



Avoid Stress by Balancing Work and Home

BY JENNIFER L. ASHLEY

Stress. As lawyers, we experience a lot of it. It makes sense, since our justice system is adversarial. Lawyers are pitted against one another. Sometimes the experience is pleasant, but many times it is heated, frustrating and stressful.

Stressors can run the gamut from non-stop emails, demanding clients, long hours, to never-ending fundraisers, awards dinners and events. We are bombarded with news shows, magazine articles and other media telling us to eat better, sleep 8 hours, exercise, spend time with our family and friends, all while maintaining a successful career. It seems as if there are not enough hours in the day to accomplish all of this.

Due to technology and the economy, employees are being asked to do more work for the same – or even less – pay. With emails on our phone and laptops available for use anywhere, anytime, we are expected to do the work of what two or more people would have done in years past.

Balancing your legal career with your home life can also be challenging and stressful with the demands of housework, child care, shopping and entertainment. Additionally, studies show that women are more prone to excessive stress. Women tend to be pulled in more directions than men are. More women than men will experience

emotional exhaustion. Add in a stressful legal career, and it is no wonder why women feel overwhelmed.

Lawyers in particular seem susceptible to stress. Take into consideration the following statistics:

- According to a Johns Hopkins University study of more than 100 occupations, researchers found that lawyers lead the nation with the highest incidence of depression.¹
- An ABA Young Lawyers Division survey indicated that 41 percent of female attorneys were unhappy with their jobs.²
- In 1996, lawyers overtook dentists at the profession with the highest rate of suicide.³

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- 1 See Eaton, W.W. (1990) Occupations and the prevalence of major depressive disorder. *Journal of Occupational Medicine*, 32 (11), 1079-1087.
- 2 See Moss, D.C. (Feb., 1991) Lawyer personality. *ABA Journal*, 34.
- 3 See Greiner, M. (Sept, 1996) What about me? *Texas Bar Journal*.

You know the saying, “what doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger?” Well, research has shown that may actually be true when it comes to stress. “Learning to work with your stress rather than against it can safeguard your health,” says Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D. a health psychologist at Stanford University and the author of *The Upside of Stress*.⁴

Emerging research has revealed that your thoughts can change your body’s stress response. If you feel that you can cope and manage stressful situations, the chances are that you can. When you find yourself stressed, force yourself to pause, take a deep breath, and acknowledge what you are feeling.

By doing this regularly, you can keep feelings of being overwhelmed at bay in the future.

Most people struggle with a lack of enthusiasm at work. Less than 1/3 of Americans say that they are engaged in their careers, according to a 2015 Gallup report.⁵ That’s obviously a big problem, but what can we do about it? Small adjustments can be made to your behavior, your workspace and your relationships to make your work life happier and healthier and help you excel in your career.

There are some things we can do every day to make our work life more positive and reduce our stress. Even little things can help. For example, you can make time for a hobby you enjoy, mentor a younger attorney, or volunteer.

Here are some tips on how to create balance and reduce stress:

- Acknowledge stress. Being a lawyer is inherently stressful. Accept that, and then learn how to manage it. Try to find healthy outlets for the stress.
- Make and maintain relationships at work. Relationships at work are crucial to work satisfaction. In a 2015 report from TINYpulse, 1/3 of those workers that were anonymously polled were most satisfied with their work when they had good relationships with their colleagues. Having someone to support you, listen to you and to commiserate with you can be a key factor to enjoying your job. Regular social outings or just grabbing a cup of coffee with a co-worker is all it takes to recharge your batteries and increase your overall satisfaction. Social

support from colleagues can reduce depression and burnout.⁶

- Volunteer. Helping others is gratifying and can help you feel more socially connected and give your life more purpose. According to a 2012 study in *Psychological Science*, people who did something to help others felt as though they had more time, not less.⁷
- Make downtime a daily ritual. Schedule daily blocks of downtime to refuel your brain and enhance your well-being. When it comes to scheduling, we will need to

allocate blocks of time for deep thinking. Maybe you will carve out a one hour block on your calendar every day for taking a walk or grabbing a cup of coffee. If you want to be even more ambitious, you can practice meditation.

- Take time for yourself. Remember that you cannot be an effective

litigator, good parent, and reliable colleague if you don’t give yourself permission to take time to do things that are meaningful to you. Any number of things could help you push the reset button and rejuvenate you, such as volunteering, trying a yoga class, or picking up a (fiction!) book. These activities can make a huge difference in reducing your stress level.

- Pick a simple activity to lose yourself in. There is a reason that adult coloring books have become so popular. Simple activities that keep you busy while letting your mind wander can be very calming. Losing yourself in a Sudoku, jigsaw puzzle or knitting can actually lower your blood pressure and reduce stress.

Remember that stress will happen, and you are not alone. But there are simple ways to help you accept and cope with stress and become a happier, healthier person.

“Remember that you cannot be an effective litigator, good parent, and reliable colleague if you don’t give yourself permission to take time to do things that are meaningful to you.”

4 See McGonigal, K. (2015) *The Upside of Stress: Why Stress Is Good for You, and How to Get Good at It*. (ISBN 978-1583335611).

5 See Gallup Poll, (May 2015) *Employee Engagement*.

6 See TINYpulse, (2015) *2015 Best Industry Ranking report: Employee Engagement and Satisfaction Across Industries*.

7 See, Mogilner, C, *Chance*, Z and Norton, M.I. (October 2012) *Giving Time Saves You Time. Psychological Science*, vol. 23 no. 10 1233-1238.