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IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

GETTING UNSTUCK

The end of the year can bring opportunities for reflection about changes we would like to make in our lives. Sometimes, the desire for change conflicts with an awareness that we feel stuck and unable to change. When we're stuck, it's not healthy but it's familiar. Change feels hard. It seems easier to stay in that stuck place than to change, even though change can bring positive results for us and can make us feel and be healthier.

Change can feel overwhelming, but often all we need is to take one small step to create momentum. Following are some quick tips for getting the ball rolling and creating positive energy.

Tips for Getting Unstuck

1. Break it down into small steps.

Pick one step to start. High achievers tend to take on a lot. We often start with a laundry list of things that we think are wrong with ourselves – we're not eating right or exercising right; we're not being social enough; we're not prioritizing ourselves. The laundry list seems insurmountable and leads to our feeling overwhelmed because there are too many things we want to change. If we start with the behavior we want to change or realize we're stuck in an unhealthy pattern, picking one small action will often get the ball rolling and eventually lead to a healthy pattern, behavior, or situation. Rather than make a plan to change every single thing on your list, just pick one thing to start. Choose a small item with a tangible result. You want evidence that you can change. The end result is that you feel the success, and you can build on that success by taking yet another small step.

2. Start in the middle. Start anywhere.

Sometimes it feels like there is a logical order to things and the first milestone is unattainable. For example, I want to run a marathon, but I need to get in shape. Or I want to change jobs or careers, but I don't know what I want to do. There appears to be a long list of steps in the process of effecting change. If you're overwhelmed and don't know where to start, just pick one thing that you can accomplish instead of choosing what you think has to go first. Often, you will gain momentum from the small actions taken.

3. You can do anything for 15 minutes.

When you embark on making a change, don't set yourself up to make a huge change at the outset. For example, don't say you're all of a sudden going to exercise for an hour a day. Tell yourself that you will go for a walk for 15 minutes and it counts. Or say to yourself, "I can work on this challenging memo for 15 minutes and that counts." Literally set a timer and just do 15 minutes of the behavior or activity you'd like to change or adopt. You are not giving up your expectations; you are just changing them. You're setting a bar that you can reach.

4. Don't overthink it. Just do it.

Many lawyers overthink things because we tend to be perfectionistic and we don't want to miss anything. Sometimes that can paralyze us when trying to overcome or change anything about our lives. Rather than understanding the nuances of every change you want to make, just start moving. As you make small changes, new truths appear, new ideas will come to you, your creativ-

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ity will be ignited, and all of this will help you move forward. You will start to gain clarity. You cannot map everything out. Some things in reality are different than they look on paper. Better to just have a simple list and notes about the things you want to accomplish or the changes you want to make and then start to make them. After seeing what the results are, you can recalibrate as you go along.

5. Walk away. Do something else for awhile.

Sometimes we need to take a break and just relax and/or focus on other things in our life where we are not stuck. Just because we feel there are changes we need to make in our life doesn't mean we need to focus on them all the time. Take a step back and regroup. We can sometimes be so serious about our goals that we forget to have fun and enjoy life. Don't always have your eyes on the horizon at some future point. Take time in the moment to appreciate the present.

Dealing With Negative Thoughts About Being Stuck

When we are stuck, we tend to slip into negative thinking. Feeling stuck can bring up feelings of defeat. We not only feel overwhelmed, we also feel incapable and possibly like we're never going to overcome and change. It's hard to imagine getting from point A to point B. Sitting and ruminating over negative thoughts can keep us in that stuck place. We need to combat some of the negative thoughts and feelings. Here are some tips.

1. Instead of stewing, start doing. As lawyers, we are trained to be skeptics and see the negative. Often that prevents us from trying something new or doing something even if we believe it would be good for us. Instead of sitting with our thoughts and ruminating, it makes more sense to just act. As an alternative, allow yourself a short time period per day to feel the negative feelings.

2. Create a shortcut to feeling better. A shortcut is a reminder of something peaceful to lift you out of the cycle of negative thoughts. Visualize a positive place that is soothing and relaxing for you (like the beach), think about something you enjoy (like a piece of music), or hold an object that has special meaning for you.

3. Try a mood log. Take a negative thought you are having, analyze it, and say it aloud or write it down. Once you've said it aloud or written it down, you often gain some perspective. You don't believe it as much as when it was just in your head. Then see if you can replace the negative thought with a more logically objective positive thought. If you say that new thought aloud or write it down, it often makes it more real to you. This process helps create positive neural pathways to replace the negative neural pathways caused by being in the stuck place. (See *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, by David D. Burns, M.D.)

4. Defeat anxiety with deep breaths. Do a body scan. Research has shown that many people find relief from anxiety through deep breathing. If you are feeling anxious about being stuck, you can pause and take a few deep breaths. You can also do a quick body scan. Try to find a quiet place for a few minutes. Begin by intentionally focusing on your scalp and work your way down to your toes. You will most likely find that you are feeling more relaxed long before you reach the end of your body scan.

5. Change how you respond to being stuck. Do you resist resistance? Do you judge yourself for being stuck? Do you think it's a flaw, a sign of weakness, or something that's "bad"? What if you changed your relationship to feeling stuck? What if you allowed the behavior or situation to be okay just as it is? When we change our relationship to what we feel, we release our own resistance to it and it naturally begins to shift and transform. Instead of making it wrong or bad to feel stuck, instead of fighting it, just accept that this is how you feel right now and that's okay. When you stop making it wrong, it stops feeling so bad. Practice letting go of being so hard on yourself.

Conclusion

When we feel stuck, it can be hard to know whose advice, counsel, or wisdom to trust. You can journal and trust yourself. By journaling every day, patterns will emerge about the best part of your day and the worst part of your day. Just recording your thoughts and feelings and then looking at them a few days or weeks later can provide amazing insights. Seek counsel from those who are invested in your success or transition.

If you are feeling stuck in some part of your life, you can also call the OAAP and ask to talk to an attorney counselor. We are here to help you. Call us at 503-226-1057, or 1-800-321-6227.

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Resources: *If the Buddha Got Stuck: A Handbook for Change on a Spiritual Path*, by Charlotte Kastl

Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy, by David D. Burns, M.D.