

Civility Is Good for Your Health

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Shake not the head, feet, or legs; roll not the eyes; lift not one eyebrow higher than the other; wry not the mouth, and bedew no man's face with your spittle by approaching too near him when you speak.

— George Washington's Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation

Civility, an ancient value rooted in classical philosophy, is about more than simple courtesy and good manners. In its broad classical sense, civility is about good citizenship and about consciousness regarding how our actions affect the larger community.¹ Chief Justice Warren Burger suggested in a 1971 address that civilization itself is at stake:

With passing time I am developing a deep conviction as to the necessity for civility if we are to keep the jungle from closing in on us and taking over all that the hand and brain of Man has created in thousands of years . . . [C]ivility . . . is really the very glue that keeps an organized society from flying apart.²

A greater consciousness about how our behavior affects others and ourselves will lead to greater civility. As one 20th-century philosopher, Dr. Seuss, noted, "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."³ A more classical philosopher, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, in a compelling call to action, stated, "Waste no more time arguing about what a good person should be. Be one."⁴

The specific rules by which civility operates may vary depending on cultural

social norms, but they operate across cultures to facilitate the smooth functioning of society. That civility benefits the community at large is readily apparent, but does the practice of civility also advantage each individual biopsychosocially?

There is growing evidence that incivility is associated with a wide range of risks to both mental and physical health.



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It is no secret that the legal profession has more than its share of job dissatisfaction, depression, alcohol and drug abuse, and divorce.⁵ Research suggests that the incivility that seems to pervade the profession plays a role.

Investigators have begun studying the prevalence and effects of general incivility in the workplace, and have found that it is associated with job dissatisfaction, psychological distress, poorer mental health, and poorer physical health, and that these negative outcomes cannot be explained solely by the presence of job stress.⁶ A large survey focused on attorneys practicing in federal courts found that rudeness and disrespect were rampant, with two-thirds of survey respondents reporting that they had experienced general incivility. The study found that job satisfaction decreased and job stress increased as the frequency of mistreatment by others increased, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, that attorneys with the least job satisfaction and most job stress were most likely to consider leaving federal law practice.⁷ We believe that incivility in other practice areas would contribute to similar results. A nationwide longitudinal random sampling of lawyers by the American Bar Association (ABA) showed that most lawyers —

whether they worked in private, corporate, or government practices — felt increasing dissatisfaction with their practices.⁸ After following the lawyers for six years, the ABA documented that only 29 percent were very satisfied (compared with 40 percent at the baseline data collection point). Dissatisfaction grew significantly for this sample of lawyers and prevailed through-

out the profession, regardless of the type of practice.

Moreover, incivility can have detrimental consequences that are not so immediately noticeable. Studies have shown that experiencing rudeness adversely affects cognitive processing, work-


ing memory, and creativity, and thus interferes with performance.⁹ One need not even be the target of incivility to experience these effects; the mere witnessing of rude behavior can reduce performance, creativity, and citizenship behaviors, increase aggressive thoughts, and cause observers to become less concerned for others' welfare.¹⁰

The harm caused by incivility is not limited to mental health or subjective well-being; it can also affect physical health in profound ways. It is now well-established that anger, hostility, and aggression are linked to increased risk of cardiovascular disease in men.¹¹ In a study that followed University of North Carolina law students as lawyers for 30 years, those law students with significantly elevated levels of hostility were far more likely to have died prematurely from cardiovascular disease.¹²

The burgeoning field of psychoneuroimmunology is investigating the relationship between our emotions and our immune system functioning. This research is finding growing evidence that negative emotions including depression, anxiety, and anger can have substantial detrimental effects on the immune system, which in turn can increase risks associated with infectious disease, cancer,

wound healing, autoimmune disease, HIV progression, type 2 diabetes, and even Alzheimer's disease.¹³

An important protective factor identified in these studies is social support. A recent meta-analysis across 148 studies showed that having adequate social relationships increased the likelihood of survival by 50 percent, which was equivalent to giving up a 15-cigarette-per-day habit and more beneficial than losing weight or exercising.¹⁴ Social support is also linked to happiness, with the happiest people tending to have the strongest social relationships.¹⁵

Civility, then, is a value that benefits not only the community at large, but also each of us as individuals. Each time we treat an opposing counsel, a witness, an employee, or a stranger with courtesy and respect, we contribute to the cultivation of a culture of civility and we contribute to our own health and well-being. 

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Cynthia L. Alexander was a trial attorney with the Civil Division of the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, D.C., from 1993 to 2010, where she represented the United

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While working with families engaged in high-conflict litigation and lawyers suffering from various mental-health and drug-abuse problems, G. Andrew H. Benjamin was named

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ily Law Section. He was elected to serve as president of the Washington State Psychological Association and later his colleagues there created an Association award named after him for "outstanding and tireless contributions." He was honored by the Puyallup Indian Nation's Health Authority for serving as a "modern-day warrior fighting the mental illnesses, drug-alcohol addictions" of the people served by the Nation's program. Dr. Benjamin has published 57 peer-reviewed articles in Psychology, Law, and psychiatry journals. He is the author of three books published by APA: Law and Mental Health Professionals (1995,1998); Family Evaluation in Custody Litigation: Reducing Risks of Ethical Infractions and Malpractice (2003); and The Duty to Protect: Ethical, Legal, and Professional Considerations for Mental Health Professionals (2009).

NOTES

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