

# Stress Seeking v. Stress Management

By Jim Brady

Lawyer stress certainly gets a lot of attention. Whole books are written about it, and good books, too.<sup>1</sup> Workshop and CLE sessions offer tips about dealing with the incessant pressures, made worse by cell phones and the avalanche of email. What's an exhausted lawyer or frazzled judge to do?

At the risk of being iconoclastic, I suggest reveling in it. I think it silly to believe that lawyer stress is going to ease any time soon.

So what then to do? It seems there are three options. First, soldier on under great stress to the point of physical illness and mental exhaustion, then pick up the pieces after the grand collapse. Second, drastically cut back on lawyering, cutting stress in the bargain, with financial and career trajectory consequences. The third is to ratchet up one's coping strategies, to inoculate oneself, so that more stress can be managed without disaster. Let's see what you'd like.

Suppose I were leading one of these frequent stress management seminars. I might ask the group of lawyers to brainstorm good stress management techniques, while I jotted them down on a flipchart. I imagine the group would say good ideas faster than I could write them, until the page was full. In my imaginary workshop, I would then scan the group, look them all in the eye, and say, "So why aren't you doing these great ideas?"

I think most of us already know what works best for us to mitigate stress. The key issue seems to be the resistance that keeps us from doing those useful things. So what would keep very intelligent problem solvers from doing what's really good for them? It could be that lawyers would like to appear as wonderwomen or supermen to their clients and the rest of their firm. Maybe they strive so very hard to gain advantage, or to keep from being disadvantaged on cases. Maybe it's a service heart, which is passionately committed to helping others, at the risk of using one's self up. It might just be the competitive nature of people who go into law, constantly seeking to one-up the next person. Or it might be a method to prove oneself in the giant shark tank: "Can I really cut it in this business?" Handling monster stress is proving oneself monster tough.

Lawyers also have to contend with several other issues endemic to the practice of law that make things even worse. The first is the problem of interruptions; connected to the second, false crises (the client, the judge, or opposing counsel believes something to be a crisis, when you don't). Next is the problem of emotional suppression. Lawyers are often forced to appear impassive and thoughtful, when they are inwardly seething. What a strain! Finally, there is the issue of unreasonable demands. Many members of the public, including clients, blame lawyers for the complications of

our system. They conveniently ignore the public's part in the mess by demanding what they want, when they want it, expecting it to happen quickly and at a very cheap price!

There is a strong drive that brings academic success in college, law school admission, law school completion, and then professional development and success. That same drive now leads to packed schedules, pressured production, ruthless deadlines, and the incessant bombardment of communications of all sorts, from the ridiculous to the essential. In the face of such duress, there are at least six standard stress management domains: fitness, nutrition, sleep hygiene, nurturing relationships, time away, and time shifting (controlling or manipulating schedules to reduce multiple competing demands). Some lawyers might say that carving out time to use these techniques would make the stress worse rather than providing relief!

So would you be willing to take a new approach to your stress issues? If so, let me suggest four questions for your consideration: Is your family happy that you are a lawyer? Are you about as rich as you need to be? Are you having a good time? Where is all this going to end up in 10 years? As you reflect on these ideas, and maybe even discuss them with the important people around you, you might have opportunity to re-evaluate how helpful or hurtful all this stress is to you.

Let's acknowledge that if you continue to practice law at all, you are deliberately stress-seeking. But you have already demonstrated a substantial ability to deal with significant stress, or you wouldn't be where you are now. Perhaps a better concept to consider is "sustainability." This is a great ecological term, useful here. If you change some of your ways, cut back some things and increase healthy coping behavior, can you increase the amount of stress you can sustain over an extended time? Probably. This assumes that you are in charge of your practice, as opposed to having the practice in charge of you. If you choose to change the amount of stress you wish to sustain,

that will entail changing, doing new or different things, which is always tough. But imagine how comfortable and satisfying it would be if some things were limited or controlled. How would that feel? Would the difficulties of the change process be worth it?

If we're going to be in the deep end of the pool, we might as well get life jackets. Choose a nice one.

## ENDNOTES

1. Excellent reference sources include:

- Amiram Elwork, Ph.D., *Stress Management for Lawyers*, Gwynedd, Pennsylvania: The Vorkell Group (1997).
- George W. Kaufman, *The Lawyer's*

*Guide to Balancing Life and Work: Taking the Stress Out of Success*, Chicago: Law Practice Management Section, American Bar Association (1999).

• Steven Keeva, *Transforming Practices: Finding Joy and Satisfaction in the Legal Life*, Chicago: Contemporary Books (1999).

• Julie M. Tamminen, ed., *Living With the Law: Strategies to Avoid Burnout and Create Balance*, Chicago: American Bar Association (1997).

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