

Balancing Act

BY DENNIS WONG

Struggling for consciousness, once more I slap the snooze bar on my alarm clock. Still groggy after a night of restless sleep, I stumble into the shower to start my new workday.

I'm running late again, and there's no time for breakfast. At the office I grab a large cup of coffee and add six packets of sugar, hoping the caffeine and sugar fix will help jump-start my brain. It seems to kick in as I review my workload for the day. A pleading must be filed. There is a ton of work to do, but so little time.

Lunchtime has come and gone. I still haven't eaten or taken a break. I grab a can

I didn't notice. The days turned into weeks, and months into years. Then one morning I looked into the mirror and saw the haggard face of an aging man.

While I had been consumed with my law practice, my parents grew old without me. My brothers and sisters got married and had children who grew up without me. My friends drifted away. I was all alone. I would come home to an empty house because I had not made room for anything else in my life, including myself. So I buried myself in work. Then, in 1995, I got married—to someone I had met years earlier. Though my wife was very supportive, I was still working 80 to 90 hours a week, so my dissatisfaction with life continued.

Then one day in 2003 I fell down. One minute I was standing up, and the next thing I remember I was lying

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of soda to ease the hunger pangs and keep working. When the pleading is finally sent to court, it's too late to eat lunch and too early for dinner. I grab another soda to tide me over and keep working. When I finally look up, it's after 8 p.m. and I still haven't had my first meal of the day. This was my routine for more than 15 years.

Even after I switched from a business- and toxic-tort litigation practice to focus on transactional matters, my workload and work habits never changed. Friends and family called to invite me to social gatherings, and I would tell them that I was too busy. Perhaps another day. After a while they stopped calling, but

on the ground, my head spinning. I had vertigo. The doctors couldn't find anything wrong with me, other than that I might have an inner ear infection that was affecting my sense of balance. Still, I was bedridden for weeks, with nothing to do but think and feel sorry for myself. I finally recognized the truth—that I had intentionally created the life I was living. I had created the emotional, mental, and physical imbalance in my life. I had willingly given up my family, friends, and my sense of self to practice law. Eventually the vertigo



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went away, but I can still feel the pressure in my inner ear to this day.

Once I recognized that I had a problem, I decided to take responsibility. In 2004 I found a facilitator to help me create the experiences I wished to have in my life. I began a regimen of exercise and eating three regular meals a day. I ate healthier foods and made sure I got enough rest. I allocated time each day for meditation and introspection.

In the fall of 2007, I decided on a new purpose for my business: to advise people and businesses on their legal and financial opportunities, as well as help them assess the consequences of their choices and actions. This became the foundation for my practice.

My schedule became more manageable because I now break down big tasks into smaller daily tasks. I strictly enforce boundaries in my work hours to reinforce my relationships with clients, friends, and family and help maintain balance between my business, myself, and the rest of my personal life.

As a result, I have found a renewed joy in my practice because of what I am doing and the way I am doing it. I am healthier now than I've ever been since I began practicing law in 1987. The change didn't happen overnight, but now, at age 54, I continue to find more balance in my life. ●

Dennis Wong, an Oakland attorney, advises people and businesses on legal and financial issues.