

A Reminder on World Mental Health Day: Law Firms Can Be Good Places To Make Friends

By **Lori L. Pines**

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Today is World Mental Health Day, an important day to recognize how our mental health and happiness depend on our social connections and friendships. This is true both inside and outside of our offices, because friendships formed at work, along with cooperative teaming, can help lawyers manage a successful, healthy and satisfying legal career.

Of course, the long hours and demanding nature of legal work can bring on stress and even depression in some cases, if left unaddressed. I have lived and truly understand those stresses and strains. That said, I want to remind everyone of something else you don't hear so often: law firms, especially large ones with many employees, can actually be good places to form real friendships.

I remember being in an auditorium in the early 1990s, when Ira Millstein, one of Weil's wisest and most revered partners, was addressing a group of new lawyers. "You spend a lot of time here," he said. "Make some of your best friends here." That struck a chord with me. While I had no control over who I was going to meet at the firm, I was fortunate enough to find a best friend at work who started as my mentor and eventually became the godmother of my children.

In the early stages of my career, we spent hundreds of hours together during out-of-town trials, side-by-side in the trenches fighting on behalf of our clients.



Courtesy photo

Lori L. Pines is Weil Gotshal's chief wellness officer and a litigation partner at the firm.

We worked incredibly long hours together, dealt with stressful situations on a daily basis, but somehow enjoyed countless laughs and became part of each other's lives. Would I have thrived in Big Law without our 30+-year friendship? Probably not. Our friendship and others I have formed along the way in connection with work have certainly been an invaluable mental health anchor for me. It always meant the world to me (and still does) to know that whatever situation I was facing at work or in my personal life, others around me had my back.

Courses on happiness offered at some of the world's leading educational institutions, the Blue Zones project and scientific studies including the 85-year-old Harvard Study of Adult Development all draw the same conclusion: positive relationships and social connections are key factors in our happiness and mental and physical health. Despite what we see in some idyllic social media posts, nobody sails smoothly through a problem-free life. At one time or another, everyone experiences difficulties, challenges, stress and pain. Friends and family are crucial to our mental health because they help us weather life's storms. They keep us grounded, put things in perspective and support us as we manage our problems.

All positive friendships are helpful to us, but not all friendships are created equally. Aristotle described three levels of friendship: (1) casual friends who are part of our business networks, but more than mere acquaintances; (2) friends with whom we do things and have fun; and (3) close friends who care deeply about each other's condition and are there for each other in both the good and bad times. Modern studies that affirm the ancient Greek's thinking have found that you not only have to be compatible with someone in order to form a friendship, but also that you need to spend lots of time with them. On average, you need to spend more than 200 hours with someone before you can consider them a close friend.

Busy adults, like the ones who work in law firms, however, don't have an abundance of free time to hang out with others. That is one of the reasons many people lament how difficult it is to make friends as an adult, emphasizing that it seemed so much easier to make friends when they were in grade school and college, with more free time to play and occasions to socialize.

Now let's consider a place where we spend tons of time with other like-minded adults at meetings,

coffee breaks, and meals. Where we collaborate on projects and sometimes even travel together—our law firms. To be clear, I am not saying lawyers should find all of their friends at work; it is also essential to have strong social connections that have nothing to do with the workplace. But given how much time we spend with our office colleagues, we should at least recognize the opportunity for forging friendships. Speaking from my own experience, the benefits of working and teaming with people who care about you—or even better, those you consider friends—are immense. You are more likely to support one another, cover and root for each other and have fun along the way (the value of which should not be underestimated!).

It is undeniably uplifting to work with your friends. Indeed, when it comes to overall job satisfaction, even being recognized and lauded for the value of your work is insufficient if you perceive that none of your colleagues care about your wellbeing.

As a Mental Health First Aid Instructor, I train people to notice signs and symptoms and behavioral changes in others to provide any assistance and resources they might need. Just as CPR helps us assist individuals in cardiac distress, Mental Health First Aid helps us assist someone experiencing a mental health or substance use-related crisis. And this can literally save someone's life. We can gauge behavior most effectively when we know the people around us on a personal level.

My wish to all of you on this World Mental Health Day is that you nurture your personal relationships and find friendship at the deepest level, either at your firms or elsewhere.

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