

Introduction to Stress

The stress reaction is a natural phenomenon, which provides a valuable service. At its most basic level, it alerts us to danger and can protect us from harm. When properly understood and managed, stress can motivate us to achieve a successful and happy life. It can be a positive force in our lives that helps build self-esteem and self-confidence. However, too much stress continuing over a long period, even if it results in accomplishing some good things, is harmful to our health. Lawyers experience stress-related career burnout at very high rates. Burnout can negatively affect careers, health and relationships and can lead to depression and other mental health and substance use issues. Lawyers are four times more likely to experience depression than the general population. Understanding how our minds and bodies react to stress can help us to take control of the stress in our lives and take actions to mitigate its effects. By doing so, we can increase the quality of our personal and professional lives.

Quick Stress-Busters

The discussion that follows will be focused on making changes in our lives that take effort, commitment and time. Sometimes, however, we need a quick fix to get through the moment or the day. See below for both quick and long-term stress management techniques.

- ✓ Pause - lean back -give your eyes a rest for a couple minutes.
- ✓ Focus on your breath... in and out...when your mind races, notice it and gently bring yourself back to focus on your breath.
- ✓ Be mindful. Focus on the immediate present. Enjoy the moment. Learn some easy mindfulness techniques that you can use every day. It has been proven that the practice of mindfulness significantly reduces stress.
- ✓ Stretch. Walk. Get outside into nature.
- ✓ Maintain a sense of humor about yourself and others.
- ✓ Remember: "This too shall pass." Make a list of things you are grateful for.
- ✓ Vary your routine. Don't get trapped in a rut.
- ✓ Volunteer / help others (within limits).
- ✓ Ask for help. Talk it out. Confide in a trusted friend or a therapist.

- ✓ Meditate and/or pray. Consistent stress reduction occurs when we meditate for at least 10 minutes daily.
- ✓ Unplug from social media when acutely stressed.
- ✓ Exercise.
- ✓ Eat a healthy diet.
- ✓ Sleep approximately 8 hours/night when possible.
- ✓ Prioritize at work and home and manage your time effectively.
- ✓ Cultivate a positive attitude.
- ✓ Go outside and experience nature.
- ✓ Take three deep slow breaths, and imagine your muscles relaxing from head to toe.
- ✓ Avoid overuse of alcohol or prescription drugs. These short-term 'fixes' just mask the problem and can lead to negative health and social consequences.

The Stress Reaction

Do you stay calm and unruffled, looking for solutions? Alternatively, do you get angry and look for someone to blame? Some people are stress hardy and don't seem affected by the pressures and problems of daily living. They seem to thrive on the challenges put before them. Others are unable to withstand any pressure or difficulty without being upset or rendered unable to act. Most of us fall somewhere in between, and our reaction to any given situation varies depending upon how we are feeling physically and/or emotionally at any given time. Your stress reaction is the result of a complex interaction of memories, emotions, thoughts and automatic, physiological responses. The complex interplay of your personal genetics, childhood experiences, adult experiences, lifestyle, environment, underlying health, etc. determines, in large part, how you cope with stressful situations; from a death in the family to financial setbacks, to the often adversarial nature of the practice of law, or something as simple as the constant interruptions we experience at work. When we are overtired, hungry, ill, feeling down, anxious, angry or overwhelmed, we may overreact to situations that normally would not bother us. This only makes matters worse and further increases our stress.

Our mental response to stress reflects how we first perceive and, then, subsequently think about any given situation. The brain is constantly evaluating our present circumstances and defining it as rewarding, risky, threatening or unknown. Our initial response operates on a subconscious level and influences our emotional and physical responses (which are interrelated). This subconscious and spontaneous analysis of every situation we encounter is a vital part of our instinctive survival mechanism and is similar to the animal kingdom's freeze, fight or flight response. The brain sends out signals to the rest of the body triggering specific chemical reactions as well as other specific physical and emotional responses.

Sometimes this leads subconscious process propels us to take immediate action in an emergency to get us out of harm's way, or it may trigger a fear-based response causing us to strike out in defense and later regret our actions. We can, however, exert conscious control over our thoughts and emotions to put the brakes on impulsive, harmful or inappropriate emotions and behavior. This awareness of how and why we respond the way we do to certain events combined with proper training allows us to exert some control over the automatic physical and emotional responses discussed below. We can and must consciously change our reactions if we are to reach our full potential in life and find contentment and joy. We can learn to 'hit the pause button', to thoughtfully respond rather than instinctively react.

Our initial ***emotional response to acute stress*** in our present circumstances may be one of joyful anticipation or fear and anxiety; calmness or anger. Thoughtful, optimistic and calm emotional responses reduce harmful stress. Resentment, anxiety and anger generate harmful stress. Our individual responses may differ from one another because of our individual differences in genetic makeup, childhood experiences and environment, present circumstances (e.g., health, finances, personal relationships), previous similar experiences, awareness and understanding of what is happening and what can be done, if anything, about the situation. In addition, our individual response to the same situation may also vary depending upon how we are feeling physically and emotionally at that time. Some days we deal well with a particular stressor; some days, we deal poorly with the same exact stressor. The many variables that influence our initial emotional response include whether or not this is a first time experience, whether any prior similar experiences were positive or negative, whether we are properly prepared for the situation, as well as your preceding physical and mental state. For example, were you hungry, angry, lonely, tired, ill or injured; taking medications; depressed; anxious or fearful; surprised or caught off guard? All of these factors affect how we perceive and react to our present circumstances.

Our spontaneous ***physical response to acute stress*** includes the following:

1. The brain's pituitary gland increases its production of adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH), increasing the output of cortisol, a steroid that suppresses our immune system.
2. Blood is diverted to the skeletal muscles and away from the extremities and stomach, causing digestion to slow or stop.

3. Sugars are released from stores in the body in anticipation of a fight or flight response.
4. Blood pressure elevates and blood vessels constrict.
5. Metabolism, heart rate and breathing rate increase.
6. Hearing becomes more acute, and pupils dilate.
7. Our abstract thinking is impaired. See the 'Science of Stress' below for more detail.

Distress

Over time, we have completed college and law school, gained admission to the bar, practiced law and developed our career path. Many of us have married and are raising a family, caring for our parents and helping other members of our family. We are active in the community and find our schedules filled with an increasing number of commitments.

However, too many events, changes or demands in our lives (even positive ones) can leave us feeling overwhelmed and sometimes paralyzed with worry about how we will get it all done. Alternatively, we may launch into action but carry with us an attitude of impatience, irritability and resentment, making life miserable for all with whom we come into contact as well as denying us any joy in what we are doing. At that point, when life seems too much for us to handle, stress has ceased to be our ally but now has become our foe. We have entered into a life of "distress."

Warning: We can be in distress and not know it.

Gradual, incremental increases in responsibilities, duties, pressures and demands at home and at work combined with long work days and weeks is risky. At some point work may dominate our lives and keep us at a chronically high level of distress; yet we are often unaware that we have lost balance in our lives. In fact for some (i.e., a workaholic) trying to relax may create feelings of distress. Therapists tell us that workaholics "stuff" their feelings; that is, as they experience life's eventual troubles and periods of painful or difficult times, they stay busy with work and do not allow themselves the experience of feeling the pain or sorrow nor do they discuss their innermost feelings with anyone else. Then, in times of relaxation with no busy schedule in front of them, these feelings come back and cause discomfort. Their solution is to get busy; the vacation becomes scheduled with hectic days leaving everyone more tired at its end, or, the workaholic learns to forego vacations by either not planning for them or canceling them because of work related commitments and deadlines.

Distressed lawyers eventually lose their efficiency and their effectiveness. The risk of burnout increases. Unaware of how they affect those around them, their social and family life may disintegrate. Feelings of isolation, emptiness and unhappiness grow.

An overwhelming sense of loss of control may either trigger paralysis or the need to

work even harder. Either path eventually leads to failure, because we have lost our focus as well as our balance. Being in a state of chronic distress leads us to being unable to recognize or do the things that are important to us. We become unsure of our goals or purpose for living and can feel a loss of control over our daily lives. This leaves us susceptible to physical, emotional and mental illness.

By understanding how and why we mentally, physically and emotionally respond in certain ways to life's events, we can begin to regain control over our lives. We can learn to establish healthy thinking, boundaries and lifestyles that reduce stress and improves the quality of our lives. The next section explores the mind-body relationship as it pertains to the stress reaction.

Self-Assessment Quiz: Your Level of Distress

Do any of the following attributes apply to you?

Check (✓) the ones that apply:

- Do you sleep less than 7-8 hours per night?
- Is your sleep restless or do you wake up a lot?
- Is it difficult to get out of bed in the morning?
- Do you exercise less than 5 hours a week (including walks)?
- Do you eat a lot of fast foods or junk foods?
- Do you skip breakfast or lunch?
- Do you drink more than 2-3 cups of coffee a day?
- Do you drink more than 2-3 alcoholic beverages a day?
- Do you take sedatives or sleep aids with/without a drink to relax or sleep?
- Are you more impatient and irritable than you would like to be?
- Do you feel that you are not in control of your life?
- Are you feeling worn out at the end of most days?
- Do you wish for more time to spend with family or yourself?
- Are you worried about your marriage, children or parents?
- Are you struggling to make (financial) ends meet?
- Do you work a lot of nights, weekends or holidays?
- Do you skip vacations?
- Do you feel that you don't have anybody to confide in?
- Are you feeling stressed over how many "yes" answers you just gave?

The more ✓ marks, the greater the likelihood that you are in distress. Change is possible and help is available. Why wait any longer to feel better? Call the LCL Confidential Helpline now.

The Science of Stress

If stress is mitigated or the stressor is removed, the body resumes baseline functioning relatively quickly. Heart and breathing rate go back to normal and muscles relax. When the individual does not cope well with the stress, and/or additional stressors are introduced, chronic stress (i.e. distress) results. With chronic stress, the physiologic baseline is never restored, resulting in high levels of stress hormones as well as physical and emotional ailments such as:

- ✓ Headaches and muscle pains, low back pain
- ✓ Fatigue
- ✓ Upset stomach
- ✓ Sleep disturbances
- ✓ Anxiety
- ✓ Restlessness
- ✓ Lack of focus and/or impaired memory
- ✓ Irritability
- ✓ Depression
- ✓ Increased risk of disease and stroke
- ✓ Frequent illnesses and increased risk of autoimmune disorders

We can better understand why severe or chronic stress can have such debilitating effects by learning a bit about what happens in the brain during times of stress. The amygdala, in the limbic system of the brain, receives and processes incoming stimuli (events or experiences) and 'assigns' it emotional significance (often negative). It also alerts us to any perceived threats. This is a major part of our built-in, subconscious survival system. The left prefrontal cortex, near the front of your brain, allows conscious, rational thinking and impulse control. It is involved with inhibiting the negative emotions generated by the amygdala as well as with establishing and maintaining positive feelings. When the left prefrontal cortex activity is not in balance with the amygdala's activity it can no longer put the brakes on the amygdala, which generates feelings of dread, fear, helplessness and negativity. This imbalance occurs most markedly in depression and substance use disorders.

Ongoing stress also produces higher levels of the steroidal stress hormone, cortisol, in the left prefrontal cortex (PFC). This interferes with the 'rational' and 'positive' PFC's ability to inhibit the activity of the 'negative' and 'impulsive' amygdala, thereby allowing an increase in feelings of dread, fear, helplessness and negativity to occur along with decline in rational thinking. This increases a person's vulnerability to becoming distressed, as they are unable to cope appropriately with the problems of daily living, not to mention the practice of law.

There is a significant link between chronic stress and depression. Scientists now know that the brain has the capacity to change and adapt by developing new neural pathways through the sprouting of new nerve connections. The brain's neural pathways are one of the communication highways between other neural pathways and various areas of the brain. All of our thoughts, emotions and actions involve activity of these neural pathways. The development of new neural pathways is called "neuroplasticity." Significant or ongoing stress can reduce neuroplasticity (i.e., reduced growth and function of neural pathways in the brain) and cause a decline in memory, attention, and rational thought. When the amygdala 'takes over' in these situations, negative emotions rule the day. Stressors that occur early in life may permanently sensitize neurons and receptors throughout the central nervous system so that they perpetually over-react to stress. This hypervigilance leads to significant mental and physical health problems, as the individual remains in a constant state of 'fight or flight'.

It is very likely that inherited factors, the environment and individual differences in prefrontal cortex activity may create a biological vulnerability for having a low stress tolerance. An early stressful experience may then set up the brain to overreact to all environmental pressures, triggering the chemical reaction discussed above. This can produce the behavioral symptoms of depression (including physical and cognitive dysfunction), among other disorders, which, in turn, increases the individual's stress. A vicious cycle can be set in motion consisting of susceptibility to stress, the occurrence of stressful events, impaired functioning causing more stress, the triggering of depression with increased dysfunction, more personal and health problems causing more stress, etc. With knowledge and understanding comes the power to effect change. We can learn to reduce our stress and its harmful effects.

Identifying the Sources of Stress in Our Lives

(Remember some stress is good ... but too much stress leads to distress.)

Stop for a moment and recall the last time you were acutely aware that you were under a lot of stress. It was probably some crisis that left you feeling like you have lost control of the situation or its outcome. The truth, however, is that you were probably already under a lot of stress and the crisis merely accentuated your awareness. Many, if not most, lawyers are in a state of denial as to the amount of stress they are under. Becoming aware of what causes our stress is the first step toward better managing our stress reaction. For purposes of this paper, we will examine stressors by separating them into two groups: (1) *our internal, self-generating demands* and (2) *our external demands*. Keep in mind, however, that genetics, family upbringing, health and living habits can and do effect our personal response to stress.

Internal Demands

Let us first look at our *internal demands*. If you were raised in a household that demanded a high level of achievement, berated failure and discouraged any discussion of

feelings or emotions, you may be carrying some subconscious motivation to please your parents and prove to yourself that you are as good as everyone else. You push yourself to work harder and, despite a long list of achievements, you still don't believe you measure up. You may feel uncomfortable (shame, guilt) when not working or staying busy. Perfectionism often presents with procrastination, the inability to delegate, and chronic worrying; for some, the need to please others can cause them to consistently put others' goals and needs ahead of their own. Of course, there are those of us who care only for our wants and needs and help others only when it furthers our own self-interests. Both groups of people lack balance in their outlook on life and probably suffer from low self-esteem and a deep-seated fear of failure and rejection. Communication skills are poor, at best, or may be non-existent. Relationships at home and at the office suffer, leading them to feel isolated, misunderstood and under-appreciated.

We may operate for years under the influence of these internal demands but remain unaware of their existence. These internal demands may be heightened by an inherited susceptibility to low stress tolerance, anxiety or depression, of which we may also be unaware.

Still in the dark about what is behind our unhappiness, we change jobs or careers, divorce and remarry, move to new homes or new cities, all in a vain attempt to find happiness. Until we honestly search our past to identify these subconscious triggers and take constructive action to change how we think, feel and act in the present, we are unlikely to affect any lasting or meaningful change. This program of self-discovery and personal action can go a long way to overcome genetic predispositions, family of origin issues and our present circumstances to restore balance, establish healthy relationships, build confidence, enjoy good health and enable us to lead to a useful and happy life.

Stressful External Demands: One Lawyer's Deconstruction - A Cautionary Tale

Life has a way of gradually becoming more demanding and more complex (i.e., more stressful) to which we adjust rather quickly. These are the *external demands* put upon us by family, career and community involvement. To some degree, we all share this common experience as we strive for and reach our full potential. For the most part, however, we are not aware of just how busy our lives have become until one day we feel very overwhelmed and no longer in control of our circumstances.

Here is an example of how a "successful" lawyer's life became crowded with ever-increasing commitments and responsibilities leading from positive stress to distress and disaster. Our newly admitted lawyer may be single, or, is married with no children. He/she is ready to go to work at a law firm, or, is opening up his/ her own law office. The emphasis is on the career; i.e., to become an experienced and competent lawyer, to build a good reputation, develop a paying client base, and earn enough money to pay off school loans and buy a new car. Stress levels are high as our lawyer struggles with such initial things as finding the

courthouse and the correct courtroom, learning local rules and procedures, drafting pleadings, handling real estate closings, etc. Everything is new, and feelings of being ill prepared and overwhelmed dominate. Our new attorney puts in long hours and makes an extra effort to do his/her very best. Taking time to enjoy living is deferred until the practice is established and financial goals are met.

Within a few years, there is a new car, a new house and a family in the picture. Becoming a new parent is great but with it comes added responsibilities and concerns, especially over future financial security for the family. Our attorney would rather be home with his or her family, but sacrifices must be made to build future financial security. Right now is the time to complete the task of building the practice. Living expenses keep increasing; there is the new house to pay for, not to mention savings for college and retirement. There will be time later on to spend with family once the finances are in order, right?

It seems that the more successful our attorney becomes, the more he/she finds that client development and generating more fees takes on more importance - running a law office is not inexpensive and bringing in new business is an ongoing concern. The practice grows - there are more clients and more complex cases and more time (including nights and weekends) working to get it all done. Community commitments require giving up some nights normally spent at home. From the outside, everyone thinks the attorney is doing well - the successful practice, a beautiful home, happy marriage and wonderful children. Our lawyer, however, is not feeling successful, much less happy. At times, he or she worries about spending too much time at work and how the marriage is suffering for it. This worrying turns to resentment because the family "fails to fully appreciate" how much he/she has sacrificed to provide them with a fine house, clothes, cars, vacations, etc. They may complain that the attorney is never home or is not spending enough time with the family. No matter what our attorney says or does, the family seems unhappy. They "just don't understand" the problems, pressures, responsibilities and commitments that the attorney is under. At home, our friend encounters brief interludes of getting along with family, but all too often there are fights and long periods of silence and brooding. Sometimes it is easier to work late and avoid going home altogether.

A few years later there is a separation followed by a not-so-friendly divorce. There are alimony, child support, custody, and visitation issues with which to contend. The emotional hurt and strain of the divorce has taken its toll on our lawyer's practice. Time off to recuperate is needed but there are bills to pay and office overhead to meet, so a vacation is out of the question. Most likely, our attorney will work even harder in order to suppress the feelings of discomfort. After a while, the pain passes and our lawyer meets someone who understands his or her needs. A second marriage or live-in arrangement occurs and the family issues get very complicated, especially if their new spouse or significant other has children. The kids are more involved with after school activities or work and it is not always easy arranging transportation for them not to mention the routine visits to doctors and dentists and other day-to-day "emergencies" that crop up. Scheduling visitations, family holidays and vacations become

problematic; the “ex” still does not seem to understand and, at times, appears to be uncooperative. Our attorney sometimes wonders how things got so bad.

Unfortunately, his/her problems aren’t over yet. While still adjusting to the new marriage, the health of our lawyer’s parents begins to fail. Doctors’ visits, hospitalization, home nursing care and taking responsibility of the parents’ finances add additional stress. Meanwhile, the teenage son or daughter is “acting out,” having problems at school, hanging out with the wrong crowd, drinking alcohol and maybe using illegal drugs. They are heading for serious legal trouble if something doesn’t change. The car you provided for them to get to school and work has become a major headache – driving around with their friends instead of working or studying; costs of gas, insurance and repairs; warnings and tickets; and suspicion of driving under the influence. Our friend is worried but does not know what to do. Everything he/she says or does seems to backfire and the teenager just gets worse. What went wrong and who is at fault sets off major fights between our attorney and his/her new spouse. Now it seems that although our attorney has provided much financially, the second spouse is fed up with the long work hours leaving him/her alone to deal with the “troublesome” children and the aging parents. The spouse wants more time and attention from our lawyer, or else. It looks like a second divorce is on its way.

Our lawyer hasn’t felt well lately (headaches, upset stomach, back pain, feeling short-tempered, impatient, and having trouble concentrating), and the doctor is telling him/her to slow down, exercise and eat better, or else. How can this possibly be accomplished? The attorney’s finances are stretched to the limit and the firm’s partners are complaining that he/she is not producing enough fees this year to justify their personal draw. The partners want more income generated, or else. There have also been complaints from clients of work not being attended or being handled poorly... even some threats of filing a grievance or liability claim if not rectified by the firm. The pressure at work is greater than ever. *Our attorney begins to sense that he/she is no longer in control of his or her life.* Some days it just doesn’t seem worth getting out of bed, but there is so much work to be done at the office. Deadlines are missed, and additional extensions and delays are not possible. Increased use of alcohol, sleeping aids, anti-anxiety medicine and/or prescription opioid painkillers may begin a dangerous descent into a substance use disorder.

Is a second divorce, runaway children, malpractice and disciplinary actions, losing partnership standing, and a heart attack or other breakdown inevitable? **The answer is no.** There is a way out of this mess and there is an alternative path to take that will lead to a balanced, healthy, happy and prosperous lifestyle. Please note, however, that the solution is neither easy nor painless nor quick. Before we find out how our friend can turn his or her life around, let’s finish our discussion of what can and often does go wrong in the lives of lawyers.

An attorney’s life is not always as traumatic as the one described above but many do experience some of these problems, which have the potential to destroy the chances of a

balanced and happy home life and career, not to mention one's health, both physical and emotional. Major studies link prolonged periods of stress to depression and a depressed immune system. Health problems and drug and alcohol use aggravate the situation by increasing the levels of dysfunction and stress, which in turn generates more health problems and more dysfunction, etc. A vicious cycle can be set in motion that ultimately results in devastated reputations, lost practices and licenses, divorce, bankruptcy, criminal charges and sometimes suicide, as the attorney comes to believe that they have no worth and there is no way out of their predicament. Nothing could be further from the truth.

A consultation with a qualified healthcare professional can start you down the path of positive change. Many have found it helpful to talk to another lawyer or judge who has overcome these issues. LCL can connect you with these resources and provide free literature on any topic of interest to you. Call our Confidential Helpline today.

Successful Time Management Reduces Stress

Take the time to plan and prioritize before getting into action. Delegate and/or ask for help. Upgrade office systems to maximize efficiency. Draw appropriate boundaries when asked to help (i.e., learn when it is appropriate to say "no"). Schedule time off to relax and regain your energy and enthusiasm. The following plan will provide you with some basic ideas to get you started.

For each project you have, take no more than 30 minutes to complete the following [5 minutes per item]:

1. Write down your long term and short term project goals.
2. Prepare a list of what has to be done to reach each goal.
3. Review each item on your to-do list and take note of which items are dependent upon other items being completed before you can continue.
4. Establish deadlines and priorities for each item. Pay particular attention to those items that cannot be completed until some preceding item had been completed.
5. Identify which items are both "important and urgent," and try to maximize your time and efforts to accomplish them, with secondary emphasis on "important but not urgent" items.
6. Delegate wherever possible, especially the remaining "not-important" and "not-

urgent” items to other parties.

If you follow the above guidelines, you will have created a “master plan” which will help you to stay focused on how you should be spending your time. This creates a very real sense of direction and control in our lives that is missing when we work ‘hard’ but not ‘smart.’ By knowing what is important and what your deadlines are, you become realistic about what you can accomplish in any given period with an eye toward whether or not you need assistance (or whether you are available to give assistance to someone else). A good plan will prevent the creation of false expectations upon which others rely and which later come back to haunt you (creating distress) as deadlines appear that you cannot possibly meet. Realistic goal setting keeps you from breaking commitments, which often generates resentments in yourself and those you live and/or work with.

Concluding Remarks

If you are chronically stressed out, anxious or feeling depressed, or, if you find that you are frequently relying on alcohol or other drugs to find relief, then you may require outside assistance to improve your health and well-being. We sincerely urge you to call LCL’s Confidential Helpline and schedule a free appointment with a healthcare professional who can help you to determine what changes you can make to restore you to good health as well as personal and professional success

