# Wealth and Well-being

### (Article Two, in a Two-part Series Exploring Money, Finances, and Lawyer Well-being)

By Robin Oaks

*Money often costs too much.* - Ralph Waldo Emerson

As discussed in the first article of this series exploring wealth and well-being, money is a human invention. Our ideas, beliefs and behaviors about making money are not necessarily based on facts, reality, or financial acumen. Look at the following list of proverbs and pick out one that reflects what you *believe* is a guiding truth about money. Whose voice do you hear saying this? Who in your life taught you about money matters? How might our *thoughts* and *feelings* influence our money management and decision-making?

- *Money talks.*
- *Time is money.*
- *You can't take it with you.*
- *A penny saved is a penny earned.*
- *Money can't buy happiness, but it can buy a lot of things that make you happy.*
- *Don't put all your eggs in one basket.*
- *The lack of money is the root of all evil.*
- *The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.*
- *If you want to be rich, don't spend more than you earn.*
- *Money is like manure, it does no good until it is spread.*

For years, the field of economics was considered to be based entirely on rational decision-making and predictable behaviors. Then the research by Daniel Kahnemann and Amos Tversky overturned this foundational premise of economics, revealing that decision-making around finances is influenced by a range of cognitive biases ("traps") and human feelings. In their seminal paper "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk" (1979), they challenged the bedrock belief of economists that rational people would predictably behave in a way that maximizes their income. Their research showed this was not true. Kahnemann was given numerous awards for his body of research: the *Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences* (2002), the *Presidential Medal of Freedom (*2013), and the Lifetime Contribution Award of the American Psychological Association (2007).


*Robin Oaks*

Many book titles about money management reflect how our thinking and emotions relate to financial decision-making. Examples include: *Psychology of Money, Timeless Lessons on Wealth, Greed and Happiness*, by Morgan Housel, and *Your Money and Your Brain, How the New Science of Neuroeconomics Can Help Make You Rich*, by Jason Zwei. In this article, we'll explore why mindfulness, a growth mindset, and emotional intelligence impact money management.

I invited Spencer Sherman,[1] MBA and CFP®, a financial advisor and meditation teacher, to answer some questions about how our thoughts and emotions—especially our attempts to avoid feelings of fear, uncertainty, and inadequacy—directly influence our financial decisions. Spencer is the author of *The Cure for Money Madness*, *Break Your Bad Money Habits, Live Without Financial Stress—and Make More Money!*. He also is the founder and former CEO of Abacus, a values-driven financial consulting firm managing over $3 billion in assets.

As lawyers, we are taught to be skeptical, believing that we always rationally analyze problems with no emotional influences. Yet, numerous studies about legal professionals reveal how external factors and internal biases influence decision-making. In one study of judges, if their alma mater suffered a loss in football,[2] this affected their rulings the next day in court. In another study, researchers discovered that parole board judges were more likely to grant parole requests at the beginning of the workday and immediately after a break, suggesting that judges' rulings were harsher when they were hungrier or mentally fatigued.[3]

We may assume that decisions, especially high-stake ones involving money, are always made rationally; however, the truth is that emotions, our unconscious beliefs, and our way of thinking influence decision-making more than we realize. Certain research suggests that lawyers' traits include 1) "urgency, fast-paced decision-making," 2) "autonomy, controlling and doing it alone," and 3) "pessimistic thinking, expecting perfection." These traits might counter our ability to make wise decisions concerning money matters—and in life. For instance, especially when uncertainty is the prevailing feeling, it's best to: 1) *slow down,* seek help from others, and take time to analyze a financial situation, 2) *mindfully explore emotions and cognitive biases* to be less reactive and more reason-able, and 3) reframe *setbacks as opportunities for learning* - not failures or fixed conditions.

I'll now ask Spencer to provide some advice from his perspective of building proficiency, not only with "the numbers," but also through cultivating emotional intelligence and a resilient, flexible mind.

*Spencer, you've mentioned during presentations your story about having a wake-up call when you found yourself reactively running into a smoke-filled and structurally unstable office building after a fire because you felt - for your clients' sake - you needed to retrieve your laptop. Panic kept you from realizing that the client files were safely backed up. What can you share about building mindful skill sets that contribute to financial and work success?*

*Spencer Sherman:* Attorneys operate in an environment of constant pressure. Client demands, court deadlines, and the billable hour structure all create a perfect storm for stress. Despite all of this, attorneys are fortunate to bring a high level of focused attention to their work. This presents a unique opportunity to leverage that focus to be the counterpoint to the chaos.

When I do mindfulness training with attorneys, the first skill we cultivate is resilience. We begin by recognizing the changing nature of thoughts and sensations. This awareness creates space between stimulus and response, allowing for more objective, rather than reactive, responses and decisions. Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist, psychologist, and Holocaust survivor said it perfectly: *"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."* If every attorney learns just this, I believe they will feel more content—and successful.

Lawyers who embody this tend to make smarter spending and work decisions. For example, instead of following the legal profession's push for higher yearly income, thinking about earnings over your entire career can actually lead to greater financial success (and less burnout!). One of the most profound shifts happens when attorneys learn to see that their thoughts about work and money ("I need more to be secure," "I'm falling behind my peers") are just thoughts, not absolute truths. This insight alone can transform the amount of joy they experience at work.

The billable hour model presents a unique challenge—it explicitly commodifies time in six-minute increments. This structure can create a damaging equation in the mind: Working More Hours = More Money = Higher Net Worth = Higher Self Worth. *FALSE EQUATION!*

To create healthier boundaries, I encourage attorneys to:

1. Recognize the difference between price and value. Your hourly rate is what the market will bear for your services, but your inherent worth as a human being is far greater
2. Practice being more present in daily life. Begin by noticing when you're mentally "billing" your personal time or judging activities solely by their productivity. This awareness itself creates space for more intentional choices.
3. Focus on inputs - the daily or weekly actions that you've thoughtfully chosen as the ingredients for success. When you do this, positive outcomes will naturally follow.
4. Audit your time consciously. Many lawyers I work with review their billable hours not just for client billing, but as a mindfulness practice: "Is how I spent my day aligned with what matters most to me?"

*As a financial advisor, what are your recommendations regarding financial planning at each stage of an attorney's professional development?*

*Spencer Sherman:* The following are some distinctive financial planning challenges:

Associates: Focus on debt management (especially student loans) and establishing savings habits despite lifestyle inflation pressures. I recommend calculating your *Enough* monthly savings amount, doing automated savings, and then using a debit card to spend your remaining monthly cashflow.

Partnership track: As early as possible, begin interviewing partners to learn about how to best prepare for the capital contributions and the tax implications of partnership.

Transitions: Many lawyers leave traditional practice for in-house roles, government positions, or entrepreneurial ventures. While thinking about such a transition, do a financial projection that can tell you if your fears of a potentially lower income are valid.

For all stages, I emphasize building an all-weather financial foundation. Rather than reacting in fear to economic uncertainty, a workplace transition, or market fluctuations, consider:

1. Ensuring your portfolio aligns with your current circumstances and time horizon.
2. Making adjustments based on an objective financial plan, rather than news headlines.
3. Having a general sense of four numbers: Your after-tax income, your spending, your total investment assets, and your total liabilities.
4. Meeting with an objective professional, so you make an informed decision. (FYI: I have my own financial

advisor, so I receive additional perspectives and to make sure I don't react to my own emotional impulses.)

*Can you give an example of a client you worked with who discovered how their thinking and beliefs impacted financial decision-making?*

*Spencer Sherman:* I call this mindset shift a transformation from "more" to "enough." I worked with a client who exemplified the constant chase for "more." Despite substantial financial success, they remained trapped in a mindset of scarcity and inadequacy. No matter how much their wealth grew, they couldn't escape the feeling that they needed just a little bit more to finally feel completely secure.

They began by getting curious about their persistent thoughts of "I'm not enough, I don't have enough, I don't do enough." Rather than fighting these thoughts, my client learned to observe them with compassion. This counter-intuitive approach lessened the fear associated with these beliefs and softened their self-judgment. Over time, the allure of "more" became less seductive.

What truly sparked transformation was when my client focused on adopting a generous mindset. Generosity (whether it's with time, resources, or money) signals to the mind that we have enough to share. This practice gradually dissolved the scarcity mindset and opened the door to experiencing "enough" right now. As the client became freed from the trap of wanting more or things to be different, ironically, they were able to achieve more. When we're less stressed, like animals, we function much more optimally.

The "always more" mindset is endemic in law, where achievement and comparison are baked into the culture. To help attorneys determine their personal "enough," I guide them through this process:

Do the math. Multiply your investment and retirement assets by 4-5%—that's approximately what you could withdraw annually to fund your lifestyle if you want to work less or retire. Combined with other income sources, this gives you a realistic spending framework.

Work on your mindset. Through an awareness practice, increase your ability to recognize and get curious about thoughts like "I'm not enough" or "I don't have enough" without automatically believing them.

Create a values-based spending plan. Direct resources toward what truly matters to you, not what impresses others or meets external expectations.

Practice generosity. Counter-intuitively, giving creates an abundance mindset that reduces scarcity thinking. A well-known meditation teacher, Joseph Goldstein, once said to me, "*I listen to every generous impulse and act accordingly*." Money is just one of many ways to be generous—your time, skills, and attention all count. The Buddhist principle of non-attachment applies here too. Whenever we are generous, we loosen our grip on something, whether it's a fixed idea, a material possession, or the tendency to say "yes" to every new project. The more we soften our grasp, the more we enrich and widen our experience of life.

*I know that you've been conducting professional development retreats ("Mindful Advisor" and "Reset Retreats") for nearly ten years, exploring wealth strategies and mind-body practices for entrepreneurs, executive coaches, financial advisors, teachers, CPAs, therapists, attorneys, and more. Could you share some practice techniques?*

*Spencer Sherman:* One powerful technique I use in my retreats is to have participants visualize themselves a year from now after having achieved a major goal. Then I ask

## The Power of Widening Your Aperture for Expanding a Crowded or Tense Mind

BY SPENCER SHERMAN, MBA, CFP®

By widening your aperture, you can recognize that pursuing meaningful goals doesn't require tying your happiness to specific outcomes. This freedom actually enhances performance and creativity while reducing burnout. When attorneys feel overwhelmed, I teach them to literally widen their visual field. This simple practice can break the tunnel vision of scarcity thinking.

1. Go to a window with a view or go outside and widen your gaze. Look out, with as wide an aperture as possible.
2. Let your left eye gaze left and your right eye gaze right. (1 minute)
3. Let go of pursuing random trains of thought & allow your inhales & exhales to become slower. (1 minute)
4. Allow your exhales to be longer than your inhales. (2 minutes)
5. Now, immediately apply this spacious mind to your most important project.

them to work backwards by asking the question: "*How did I get there?*" This exercise reveals insights they didn't realize they already had - we often know deep-down what we need to do but that wisdom often gets crowded out by the minutiae of day-to-day workload and deadlines.

Another is called "widening your aperture," and the steps are set out for you to try in the practice box at the end of this article. The mind excels at creating new "mores" to chase—more wealth, status, recognition—but this constant grasping causes us to move through life propelled by inadequacy rather than purpose.

As John D. Rockefeller discovered, even becoming the world's first billionaire in 1916 didn't satisfy his craving for "just a little bit more." The math of enough can be calculated, but the mindset of *enough* requires cultivation—and conscious practice. For attorneys, who live in a profession defined by precedent, comparison, and measurable achievement, finding your personal enough may be the most revolutionary act of your career—and the one that leads to your definition of well-being and success. ■

*Robin Oaks has been an attorney for nearly four decades, and for twenty-five years has provided legal services focused on independent workplace investigations and mediations. For over two decades she has studied and become certified in a wide range of emotional intelligence, cognitive fitness, and mind-body healing practices especially useful for legal professionals and the stressors they face. She offers MCLE presentations, PROS training programs, witness well-being support, and individualized coaching sessions empowering legal professionals to thrive in livelihood and life. Contact: Robin@RobinOaks.com or 805-685-6773.*

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## Endnotes

1 https://www.Spencer-Sherman.com
2 *Eren, Ozkan, and Naci Mocan. 2018. "Emotional Judges and Unlucky Juveniles." American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 10 (3): 171–205.DOI: 10.1257/app.20160390*
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