

# Generosity, Money, and Happiness

BY ROBIN OAKS

As legal professionals we “give” to our clients—our time, attention, and mental and physical energy—to help with legal conflicts and issues. This article explores the science of generosity (i.e., “giving”) and looks at the current research on money and happiness to consider factors that contribute to legal professionals’ well-being. According to the University of Notre Dame’s Science of Generosity Project, generosity is defined as “giving good things to others freely and abundantly.”

We typically think of pro bono work as giving legal services for little or no monetary compensation. At its root, pro bono stems from the Latin phrase “pro bono publico,” which means “for the public good.” Does generosity beyond pro bono work play a role in sustaining our legal community and can adopting a mindset of “giving” reframe what success truly means in legal practice—and our lives?

## Generosity, Relatedness, and Legal Practice

Based on research studying money and happiness, people generally are happier when spending money on others rather than on themselves. Also, studies have shown that when we spend money on having experiences or building experiential connections this contributes more to well-being than buying material things.

Larry Krieger, an attorney, and Ken Sheldon, a psychologist, conducted a seminal study of 6200 lawyers and judges about life satisfaction and legal practice. They found that when it comes to “happiness”—and reframing success as legal professionals - that the highest and most significant correlations with life satisfaction involved being authen-

tic (feeling engaged at work and aligned with values) and relatedness (meaningful connections and receiving and giving support). These factors correlated with lawyer happiness far more than prestige or income.

Doing for and connecting with others reduces the likelihood of job burnout and contributes to physical and mental health. In U.C. Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center’s White Paper on the Science of Generosity,<sup>1</sup> the studies cited confirm the wide range of health effects when we “give good things to others.” Some benefits include lowering blood pressure and cortisol levels and increasing immunity and longevity.



Robin Oaks

## PRACTICE

1. Talk to employees that you supervise or collaborate with about the specific benefit their work is giving to clients (and their legal matters) beyond any monetary profit or win.
2. Give your time, attention, and/or money to a specific charitable cause in our community and find out the details of what and who your contribution may affect positively (sharing with others what you learn).
3. Look at your monthly accounting sheet and do a well-being audit. Reflect upon whether you are spending money on experiences or material things. Does your money flow in a way that reflects what you value? Consider how a mindset of “giveaway” might add to your life satisfaction—and that of others.

To maximize the mental and physical effects that derive from generosity, people need to feel and know that their giving will have a positive impact on the recipient. Research has shown that providing details about how, what, and who a charitable donation will benefit increases the likelihood that people will donate time or money for a cause. In the legal setting, mental and physical benefits and motivation to perform optimally can be cultivated by frequent communications with associates and employees about how their legal work benefits clients (beyond monetary gain or winning a case).

Any discussion about giving should note that while generous people in work settings are often appreciated and promote business success, these “givers” may be at greatest risk for “generosity burnout” (a topic to be explored at a later date). While *reactive* helping (“people pleasing” and always saying “yes,”) is exhausting and drains energy, *proactive* giving (giving with awareness of mental and physical limits, and setting clear boundaries, when needed) can be energizing.

## ***Income and Emotional Well-Being***

Daniel Kahneman, who just recently passed away, won the Nobel Prize in 2002 for his landmark work that created the field known as *behavioral economics*. Kahneman's research revealed that what people do with money is less often guided by rationale thinking, and more often by emotions and unconscious considerations. Significantly, Kahneman (and Angus Deaton another Nobel Laureate) also over a decade ago conducted research concerning the relationship of income and happiness. Although people with very little money were less happy than others (for a variety of reasons), Kahneman's research found that once a yearly income of \$75,000 was reached, further increases in income appeared to have no significant effect on experienced happiness.

However, in 2021, research by Professor Matthew Killingsworth significantly contradicted Kahneman's longstanding study, and suggested that maybe money does buy—or at least impact—our happiness. Killingsworth obtained 1,725,994 reports from 33,391 U.S. adults by texting them three times a day for several weeks and asking them to respond to the question, “How do you feel right now?” He correlated this data with income levels and found happiness continues to rise as income increases (up to \$500,000 a year level, which was the limits of the dataset).

To resolve this conflict, in 2021 both Kahneman and Killingsworth engaged in an “adversarial collaboration in search of a coherent interpretation” to reconcile their contradictory results.<sup>2</sup> Their joint research and reanalysis published in March 2023 confirmed that both Kahneman's and Killingsworth's prior research were correct and incorrect, in part. The flattening pattern (no effects on happiness after \$75,000-\$100,000) only happened for the *least* happy people. For the majority of others (mid to high scoring happier people), happiness appeared to steadily increase with income (but only slightly so because as income increases it has a diminishing *influence* on happiness). The research revealed the extent to which money affects happiness differs for people depending upon the levels of emotional well-being they felt.

As Killingsworth noted, “If you're rich and miserable, more money won't help.” Money does not *cause* happiness and a myriad of factors contribute to life satisfaction. In fact, research has shown *seeking* money and making it a primary goal has been found to negatively impact life satisfaction. Studies have shown that seeking money compared to having it diminishes the likelihood of cultivating meaningful relationships at home and work, which is a clear factor that impacts our happiness and feelings of living a good life. Generosity, health and wellness, supportive connec-

tions and belonging, and feeling our work is meaningful and valued, all contribute to our sense of satisfaction and success far more than financial gain alone.

## ***Giveaway***

Recently, I attended several ceremonies in New England with an Indigenous Medicine Woman, and one ceremony involved the ancient ritual practice known as a “Giveaway.” A “Giveaway” involves a family in mourning expressing gratitude for a deceased person's life by giving to everyone gathered at the ceremony whatever the living family members feel are their most valued possessions. Generosity has been studied behaviorally in many species and may actually be an evolutionary adaptation that has helped promote survival of species—including our own. Through the giving of something cherished in physical form, a “Giveaway” supports others, and the person who has passed is remembered through the symbolic ritual of community connection.

Experiencing the “Giveaway” ritual, I was reminded deeply of how we are sustained through a interconnected web of life that gives abundantly to us. Yet, only by recognizing our responsibility to choose wisely how to be givers—contributing to the greater good - can benefits be derived for all. As legal professionals, if we adopt a mindset that our legal practice is about positively and generously impacting the “public good”—in the *spirit* of “pro bono publico”—we thereby enrich our livelihoods—and the lives we touch in the process. ■

*Robin Oaks has been an attorney for nearly forty years, and for twenty-five years has provided legal services focused on independent workplace investigations and mediation. She is certified in and has studied a wide range of healing, emotional intelligence, cognitive fitness, and mind-body practices. She is a well-being consultant and offers confidential professional life coaching sessions for legal professionals seeking to optimize potential, restore balance, and thrive during stressful life changes and challenges. Contact: Robin@RobinOaks.com or 805-685-6773.*

## ENDNOTES

1. [https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-JTF\\_White\\_Paper-Generosity-FINAL.pdf](https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-JTF_White_Paper-Generosity-FINAL.pdf)
2. Income and emotional well-being: A conflict resolved | PNAS; Does more money correlate with greater happiness? | Penn Today (upenn.edu)