COUNSELOR, COUNSEL THYSELF (WITH AI)!

By Andrew Sharp

Lawyers are trained to give advice, not take it. We pride ourselves on clarity, objectivity, and strategy when life gets hard. But when it comes to our own growth, balance, and sense of purpose, most of us could use a counselor of our own. The catch is that many of us would never actually hire one unless we had to. We're too busy, too skeptical, or too ashamed to share our inner lives with another person.

That's where artificial intelligence, used carefully and intentionally, can serve a surprising role. Not as a therapist, not as a boss, but as a private coach that helps you ask better questions and structure your days with purpose. It may even open the door to more meaningful pro bono work. AI won't solve burnout or replace the connection that comes from human mentors. But AI can act as a consistent, judgment-free mirror, reflecting your own thoughts in sharper relief and reminding you of what matters most.

A New Kind of Counselor

For most of us, AI conjures headlines about plagiarism, hallucination, or dystopian robot law firms. But strip away the hype, and at its simplest, an AI chat tool is just a language model trained to recognize patterns, summarize information, and help you think through problems conversationally. It therefore functions very well as a writing partner, an idea coach, or a paralegal that's always available.

That combination of responsiveness and detachment makes AI a powerful aid for reflection. It will ask follow-up questions, summarize your thoughts, and propose next steps. You can use that dynamic to build better routines, test new habits, and turn vague intentions into action. Think of it as hiring a digital "counselor" whose sole purpose is to help you practice law and live a little more intentionally. Let's take a look at three specific ways you can use AI to help you in your career.

Caution: AI tends to be sycophantic, which can rob you of the true value of having an objective digital coach that helps you grow. I suggest going into the "personalization" settings of your chosen tool and telling it to avoid sugar-coating or being overly positive. If the tool you're using doesn't offer this, just write a pre-prompt that says the same and paste it into all your conversations. This provides context, which makes all the difference for getting quality AI outputs.

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Reflecting on Growth: A Daily Prompt

The first way lawyers can use AI as a personal coach is to prompt reflection. A simple exercise is to ask your AI assistant to help you debrief your day. You might prompt it like this: "Ask me five quick questions to help me reflect on my workday, what went well, what drained me, what I learned, how I helped someone, and what I'll do differently tomorrow." Then, after you respond in a few sentences, ask it to summarize what it hears: three takeaways, one habit to try tomorrow, and a short sentence of encouragement.

The beauty of this tiny ritual is not in the AI's wisdom, but in the act of slowing down to notice your patterns. Over time, you can start to see where your energy naturally peaks, which relationships make you stronger, and what tasks are draining your sense of purpose. Many lawyers, used to constant motion, never stop long enough to make these observations. The AI simply holds up a mirror long enough for you to look.

I did this myself and found it enormously helpful psychologically. The ability to "unload" at the end of the day was so powerful that it helped decrease my stress and anxiety after work. It wasn't easy to stay disciplined enough to use this prompt daily, but I got a lot of value out of it. And the bonus? After a few weeks the AI was able to help spot larger patterns and trends I might not have noticed and draft a report on my activities.

Once you've practiced daily reflection, you can take it further. Try having AI help you build a simple 90-day growth plan. Give it a few areas you'd like to focus on, perhaps improving courtroom presence, deepening business relationships, or mentoring younger lawyers. Ask it to turn those into specific, measurable goals. You can even have AI help you set reminders or write a short "Friday review" script that prompts you to check in on progress (this is my favorite hidden gem feature—just ask AI to remind you on a specific recurring basis and it will, via email).

Finding Better Balance: A Time Audit

If reflection is the foundation, balance is the next floor. Many of us entered law because we wanted to make a difference. Somewhere along the way, though, the billable hour (or its nonprofit cousin, the bottomless inbox) crowded out everything else. AI can help you design a week that reflects your actual priorities, not just your most urgent emails.

Start by conducting what you might call a "time audit." Tell AI roughly how your last week went, how many hours you devoted to client work, meetings, writing, email, and personal commitments. Or better yet, upload a set of your actual time logs (redacted, of course). Ask AI to create a short analysis: where you might reclaim time, what could be delegated, and what one or two things consistently make you feel like you're "winning the week." Then have it draft a "model week," with specific blocks for deep work, client contact, and recovery time.

Seeing your schedule written out this way can be humbling. Most of us think we're busier than we are yet spend more time reacting than planning. AI can help you see the week as a system you can redesign. Maybe your focus peaks in the morning, so you protect that time for drafting instead of calls. Maybe you realize you haven't built in any true downtime. The AI won't judge you, but it will make patterns harder to ignore.

Over time, using AI to fine-tune your week can change your sense of control. You become less reactive, more deliberate. Technology is there to remind you of something the profession too often forgets: Balance is a precondition for doing excellent, ethical work.

Reclaiming the Human in Pro Bono: Your Best Fit

The third and perhaps most meaningful way to use AI as a counselor is to rekindle or expand your pro bono work. Most lawyers genuinely want to serve but feel constrained by time, uncertainty, or fear of being out of practice in areas beyond their specialty. AI can lower those barriers, not by doing the work, but by helping you plan and prepare efficiently.

For example, you might ask your AI to help identify your best "pro bono fit." Tell AI to search for the Chicago Bar Foundation's listing of pro bono opportunities on Paladin.com and the kinds of legal problems that feel closest to your comfort zone. In return, it can summarize a clear statement of focus, such as, "I can commit to one Saturday clinic per quarter focusing on housing and debt issues," and even suggest types of organizations to explore. Seeing your capacity written down makes it more concrete, and thus more likely to happen.

Once you've found the right fit, you can use AI to prepare for clinic work between matters. Suppose you're volunteering at a housing clinic for the first time in years. If they give you a training manual or similar materials, upload them to your AI model and ask it to quiz you on them. AI is much more reliable at giving accurate information when it has a specific document to refer to. You can then go into your shift or case feeling sharper and more confident, which makes your time more valuable to both clients and staff.

Another option is to ask AI to help you build empathy for your future clients. For example, ask it to create a simulation where you play the role of someone facing a housing issue. Then have AI ask you what you do based on what happens. Can you imagine how much more confident you will feel walking into this pro bono case after feeling like you've put in the time to "walk a mile" in the shoes of your client? As someone who has worked with many legal aid lawyers, I can say that this is exactly what many would love their pro bono volunteers to be doing for preparation.

Most importantly, AI helps you turn pro bono from a guilt-driven afterthought into a planned rhythm of your professional life. You can set recurring calendar reminders for outreach, training, or debriefing. The tool becomes an accountability partner, a reminder that service is not extra. It's part of the job.

Guardrails and Ethics

None of this means AI is without risk. If you haven't been reminded recently, lawyers have special obligations regarding confidentiality and supervision, and the Rules of Professional Conduct apply in this digital space. Never give AI client names, identifying facts, or confidential information unless you're using a tool approved by your firm or organization that guarantees data protection. When in doubt, anonymize and summarize.

Be wary of overreliance, and don't be lazy. AI can be confidently wrong, which can lure you into a false sense of security. Always double check AI output against reliable sources.

Never give up your human judgment. AI can draft a checklist, but it can't tell you what matters most to your client, or to you. It can generate an email, but you are responsible for tone, accuracy, and appropriateness. Treat the tool as a collaborator, not a shortcut. It's like a junior associate who always has ideas but still needs your supervision.

A Tool to Make You More Human

There's a certain irony in using artificial intelligence to become a better counselor, to others and to yourself. But maybe it's not so strange. The best lawyers have always relied on tools to think better: notebooks, mentors, even yellow pads filled with shorthand notes from a client meeting. AI is simply the next tool in that lineage: faster and more conversational, but still just a way of externalizing thought.

The deeper point is not about technology at all. It's about rediscovering the habits that make this profession sustainable: reflection, balance, and service. If AI can make those habits easier to practice, that's worth embracing. You don't have to be a technologist to benefit. You just have to be curious enough to start.

So, the next time you find yourself staring at your calendar, feeling pulled in five directions, open a chat window and type a question you'd never ask out loud: "What do I really want my week to look like?" See what happens when you answer it. Let the conversation unfold. You might be surprised at how much wisdom you already have, just waiting for the right counselor to bring it out. ■

Author's note: The examples above are for general educational purposes and do not constitute legal or mental health advice. Lawyers should follow their firm or organization's AI policies and the Illinois Rules of Professional Conduct regarding confidentiality and supervision.

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AI Psychosis and the Legal Profession: Ethical Fault Lines

By Daniel A. Cotter

Recent reporting highlights a striking example of what some call "AI psychosis": an individual who, after extensive interaction with generative AI, became convinced he had discovered a new form of mathematics, an insight reinforced and elaborated upon by the AI system itself. Whether framed as overreliance, delusional amplification, or simply misplaced trust, the episode underscores a core risk: AI can validate and deepen false beliefs with persuasive fluency. AI has been referred to as a "sycophant" and a "user pleaser."

The concern is not merely theoretical. Commentators, and even novelists such as Michael Connelly, have explored how AI systems, designed to be responsive and engaging, may inadvertently create feedback loops that blur the line between assistance and affirmation. Cases alleging product defects and suicides resulting from feedback loops have emerged.

For legal professionals, that dynamic raises immediate ethical implications. Clients may increasingly arrive with AI-generated "theories" about their case, held with unwarranted certainty. Under Rule 2.1, lawyers must exercise independent judgment and render candid advice, which may include disentangling fact from AI-fueled fiction. In more extreme instances, Rule 1.14's guidance on diminished capacity may come into play if reliance on AI reflects impaired decision-making.

Lawyers themselves are not immune. Rule 1.1's duty of competence now extends to understanding AI's limitations, including its tendency to hallucinate or reinforce user bias. Courts have already sanctioned attorneys for submitting AI-fabricated authorities; the next frontier may involve more subtle cognitive distortions.

The lesson is straightforward but urgent: AI is not just a tool of efficiency—it is a potential influence on belief. Ethical lawyering in the AI era requires vigilance not only over outputs, but over how those outputs shape human judgment. ■

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