episode, I arranged some legal work for this guy to help him out. The attorney I had help him suffered a heart attack in court and almost died.

He owed her \$62,500. She had collected \$250,000 for him for suing his previous employer for giving him an uncomfortable chair to sit on at work -- I'm serious. He only paid her \$12,000 and told me he was only paying her this much because if she were in better health, she could have gotten him a better result. She should

have disclosed her heart condition.

I sold one home a year or so ago to some of my wife's friends in Malibu -- who I have known for years. It was a rental on VRBO and had a bunch of furniture and so forth in it when I sold it. When I sold them the home, they asked if I could leave the furniture, appliances, washer and dryer, sheets, and towels for a few weeks. There were some rentals scheduled that I had arranged immediately after the closing. I agreed to do so and told them I would pick the stuff up in a couple of weeks. When I contacted them to pick the stuff up, they stated I had "abandoned" the items, and since they did not agree in writing to give it back, they did not have to. I ended up suing them to get the money back--more drama.

Another Malibu couple who has a parent that is a multi-billionaire had a son who sexually abused a boy a few years younger than him. The younger boy lived in a trailer park in Malibu (trailers there start at about \$500,000--it is not exactly a bad place to live). When the abused child's family brought this to their attention, they paid the other family several hundred thousand dollars to leave Malibu and not talk about it. They then proceeded to bad mouth the family and started a separate rumor that the father who moved away was a sexual abuser. They might have gotten away with this; however, their son proceeded to sexually abuse several other children at his private school and ended up getting kicked out. When the couple offered the school a considerable donation to keep the child in the school, several parents in the school banded together. They told the school they would pull their children out of the school if they kept that child there.

Other friends of my wife and people I know in Malibu have gone to prison for stealing from people. It never ends.

I could continue about more episodes -- they all upset me. I see these people all the time, and I am still mad at them and do not let this stuff go -- more drama. I have grudges, anger, and more, which often consumes me when I should be concerned about other things. I cannot believe how many bad people I have met. There are so many reasons to be upset. I cannot believe how much drama my wife participated in and how much this upset me. It still bothers me. I have plenty of reasons to be pissed off and angry -- and this is a waste of my energy as well.

All around us, there are environments and people who control how we see ourselves -- if we let them. The only way you to survive, be happy, do good work, and have the best career possible is to not worry about inconsequential stuff. You need to focus on what is in front of you and not get distracted. In a law firm, you need to focus on facts and not delude yourself into being unhappy by perceiving what is not factual. All around you, there are opportunities to be miserable and see things in a way that detracts you from the task at hand.

The truth is that if you do your job well and do not get distracted by what others are doing, you will succeed. You do not need to be at the best firm in the world, have the most prestigious job, have gone to the best law school, or make the most money. If you throw yourself into whatever you are doing and do not worry about others, you will be happy. If you [commit to your job](#) and the people in your life, you will be satisfied. If you do not get distracted, you will do well and be happy. However, most people perceive the world in a way that impossibly judges themselves and others. They continuously see negativity that is not there and feel unhappy about it. Spending your days obsessing about gossip, what other people are doing, and finding fault with yourself and others detracts you from your true place in the world and your contributions.

One of the ways that people try and focus their attention is to try and get outside of themselves and others and focus only on what they can change. Many people use religion to stop the chatter of their minds and focus them on something else. Some people do yoga. Others meditate. Some spend time in a frenzy with their minds finding fault with themselves. They get addicted to substances, liquor, sex, gambling, and other distractions to settle their minds.

My mother was in Alcoholics Anonymous and did not get happy and centered until she did. She was from a small town where her father owned the local hardware store. She ended up moving to a big city and marrying my father. My father was from a famous American family. (Laura Ingalls Wilder, Amelia Earnhart, the Senator John James Ingalls (his great grandfather) who has a statue in the United States Capital representing Kansas.) His father was a famous writer. He went to Harvard, attended a prestigious prep school, and had all the right pedigrees.

She saw how my father viewed the world and felt like she did not measure up. She got divorced and lived around wealthy people, but did not have money. She felt excluded and used drinking as a coping mechanism - as many people do when they face their inadequacies.

It was only through learning to connect with something outside herself and changing her perception of the world that she was able to change. The most fundamental teaching of Alcoholics Anonymous -- which has chapters in virtually every city in America -- is based on the serenity prayer, which starts every meeting.

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, and Wisdom to know the difference."

You cannot stop drinking when you worry that you do not measure up because you grew up in a blue-collar family, or are not from a famous family - these are things you cannot change.

You cannot stop drinking when you worry about the fact that something terrible happened to you when you are younger.

You cannot stop drinking when you worry that the world is unfair to you because of your race, where you went to school, and more.

More importantly, you cannot be happy until you stop worrying about the things you can change and stop worrying about those you cannot.

If your perception of the world is around the things you cannot change, you will never be happy.

I recently stopped watching and reading the news, and it is one of the best decisions I have ever made. At first, I noticed I logged into my favorite news site several times per day - at least once per hour. Then, I realized that I was coming home after work and watching my favorite news commentators on television for two or three hours per night. Then, I became so entranced with one program that I texted the alumni development director from [the University of Virginia Law School](#) (who I have corresponded with throughout the years). I asked him if he could introduce a famous political news commentator who had attended my law school. I wanted to ask the commentator some questions about an issue and interview them for my podcast -- I wanted to get involved in the drama.

Despite having known him for over twenty years and spent time with him in the past, he did the right thing and did not respond. My text contained polarizing statements about the news commentator's political positions. I was pulled in by the drama around me and trying to get him involved and speak to someone else about this drama.

Instead of him, he had a recent college graduate in his office contact me for money this year. I was offended by this and did not give the school money - more drama. Stupid.

Drama is everywhere, and it detracts us from what is essential.

When I was practicing law, people used to drop in my office several times a day and share drama. Associates would share drama when I interviewed with law firms. People tell me about drama when I speak with them about their job searches. I used to have the news on a big-screen television in my office lobby - drama. I still get the Wall Street Journal delivered every morning during the week - the headlines upset me - drama. I get the New York Times during the weekend--headlines also upset me - more drama. Law firms contact me sometimes and say they do not like something I have written because it is too liberal, too conservative, too harsh - drama. Attorneys in the market contact me with hate mail that comes straight to my inbox because they are mad I will not represent them in their job searches, do not like something I wrote, sent them too many firms, not enough firms, and who knows--more drama. One time an attorney I never met or spoke with, drove around the country to several offices looking for me because he was mad about something I wrote. He ended up killing himself after shooting another man while the police were chasing him - more drama. What you can improve in your legal career is how hard you work. You can change whether you choose to be happy and do your job, or worry about others. You can change whether it takes having your private jet to feel successful, or if driving in a Honda is good enough for you. You can change whether you are going to get involved in the drama and negative thinking around you - or whether you are not going to.

Are you going to feel bad about the past and things you have no control over, or are you going to step up and be happy? You will have an impossible time achieving anything if you worry about what you do not have control over. You will be like the woman who no longer sees her husband in the same way and is unhappy because he no longer measures up and divorces him. You will be like the woman who believes her house will only be nice when she does everything the decorator recommends - even if the investment is nonsensical. You will be like the guy from Oklahoma who kills himself because he is not as smart as a bunch of eggheads at the University of Chicago. You will be like the guy who lost a great opportunity as a staff attorney because he was unable to be happy with this after making a career mistake earlier in his career. You would be like the girl who left the practice of law because she was too concerned about how it would look to her peers if she were not at one of the country's most prestigious firms. She perceived people who did things like that as inferior to her. You will be like the person who drinks themselves to death because they are not the person they believe they should be. You will be like many of the women I knew in Malibu who spend their time worrying about others. The solution to all this is not to get involved in the drama. Perceive the world the way it is and not through clouded glasses. Step up and do and be the person you are capable of being without seeing the world negatively. Control the things you can control.

Conclusions

I started this article by telling you about my friend, [one of the happiest and most successful people I know](#). I believe he is that way because he never involved himself in drama and concentrated on what was before him. I also told you about a girl who got a job with Sullivan & Cromwell as a first-year law student who succeeded and did not worry about anything.

I sent my staff an email that contained the following paragraph last week. It is instructive about not only working in law firms but your life:

"At each stage of this company's evolution, people have been unable to evolve. Instead of growing and

improving, they complain, undermine the company, gossip, try and protect the status quo, upset others, and rebel against an ever-improving system to (and does) help everyone here. In every profession, the people that concentrate only on their work do the best -- and those that manufacture crises and other issues and rebel against the system do not. It is like this in law firms, businesses, and here. Businesses expel those who undermine them and advance and protect those that help them improve. Even one person undermining a company can drastically affect the company's ability to operate. Good companies are careful to guard against this."

You need to push the drama out of your mind and concentrate on tasks before you can have a great life and career. There is no other way. You need to avoid watching the news, participating in drama, and getting involved in things that do not advance you. You need to get outside of yourself. Internal peace and focus cannot exist when you allow drama to come in.

I noticed that my friend that was not that smart went to church weekly with his mother growing up, and he probably still does. He concentrates on something outside of himself, and this calms him.

I have noticed that many of the people in the Malibu circle that are unhappy use cocaine, alcohol, power, houses, cars, social climbing, and similar things to make themselves happy. These things are drama. If you concentrate on these things, you will never be satisfied.

There are, of course, many people in Malibu that are happy -- and these are the [people I choose to surround myself with now](#). Most of the people I know that are happy are grounded in something outside themselves -- some volunteer and help others during their free time. Many go to church. Some exercise a lot and have groups they exercise with, such as Cross-fit; others get together and exercise with each other in their homes. Some do meditation. Others are in groups like Alcoholics Anonymous. Many have other spiritual practices.

I am not an expert in what it takes to be happy. I do know, however, that drama never ends if you allow it in. The people that are the happiest and do the best always have a way to keep focused and now allow drama in.

When I was in high school at Cranbrook-Kingswood school in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, I had a fantastic advisor named Dr. Fred Roth, who is no longer alive. He was a tough teacher and usually only gave one A or A- in his English classes. The rest of his students did not do as well, and because their grades were not that great, many students did not like him, and hardly anyone chose him to be their advisor. I wanted him as an advisor, and two other kids in my class chose him as their advisor as well. I ended up going to the University of Chicago. Another guy in my class, Steve Frick, went to Harvard, and another guy who chose him, Aaron Franke, went to Columbia. Dr. Roth had gone to Yale for college and gotten a Ph.D. at the University of Virginia.

Whenever we would meet with Dr. Roth, we would try and involve him in various types of drama and reasons for things not working out. I did not do that well on AP exams and brought this up to him, and everyone would always try and involve him in drama. He never would listen or even comment. I remember him doing this with each of us. He refused to get involved, take sides, judge anything, or say one thing or another.

When I told him about not getting the sorts of results I wanted on my AP exams, he simply said I would need to get better grades and do better on my SAT scores. He refused to debate and would only layout a solution. When I complained about my chemistry teacher, he refused to take sides and told me that I better work harder than the other kids in the class and impress her. When I wrote a play for him that he thought was not good, he refused to discuss it with me and told me to read his comments and improve the next time - he gave me a B+ on it and this crushed me because it was the lowest grade I had ever received in the class.

When I called him one Saturday to discuss a paper with him that I was working on that was confusing, and I wanted to discuss the motivations of various characters in the paper, he simply said, "Figure it out. I'm going to play tennis."

When one of my friends got kicked out of Cranbrook for pulling his car up with a group of other kids and asking the child of a faculty member walking home from school if they wanted a piece of candy, I tried to discuss it with him. He simply said: "You'll figure it out. People will judge you based on the people you are friends with. You need to show them you need to be judged on your work."

Everything Dr. Roth said came back to fix your life by concentrating on doing your work and not getting involved in drama. Work was his religion and something he took seriously. He would spend an hour or more grading a five-page paper for his students. His college recommendation for me was eight pages, single-spaced. He threw himself into his job, and this was his religion and meant the world to him - even if he was teaching at a private school and to a bunch of high school kids. He gave his job everything he had. It was all that mattered. He did not care if he was not teaching in a prestigious college, making a lot of money, or doing something very prestigious - he was making the most of his situation.

In contrast to Roth, other teachers had huge numbers of advisees. They would be talking to these advisees and involved in all sorts of drama with them. They would have these massive meetings where they would discuss policies they did not like, what was unfair, sometimes the teachers would get involved in the drama of relationships between students, and it was never-ending. There was so much drama in these other advisees compared to what I observed with Dr. Roth and how he worked with me.

One of my history teachers at Cranbrook was a guy I will call Andrew Soloman, was very much into drama. One time in a class I was not in, he started questioning my girlfriend about why she was going out with me and making fun of her--she was a tough girl, a nationally ranked junior tennis player, and thought it was funny, but I was offended. He would use his position to expose extremely liberal positions. When he did that with my girlfriend, I confronted him, and he said it was nothing. Then, he brought up that I had confronted him in front of the class again, made an issue out of it, and made fun of her.

I went to the director of the history class and brought up what he had done, and he got in trouble with the school and never gave me a grade better than a B in his class - we had ongoing drama. He then did something like this with another student and upset them as well. It was constant drama and issues.

I went over to his house one night for some extra help (he lived in a faculty apartment on campus). He told me that he did not like his job and that the position paid less in an entire year than some of his friends were making working as summer associates in law firms.

His girlfriend was over at the time. She was in the other room, smoking and having a glass of wine, and he was rushing because he wanted to be with her.

When we took our final exam of the year, he was hungover, passed out in his apartment, and did not show up in the auditorium where all of the students in our grade were being given final exams at the same time. Another teacher had to go wake him up. All the students had to wait over 30 minutes for someone to find him and wake him. The school fired him a short time later. Maybe he was drinking and got drunk because he was unhappy with where he was at. I asked about him over the years and watched what happened to him, and, predictably, I was not impressed with him.

Soloman was an example of someone who did not like their job, did not give it their best, got involved in drama, and thought he was better than his job. Drama followed him, and he was like many people. In contrast, Roth stood for something, is remembered, and did the best he could at his job.

The people in my small group did not involve ourselves in this and just put our heads down and got to work. The people in Roth's group always got into great colleges--or better colleges that they should have. One guy the year above me got into MIT, I remember, and he did not even take AP exams in calculus, physics, and other classes that most people did.

I think he was such a good advisor, and the people he mentored did so well because of this lack of drama and a concentration on what matters--doing your work. This is the key to doing well at the practice of law and in life in general. The people that understand this lesson go places, and not understanding this lesson will hold you back. **If you do not and get involved in drama, you will never reach your full potential--it just will not happen.**

Dr. Roth died last year, and when I heard this, I was sad. The school had a small memorial for all the teachers that died that year, and I traveled back for it. I had not been back to the school in over twenty years. I flew several hours from California back to the school. Dr. Roth's family was not at the memorial, but there was a scrapbook in the library for me to write a message to his family.

In the book, I wrote about his message of concentrating on your job, ignoring drama, and doing the best you can--wherever you are--and what it meant to me. It had been three decades since I had seen the school. As I wrote this, I noticed myself tearing up and feeling bad for a moment--but then I stopped. He would not have wanted this. He would want me to put my head down, work, and create drama about it.

Ultimately, that was his message and something I am still learning to this day. I know that the times in my life, I have followed that message I have been the happiest and done the best and the times I have been the unhappiest and done the worst.

See also:

[Ferraris Crashing Into Poles and the Importance of Focus in Your Life and Career](#)

[You Need to Be in the Right Environment](#)

[The Only Thing That Matters Is Commitment](#)