



Coping with the stress of practicing law

STRESS IS YOUR ENEMY AND THERE ARE PROVEN WAYS TO FIGHT IT

Our noble profession is earmarked by deadlines, unknown factors in the court room, unknown rulings on our cases and daily adversarial challenges.

Some of us thrive on this. I belong to the other group. That group who is prone to stress over things they cannot always control. The group that battles with their monkey minds of “what ifs.”

A little stress can motivate and elevate performance. Stress is an essential component to survival. The “fight-or-flight” mechanism can tell us how and when to respond to danger – a life-saving instinct. We all worry. Studies show that almost one-third of people have dealt with a level of anxiety that would qualify as a disorder. With the exception of substance abuse, anxiety disorders are the most common mental health diagnosis. If uncontrolled, this becomes chronic stress which can affect a person’s mental and physical well-being. Too much stress can literally kill you.

As I researched for this article, I found a cute phrase: “Worrying works. Ninety percent of the things I worry about never happen.” Yes, that’s me. If it is you too, let’s explore this together and look for solutions. We’ll look at the mental and therefore physical manifestations of stress, why you don’t want to get to those extremes, and suggest ways to neutralize its cause and effect. If your brain starts asking the “what if” question too many times, it can come up with all sorts of horrendous scenarios which may never happen. And even if you then become busy figuring out the solution to what may never happen, you can’t be sure, because your crystal ball is all fuzzy.

Anxiety and stress is often solving imaginary problems, without the solving part. You don’t want to get so swamped with negative scenarios that you miss out on the world around you and lose focus on your law practice and family.

Why we do not want too much stress in our lives

Everyone’s body shows stress in different ways, from external signs such as

hair loss, tired eyes and weight gain, to internal signs, such as chronic diseases. When stress is left unmanaged, it can trigger a number of signs and symptoms. I list some below, so you realize what could happen if you don’t find ways to manage your stress at work.

Heartbeat/vasovagal

When stress is excessive, it is not uncommon to experience high blood pressure or heart palpitations. The brain releases hormones that cause your heart to pound, since stress hormones are stimulants. These hormones include adrenaline and cortisol. They become injected into your bloodstream, where they act on nerves of the heart and cause palpitations. You become lightheaded. You cannot focus. You cannot work. That is not good.

Even worse, sometimes the mind and then body, overreacts to triggers, such as total emotional overload. You have seen it in the movies when someone gets bad news and collapses. It causes your heart rate and blood pressure to suddenly drop and reduces the blood flow to your brain. If it becomes severe, it can result in a loss of consciousness and syncope. Vasovagal is usually harmless and requires no treatment, but it is dangerous to have an episode of syncope because you can injure yourself. Before fainting from vasovagal, a person may experience the following symptoms: pale skin, lightheadedness, nausea, yawning, blurred vision, feeling warm and cold sweats. Some people are more prone to this than others; however, if you feel you may faint, lie down and lift your legs to allow gravity to keep blood flowing to your brain.

Decreased immune system

The main types of immune cells are white blood cells, also called lymphocytes. When a person is stressed, the hormone corticosteroid can suppress the effectiveness of the immune system, lowering the number of lymphocytes in the body. This inhibits the body’s ability to

fight off antigens, making us more susceptible to infections.

Stress can also have an indirect effect on the immune system. When people are stressed, they are more likely to eat unhealthy foods, smoke or drink. These behavioral coping strategies may temporarily reduce symptoms of stress but may also end up triggering an immune response. And maybe addiction.

As you get older, the adrenal system evolves. Some of us become more prone to stress. However, hopefully with age comes wisdom about how to cope with and reduce stress. I will address solutions shortly.

Poor digestion and weight gain

During stress, digestion is inhibited, while after stress, digestion is increased. Studies suggest that the adrenaline released during a stress response may have a direct relationship with the development of ulcers. The bacterium *Helicobacter pylori* has been found to cause some stomach ulcers. It lives in your digestive tract and is able to cause sores. Studies have shown that psychological stress enhances the colonization of *Helicobacter pylori* in the stomach.

Being stressed can inevitably trigger poor decisions in diet. Another effect that stress has on food is the perception of control. Some may begin to restrict and binge on food because having control over food may help soothe the anxiety. Stress can trigger eating disorders, so it is important to stay mindful of what you are putting into your body during periods of stress.

Acne

Acne is one of the more visible ways in which stress is able to manifest itself. Cortisol is released into the bloodstream and can affect hormonal balance, which in turn results in hormonal acne. People who are stressed tend to also touch their faces more and spread bacteria, contributing to the development of acne. Fiddling around with your face or hair

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due to nervousness shows how stressed you are.

The increase in acne may be due to higher levels of sebum produced during stressful periods of time. Another theory suggests that the body responds to stress by directing blood flow and oxygen to the areas fighting stress and withdraws it from areas such as the skin.

Headaches and sleep disturbances

Many studies have also suggested that stress inflicts aches in the neck and head region which is one of the most common causes of tension-related headaches and can also trigger migraines. You may end up grinding your teeth during sleep. This will make your dentist unhappy and will be expensive for you. Which of course, may end up making your dentist very happy.

Have you ever had those nights where you toss and you turn, consumed with the “what ifs”? Poor sleep, a common result of stress, can exacerbate headache-prone people. If you can’t sleep, you cannot perform well at work.

Hormones gone wild: Libido decrease and relationship problems

As mentioned above, we are driven by many hormones which are affected by stress. It is not uncommon to experience a decrease in libido during stressful periods of time. When your body reacts to stress, you go through a series of changes in order to prepare you to run away, a “fight-or-flight” response. This can be attributed to cortisol or epinephrine. If stress is not reversed and becomes chronic, then it is able to affect the release of hormones and cause low libido.

Another factor of low libido is relationship stress. A lack of interest of one partner can affect the interest in the other partner. Some people bring problems home from work, which may impact family dynamics. This then becomes a vicious circle of additional stress. Stress at work. Stress at home. There is no escape.

Muscle tension

Muscles may become tense during times of stress. This may cause stiffness

for a brief moment or up to hours and days until the stressor is resolved or help is sought. The degree and severity can vary from person to person. Many who experience stress are sore in their back, neck, shoulders, or chest. This will obviously affect your ability to work and your quality of life.

Solutions

We all have a choice. We can distress, which will allow any or all of the above to occur. Substance abuse is a risk. Loss of life and loss of relationships is another.

Or...

We can de-stress. Which will control and hopefully minimize any and all of the above. These are some tips and tools for de-stressing:

Identify, label and compartmentalize the “what ifs”

Try to get out of your thoughts and focus on the world around you. Those “what ifs” are not real. The people around you are. You can take control of who you are with them. You can take control of how the scenarios can play out. You can examine why the worry occurred and use it as a stepping stone to prevent future triggers. Remember, you are not your thoughts if you can control them. If you allow yourself to think all sorts of crazy scenarios, you are going to end up as the leading actor in a horror film. Written, produced and directed by you. When a worrying thought pops up, acknowledge it, label it as such, but do not identify with it and let it overtake you. If you start to buy into the thought, you give it power over you. Worrying thoughts are sticky and once you give them credence, they love to take seed.

Be mindful

Try to redirect your focus from internal chaotic thoughts to the world around you. Imagine you are on a train. You cannot get rid of the other passengers but you don’t have to give them your attention either. Give the world your full attention and focus on something that makes you smile. If you practice this refocusing, when your “what ifs” rear their

ugly thoughts, you will evolve your mindfulness. Try to avoid those negative thoughts hijacking your mind.

Harvard happiness expert Daniel Gilbert has written that a wandering mind is not a happy mind. Apparently, people spend 46.9 percent of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they’re doing, and this mind-wandering typically makes them unhappy. So what should we do? Catch yourself in the act. This is your new game to play. Check in with yourself: Is my attention focused on the here and now? Or is my mind wandering to the past or future and engaging in some “what ifs”?

We are happiest and most effective when our minds cease to be time travelers and stay focused on the here and now.

Be aware of triggers

When were you last stressed about law? Why were you last stressed about law? What is it at your office that you can change? What is it at your office that you cannot change and have to rethink? Which work relationship gives you stress? Make a list and try to explore and then reframe your triggers. By doing so, maybe you can come up with new solutions and neutralize.

Notice the physical sensations in your body that accompany your emotions. Muscle tightening. Shallow breaths. Sweating. Palpitations. Be prepared to breathe deeply and calmly and not give them life. If you are aware in advance, you can prepare in advance. The key is to identify mounting anxiety as soon as possible. If you educate yourself about what triggers anxiety, it will be less unpredictable and as a result, far less overwhelming.

Meditation and yoga

Some people swear by this. Others do not. See if it works for you. Yoga slows you down for more awareness. It’s hard to really stress about the law office in a downward dog pose. Learn how to breathe slowly and deeply and slow

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everything down. That way you can keep control.

Exercise

Exercise releases happy chemicals. I always exercise. Again, it's hard to focus on the "what if" doomsday when you are panting and sweating. Try going to the gym during your lunchtime to recalibrate.

Sleep

Try to aim for seven to eight hours of sleep per night and stick to a regular sleep schedule. Make an effort to be in bed at the same time every night and wake up at the same time every morning. Changing sleeping patterns can negatively affect your ability to sleep and results in stress and headaches. Of course, when you are in trial, that is not easy. However, be prepared for the longer hours while in trial: If you "fail to plan, you plan to fail." If you try to get as much pre-trial work done as possible, including letter briefs that may be needed; you will be more prepared for those long trial hours. And hopefully able to get more sleep.

Professional advice

If you feel as though life stress is affecting your ability to function at work or your libido at home, consider symptom management. This may be anything from going on hikes, doing acupuncture or seeing a therapist or psychiatrist. Chronic stress will decrease as you use specific strategies to prevent worry and stress from affecting your life. Talking with a specialist about stress management may help with applying necessary coping techniques. There is nothing wrong with asking a professional for help. That is what they are there for.

Help others who need it

One of the best things I ever did as a result of being a lawyer was becoming part of Los Angeles Trial Lawyers Charities. It's hard to have a pity party when you are serving amongst the homeless, disabled, and needy kids. It puts

everything in beautiful perspective. By throwing yourself into helping others, you can leverage the "what if" momentum to prevent your brain shifting back to your worries.

Friends

I am blessed to have wonderful and patient friends. If you are stressing about work, a good friend will listen selflessly. A good friend will also help disarm a "what if" thought and make you laugh. A good friend is priceless as we practice law. Luckily, we have all of the friends at CAALA who are ready, willing and able to be good friends and lift us up.

Educate yourself

Some of the stress that comes with practicing law can occur when we have a new and unknown legal obstacle to jump over. It is fertile grounds for "what ifs." However, you were probably nervous the first time you drove a car or started a new job. Now these things don't worry you at all. Once you up your learning curve, the unknown will not be a black hole of "what ifs." It will be a golden opportunity to learn more and expand your legal knowledge. CAALA List Serves, educational programs and document banks are treasure troves of shared experiences. Do not be shy to ask others.

Eat and drink well

In researching for this article, I learned a lot. A July 26, 2018, article by Kathleen Squires in the Wall Street Journal talks about the proposition by nutritional psychiatrists, that certain vitamins, minerals, and foods may help lessen the symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Nutritional psychiatrists believe that many people's mental health is linked to the bacteria that grow in the gut. Uma Naidoo, a psychiatry instructor at Harvard Medical School, culinary instructor at Cambridge School of Culinary Arts, and director of nutritional and lifestyle psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, says that an imbalance

of good and bad bacteria in the gut "causes inflammation and an imbalance of the important hormones and neurotransmitters – melatonin and serotonin – in the brain."

To remedy this imbalance, Naidoo and Drew Ramsey, Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Columbia University, recommended eating fermented foods, as they bring "good bacteria," or probiotics, to the digestive system, which can help ease anxiety.

Conclusion

When you are stuck in your head worrying, you are missing out on life; missing out on friends; probably messing up in law. Worrying comes at a price and that price is all of the health risks I scared you with above. That price is also nothing less than missing out on what life has to offer.

Embrace your profession. Embrace a healthy lifestyle. Embrace your unique gifts. Tell yourself every morning how fantastic you are and what a great day you will have. Be confident, courageous and conscious in each moment. Ask for help if you need it. Learn about, and one day try to laugh at, your "what ifs." Appreciate and help others. I guarantee most of the planet is worse off than you. If you are prone to stress, I hope this has helped. Writing it really helped me.

Geraldine Weiss has been an associate at the Law Offices of Michael J. Piuze, Los Angeles, for almost twenty years, specializing in major personal-injury cases. She was educated in England and obtained her undergraduate honors degree from the University of Cardiff in Wales. After moving to the States, she received her J.D. from Whittier Law School. She is a member of CAOC and a prior nominee for its trial attorney of the year. She serves on the Board of Governors for CAALA, where she is vice chair of its public relations committee. She also serves on the Board of Governors for LATLC (Los Angeles Trial Lawyers Charities) and is proud to have been its 2018 President. ☒