Managing Your BrainStorm: Tools for Coping with Everyday Life as an Attorney

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Objective

To examine the unique boundary lines between your needs as an attorney and the needs of the clients you serve.

To interrupt and restructure your inner talk that will allow you to mentally and emotionally disconnect from work.

Overview

- 1. Not Your Usual BrainStorm
- 2. A Look Inside Your BrainStorm
- 3. BrainStorms Specific to Attorneys
- 4. The Value in Emotion
- 5. Tools for Everyday Life and Work
- 6. References
- 7. Choosing a Therapist

1. Not Your Usual BrainStorm

- We think of brainstorming as a flood of uncensored thought that is focused on one topic and is usually conducted in a group setting where everyone has a chance to contribute.
- This BrainStorm is also a flood of uncensored thought, but the thought is layered with conflicting emotion about your client's needs and your needs.
- There are techniques to help you quiet the conflicting emotion such as meditation, mindfulness and stress reduction, but they don't address the layering that attorneys experience.
- People in professional positions can benefit by combining cognitive restructuring with affect labeling. These are therapeutic methods that can help quiet the professional BrainStorm.
- The goal is to know what to pay attention to and what to disregard.
- If not, you can find yourself in mental overdrive especially at night.

2. A Look Inside Your BrainStorm

- Fight, Flight or Freeze
- The BrainStorm produces symptoms of anxiety and panic by increasing skin temperature, blood pressure and elevating heart rate.
- The physiological reaction pushes your body into sympathetic arousal.
- Also creates a cascade of emotions such as sadness, anger, worry and guilt.

The Up-Side

- The same thoughts that can ramp you up can also be restructured to help you feel calm.

3. BrainStorms Specific to Attorneys

- Your training has taught you to rely on logic and reason, however, by ignoring your own emotional needs you can get stuck in a one-dimensional role.

A Role That:

- Allows you to give assistance and comfort to clients while remaining indifferent to your own suffering.
- Tricks you into thinking that you don't and shouldn't have personal needs.
- Causes you to believe that addressing your own pain is selfish.
- Causes you to feel emotionally vacant.
- Wears you out and has you searching to feel...anything.

4. The Value in Emotion

- Research on Emotion
- Case: Elliott

Elliot suffered from ventromedial frontal lobe damage as a result of a tumor and surgery for removal. After the operation, Elliot reported to Dr. Antonio Damasio that his life was falling apart. While still in the 97th percentile for IQ, Elliot lacked all motivation.

His marriage collapsed as did each new business he started. Damasio saw Elliott as an "uninvolved spectator" in his own life. "He was always controlled. Nowhere was there a sense of his own suffering. I never saw a tinge of emotion in my many hours of conversation with him: no sadness, no impatience, no frustration."

It was clear to Damasio that as a result of his surgery, Elliot was incapable of making decisions, "Elliott emerged as a man with a normal intellect who was unable to decide properly, especially when the decision involved personal or social matters."

Even small decisions were fraught with endless deliberation: making an appointment took 30 minutes, choosing where to eat lunch took all afternoon, even deciding which color pen to use to fill out office forms was a chore. Turns out Elliott's lack of emotion paralyzed his decision-making.

- New neurological research on connections between thinking and feeling supports content and labeling, methods that can be used to help calm your BrainStorm.

5. Tools for Everyday Life and Work

- Research on Affect Labeling: UCLA Spider Study

Affect Labeling

- Affect Labeling: putting feelings into words has long been a tool for therapists to help patients match internal feeling with external emotion.
- Affect Labeling produces increased activity the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, a region of the brain that is associated with thinking in words about emotional experiences.
- Verbalizing our feelings makes emotional pain, sadness, anger less intense by reducing reactions in the Amygdala.

Affect Labeling Process

1. Ask yourself: What am I feeling now?

- Say to yourself or out loud, I feel_____for example, relaxed, worried, frustrated, angry or happy (good and bad are not descriptive enough).
- Your brain responds with matches of feeling word to internal state.
- Stop. There is no need to figure what to do with it yet.

2. Match the emotion you've labeled with how you feel inside your body.

- Close your eyes if you need to. (this helps develop automatic touch points)

3. Plan to act ONLY after you've label the emotion.

For Example:

- (Label) I'm worried
- (Situation) that I will forget my opening statement
- (Resolution) but, I'm going to be fine, and if I'm not, then I will stop and start again

- Don't say, I've got this or no problem. While this may be true, your brain knows you're lying. It's like jumping off a cliff and believing that you'll land safely without first acknowledging that you don't have a parachute.

Sleep

- Some people need to process an issue when they first go to sleep. If this is what you need to do and you still need sleep then set a time limit. For example, until you reposition yourself.
- Repositioning can be tactile end points to bedtime BrainStorms.
- When the thoughts flow, use a "push-back" visual.
- Since a single word has the power to influence bodily systems that regulate physical and emotional stress, breathe deeply and use affect labeling techniques with negative words.
- If you are especially agitated or troubled with thought, get out of the bed and walk slowly for a bit in the house. Keep the lights low, breathe deeply.
- Ask yourself, will my thinking tonight change the outcome? Then, answer the question.

Boundaries

- Learn to listen: Ask, is my decision not to_____damaging_____or just disappointing them?
- What keeps you in the layered emotional state between your needs and your client's needs?
- Are you working from your own professional legal judgement or are you making decisions based on a need for approval, to feel valued or something else?
    - Making decisions based on others' approval or on your guilt will breed resentment.
- Are you trying to avoid feeling something?

Professional and Personal Roles

- The Pleaser: susceptible to those who appear dependent and unhappy.
- The Giver: susceptible to those who appear in need.
- The Protector: susceptible to those who appear inadequate or in danger.
- The Rescuer: susceptible to those who appear incompetent and in crisis.
- The Counselor: susceptible to those who appear confused and troubled.
- The Teacher: susceptible to those who appear to be searching for truth.
- The Crusader: susceptible to those who appear unjustly treated.

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Note: The roles are taken from Carmen Renee Berry's book, When Helping You Is Hurting Me.

7. Choosing a Therapist

While any of these mental health professionals (all loosely known as psychotherapists) can help you deal with emotional issues, their effectiveness will depend as much on their experience and expertise as on their degrees.

Psychiatrist (M.D.): A medical degree plus a four year residency in psychiatry.

What distinguishes psychiatrists from other mental health professionals is their ability to prescribe medicines. They tend to deal with clinical disorders such as schizophrenia, phobic disorder, bi-polar disorders that are treatable at least in part with medication.

Psychologist (Ph.D. or Psy.D.): To be licensed, a psychologist must have either a doctor of philosophy or psychology degree. All doctoral level therapists must complete internships.

Psychologists are trained to diagnose and deal with the full range of disorders such as anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders and abuse. They may also be trained to administer personality and educational assessments.

Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT): They may hold either doctoral degrees or master's degrees and all must complete internships.

Essentially, MFTs are trained in systems theory and their work is focused on how people interact with each other and within larger systems. They work with individuals, couples, children and families.

Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC): While they can have various mental health degrees, this license allows them to practice psychotherapy. All must complete an internship.

LPCs typically focus on general every-day emotional issues brought on by changes in personal situations.

Social Worker (MSW): A licensed clinical social worker has a master's degree and must complete an internship.

Social Workers can practice psychotherapy, however, many work in inpatient facilities and focus on health related issues that affect the individual.