



## **Pandemic Well-being: Setting Boundaries by Putting on Your (Oxygen) Mask First**

**Skills and Professional Development**



The “Well-being During the Pandemic” series is a follow-up to the [“Say Yes to Well-being: How Daily Incremental Changes Can Transform our Lives”](#) feature in the April 2020 [ACC Docket](#). In the original article, the authors encouraged readers to incorporate daily incremental changes to create true,

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*lifelong well-being with these six steps:*

- *Inquire about your workplace resources;*
- *Find time to be quiet;*
- *Focus on physical health daily;*
- *Value meaningful connections;*
- *Establish priorities and boundaries; and*
- *Know it's OK to ask for help.*

*In this series, the authors focus on and analyze each of these topics to see how we can use them to support our well-being as the COVID-19 pandemic persists.*

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As we enter winter still uncertain about the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are presented with ever-increasing duties, from business requirements, family responsibilities, and trying to figure out how to celebrate the holidays as the year 2020 races at breakneck speed to an end without the typical promise of a better year to come. In fact, how do we ring in the New Year? Is that even a priority? Let's ponder that and other potential priority and boundary issues to combat increased anxiety, and in some instances, panic.

## **Put on your (oxygen) mask first.**

We are all familiar with the airline safety briefing we get at the start of each flight, which states to put on your own oxygen mask before helping others traveling with you. In the airplane scenario, this advice seems obvious because you need to make sure you can retain consciousness in a state of extreme stress before helping others. Even when used as a metaphor, the message is clear: Our top priority must be our own well-being before we can help others be well.

## **IRAC method**

As a throwback to law school, we are applying the IRAC method to each bullet mentioned above to reach the best conclusion on how to address the stressors caused by the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, we will use the IRAC method on establishing priorities and boundaries to increase your well-being. As a refresher, we will:

1. Identify the ISSUE;
2. Apply the relevant RULE;
3. Conduct an ANALYSIS; and
4. Ultimately reach a CONCLUSION.

## **Establishing priorities and boundaries**

As the year draws to a close, we move forward with increasing demands on our time and threats to our well-being. That said, alongside the surging cases of COVID-19 comes the promise of vaccines. We need to decide how to address priorities while creating boundaries to protect our well-being, as we do not know when or if we will return to the "normal" as we know it.

Even if we did return to that state, was it really optimal? Priorities and boundaries need to be

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constantly evaluated and weighed. It is incumbent on each of us to exercise our power to make choices each day that will enhance, rather than detract, from our well-being. Thus, let's approach it the way we approach any other matter with which we as legal professionals are confronted, and use the time-honored IRAC approach.

## **Issue**

We are living in a drastically different 2020 than when it started. Priorities have changed — our focus is on keeping our loved ones, our coworkers, and our communities safe and healthy.

At the same time, boundaries created by working from the office, taking the kids to school, and enjoying our typical leisure activities with friends and families have often been removed or at least blurred by the perfect storm of lockdowns and social distancing measures. Our long-held routines are disrupted, and our physical and mental well-being are suffering as a result.

## **Rule**

As overachievers, we believe that our priority is to push forward bravely — no matter what — and continue to immediately respond while completing our work in an exemplary manner regardless of the impact on us.

Perhaps, we've also been learning a new language or exploring a new hobby, even though many of us have actually assumed more work and responsibility as a result of the pandemic. For some of us, that includes being our children's teacher or our elderly parents' caregiver. Boundaries are not something that we routinely consider and put in place. The general rule of thumb is that we must prioritize external items above our own needs.

## **Analysis**

The first step is to re-evaluate the belief that our first and primary priority should be an outward focus, such as taking care of our clients and family and others who rely on us, and on accomplishing things that we feel we should do, that other people may view as significant.

While this seems like the ideal, caring mindset, in reality, it is not. If we want to be physically and mentally able to help and take of others, we must prioritize taking care of ourselves. We must first put on our oxygen mask to ensure our well-being so that we can better serve the needs of others.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that boundaries created by external factors, such as going to a physical workplace, are fluid and subject to change. We must learn to create boundaries that social distance us to protect our well-being.

## **Conclusion**

We all know that there comes a time when the law, which is often stable and static, must evolve and become dynamic to meet new demands, challenges, and realities. It is time to do away with our old way of numbering priorities and checking them off a list as though we are shopping for groceries. COVID-19 caused the oxygen mask to drop. Put it on and let us rise together to meet the new challenges.

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Begin your day with mindfulness and gratitude before you start responding to emails and “putting out fires.” Next, group your priorities into categories, such as Self, Work, Family/Friends, and Other.

Now, let’s play the “one for you, two for me game.” For every Work, Family/Friend, or Other obligation, do two Self priorities to increase your overall well-being. The boundaries are the lines you create to ensure nothing impacts your self-care. For instance, block out time on your calendar, close your email, or otherwise “unplug,” so that you can take a walk, meditate, read, or do something else to enhance your well-being.

Refer to our previous articles about fitting in physical fitness, taking quiet time for yourself, or focusing on meaningful connections. Start creating the new habit of taking care of yourself first as a priority, and you will see improvements in your health as well as reductions in stress. Try these six tips to set your boundaries:

1. Take quiet time to consider what is truly important to you.
2. Establish boundaries with your smart devices: Do they serve you or do you serve them? Do you open your devices only to be taken in many directions you never intended? Try writing down your mobile device habits and practices. How do they help you?
3. Decide what your work hours will be, even though you may be working from home. Determine the working hours that suit you: Tell your clients and colleagues that you are “off the grid” and unavailable for an hour or two — this keeps you accountable to yourself. Decide when your day starts and ends. Schedule a lunch or a walk break, and commit to taking it.
4. Decline calls and meeting invitations that you may have previously routinely accepted without considering whether they actually provide value.
5. Journal your thoughts, fears, and concerns while showing compassion to yourself for what you are experiencing.
6. Learn to ask for help and to say no if your well-being would be compromised.

## Parting thoughts

While we cannot control what is happening in the world around us, we can continue to make daily choices to support our well-being and, as a result, become more capable of being there for others. We can use this unprecedented time to learn new ways to create current and future growth. Discard your rigid view of priorities and see them as puzzle pieces that show you at the peak of your well-being.

Until we meet virtually again, put on your own (oxygen) mask first, and stay well!

For more well-being tips, visit [ACC's In-house & Wellness Support Center](#). For more advice on coping during the quarantine, visit [ACC's COVID-19 Resource Center](#).

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Jeffrey Compangano is the general counsel and vice president for the Word & Brown Companies, a leading California provider in health insurance and benefits administration products. Compangano manages all legal matters for his organization's corporate divisions, including complex contract negotiations, intellectual property, and mergers and acquisitions. He served on the board of the ACC Southern California Chapter from 2010 to 2016 and still remains active by participating on numerous committees and as a co-creator and co-chair of the chapter's newly formed attorney well-being committee.

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