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Road to Resilience

A Smarter Way to Close the Legal Year

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Founders of Professional Mind Resilience Institute (PMRI)

Legal professionals know the feeling: the year accelerates, matters multiply, the inbox swells and the body quietly absorb the strain. By the time the final stretch arrives, you are already carrying months of accumulated cognitive load. Yet there is a profound benefit in learning how to finish the year well.

When you finish with intention rather than urgency, you protect your mental clarity, safeguard your wellbeing, and step into your break with a sense of control instead of collapse. You create the psychological space required for genuine restoration, which you can feel not only in your mind but in your decision-making, your relationships, and your ability to switch off.

Finishing well is not about emptying your desk. It is about shaping your cognitive landscape, what you take into your break and what you leave behind.

These twelve expanded strategies are written directly for you, the legal professional navigating this demanding period, offering practical tools to end the year with steadiness and confidence.

1. Start with a Cognitive Inventory, Not a To-Do List

A cognitive inventory is a deeper exercise than listing tasks. It captures everything your mind is carrying, including unresolved matters, decisions waiting for attention, postponed emails, deadlines you are holding mentally, client-related concerns, and small tasks that create irritation.

Write everything down without filtering. Only then sort the list into must finish, can delegate, can postpone, and can close quickly. Seeing these items on paper gives your mind space and often reduces the sense of overwhelm immediately. You work more clearly once your mental load has been released onto the page.

2. Identify Your Critical Five for the Final Stretch

From your inventory, identify the five items that will genuinely reduce your mental load if completed before your break. Do not keep this list in your mind. Write it down and examine it.

You will often discover that what feels urgent is actually trivial, and that the real sources of stress are the tasks you have mentally avoided. Your Critical Five become the anchors of your final weeks. Everything else receives appropriate attention without unnecessary perfection.

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3. Use Time Blocking to Protect High Value Thinking

By the end of the year your cognitive reserves are lower, and deep thinking becomes more fragile. Time blocking helps you preserve clarity by giving your day structure.

Set aside mornings for drafting or strategy, midday periods for calls and updates, and afternoons for admin and smaller tasks. Communicating your focus times to your team protects these blocks. Time blocking allows you to work from intention rather than constant reaction.

4. Close the Open Loops Before They Drain Your Break

Open loops are the small unfinished tasks that follow you into your break and prevent your mind from settling. These may include short replies, final edits, quick billing tasks or matters you meant to delegate.

Closing these loops brings a surprising sense of relief. Although each task is small, completing them removes unnecessary mental clutter and helps you step into your break with greater ease.

5. Create a January Landing Page, Especially When Managing Many Files

A January landing page removes the fear of returning to chaos. Create a simple document that lists each active matter. For each file, include the current status, the first step required when you return, upcoming deadlines, items awaiting external input, and who is responsible for next actions.

If you have a large volume of files, group them by urgency or work area. Keep the landing page concise so it offers clarity, not complexity. This practice reduces January anxiety and makes it easier to disconnect fully.

6. Set Boundaries Early, Clearly and Professionally

Unrealistic expectations create unnecessary pressure at this time of year. Communicate early with clients about what will and will not be completed before the break. Explain why certain timelines cannot be compressed and clarify who they can contact in your absence.

These conversations may feel difficult, but they protect your wellbeing and prevent misunderstandings. Clients appreciate honesty more than unspoken strain. Early boundaries create predictability for everyone involved.

7. Pace These Weeks Instead of Sprinting Through Them

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By December, many practitioners feel beyond exhausted. The fatigue is cumulative, and some begin to dread going on leave because preparing for the break feels overwhelming. Pacing helps counter this.

Take short restorative pauses, set realistic daily goals, avoid habitual late-night work, step outside for a quick reset, and slow your transitions between tasks. Planning ahead and sticking to your plan reduces anxiety. You cannot sprint toward restoration. Controlled pacing protects your remaining energy.

8. Design Your Break with Intention and Support Your Nervous System

Many legal professionals work until the last moment, close the office door, and immediately rush into another layer of stress such as travel, packing, and holiday commitments. This abrupt shift keeps the nervous system in a state of hyperactivation instead of allowing it to settle.

Create a gentle transition into your break. Build in a slower morning or evening, reduce unnecessary commitments, and avoid overstimulation where possible. Intentional transitions help your body move from stress to recovery, which is essential after a demanding year.

9. Delegate for Completion, Not Continuity, and Let Go of the Fear

Trying to complete everything yourself before going on leave is often rooted in fear. This may include fear of mistakes, fear of burdening colleagues, fear of losing control or fear of disappointing clients.

Delegation lightens your load and strengthens your team. Provide clear context, specify the required outcome, offer timelines, and ensure the person has all necessary documents. Clarity helps others succeed and helps you release unnecessary responsibility.

10. Apply the Two Minute Rule for Small Tasks

The two-minute rule removes a surprising amount of mental clutter. If a task can be done in two minutes or less, do it now. This includes forwarding documents, replying briefly to a simple email, signing a form, or confirming an appointment.

Small tasks left undone accumulate and create unnecessary pressure. Completing them immediately clears your mental space and prevents a backlog from forming during an already demanding period.

11. Reduce Decision Fatigue Through Pre Commitment

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By the end of the year, even small decisions can feel heavy because your cognitive reserves are stretched. Pre commitment helps reduce this load by deciding certain routines and boundaries in advance.

Commit ahead of time to your working hours, your email windows, your admin times, meeting limits, and simple daily routines. This prevents unnecessary mental negotiation and preserves your energy for the decisions that genuinely matter. Pre commitment gives your days steadiness and protects clarity when you need it most.

12. Commit to a Daily Reset Ritual

During busy periods, your nervous system needs consistent signals of safety. Choose one small daily practice, such as breathing exercises, stepping outdoors, stretching or a moment of stillness. Repeat it consistently.

These resets help regulate your stress response and improve clarity. They do not need to be long. A short ritual practiced daily can stabilise your mind and support your emotional balance.

Finishing Well Is a Form of Professional Self Respect

Finishing the legal year well is not about doing more. It is about creating clarity, setting boundaries, reducing cognitive load, and supporting your own wellbeing. When you finish with intention, you create the conditions for genuine rest, and you return renewed rather than depleted.

You deserve to finish well.

You deserve a restorative break.

And both begin with the choices you make in these final weeks.

For more insights or to explore resilience strategies for legal professionals, visit www.pmri.co.za.

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About the Authors:

Sonja Cilliers is an advocate of the High Court of South Africa. She was admitted as an attorney of the High Court in 2001 and, after practicing as an attorney for several years, did pupillage and became a member of the Pretoria Society of Advocates in 2005. Sonja has been in practice, as attorney and advocate for an aggregate of 24 years, and obtained extensive experience in litigation in various fields of the law; including contractual law, banking law and litigation, corporate law, family law, insurance law and personal injury law. Sonja completed her B(Proc) (1998), LLB (1999) and LLM (contractual law) (2003) degrees at the University of Pretoria. She is qualified as an AFSA trained Arbitrator and Mediator and obtained the one-year diploma from AFSA in Arbitration and Mediation in 2003.

Maryke Groenewald is a transformation coach with a passion for facilitating personal and professional growth. She holds an Honours in Psychology, a BCom in Behavioral Sciences, and certifications in Master Transformation Coaching, NLP Practitioner, and Neuro-Coaching. Maryke combines her diverse skill set and experience to help individuals unlock their full potential. Maryke has been coaching and training individuals for over 10 years. She frequently does group training and coaching for corporate teams and universities.