

The Enlightened Lawyer:

Overcoming Stress and Creating Balance

By Dr. Geralyn Datz



You've already been at the office for nine hours. The senior partner is on your case about a research memo you haven't had a chance to begin. That difficult client who insists on calling several times a week to complain about everything under the sun is at it again. Oh, and you've got a brief due tomorrow and you have no idea how you're going to finish it on time. You're exhausted and overwhelmed. It's only Monday!

The Environment and Culture of Law

Most people have no idea how they get "burned out" or why. It's hard to grasp that we could actually harm ourselves while trying to work hard or helping others. This is a very real, and very misunderstood, problem in the legal profession.

The practice of law can be so all-encompassing that there doesn't seem to be an "off" switch — irrespective of the practice environment (sole practitioner, large firm, small firm) or practice area (criminal, corporate, entertainment, immigration, health, family, personal injury, real estate, tax, intellectual property, labor or international). The boundaries of personal, work, family and spiritual life may cease to exist, either temporarily or permanently. That can take an enormous toll on a person. When the toll becomes toxic to health and well-being, this is called "burnout."

It is important to understand why the legal profession is uniquely positioned to take a toll on a human being. Being a lawyer places one in a unique environment of "demandingness" — from the clients who are distressed, self-focused and sometimes entitled, to the employers who expect top-quality, super-human results. Also a daily foe is an uncontrolled, high-contact, often urgent schedule that does not understand daycare pickups, birthdays, vacations, sporting events or sleep. Lawyering can be a hyper-stressful setting where the rewards are few and far between. While some cases may be won, the time between "wins" can be long and arduous. Sometimes a "no-win" media-

tion or ambiguous success can leave a lawyer feeling over-compromised and empty. There is always the pressure to perform, to log hours and to appear "together" despite chaotic circumstances.

Finally, the context of practicing law is based on an adversarial paradigm, often involving some conflict, dispute or wrongdoing. Sometimes there is resolution, but not always. Cases are won and lost through the distortion of reality. This can create a tainted reality for the practicing attorney. Legal cases and clients themselves pertain to social deviations, misbehavior, law breaking, mistreatment and injustice. There is a side to the world, your city and your workplace that may be sinister. It is inspiring to overcome the odds, bring justice where there is none, and contribute to a precedent. However, at other times, it can feel like you against the world. The outcome of a case can be dark and unfair, and there are other compromises that must be made in the interest of income, time or tenure in the job.

Humans, as a group, tend to fare poorly under these circumstances.

Are You in Balance?

In the same way that we need air, water and food to survive, our minds need certain conditions to feel vital and healthy. We need to feel as if we have accomplished something, that we have a purpose, that we are loved and understood, and that we have "down" time away from intense stress. When we do not have these opportunities, we become out of balance.

When we are out of balance, we often try to create balance in ways that will never achieve it. We create doses of pleasure by overeating (particularly carbohydrates and "junk" food) or by drinking alcohol. We isolate and stay sedentary, thinking we need more rest, when, in fact, we should exercise.

We seek outward relief and escape from recreational drugs when we should be turning inward and creating peace and new habits. We ignore the sources of support that would normally bring us relief (spouses, children, family, parents, friends, even pets!) because we

are in a "bad mood," judgmental or just too exhausted to socialize. We structure our time so we can't take a break or feel too drained to reach out to our spiritual community when we need replenishment. Under extreme stress, we tend to make poor and impulsive decisions. Some turn to sexual infidelity or take risks (such as fast driving or aggressive behavior), which release temporary "feel good" hormones and neurotransmitters but are ultimately self-sabotaging.

When our levels of stress become toxic, this can progress to burnout. Burnout is a state of overwhelming, long-term exhaustion and diminished interest in work. Professional symptoms of burnout include depression, cynicism, boredom, loss of compassion and discouragement. The problem of burnout results from working long hours with limited resources, experiencing ambiguous success, and having contact with difficult clients.

The opposite of burnout is engagement. Engagement is the state of feeling energized, effective, and connected to one's life, career and surroundings.

Which category do you fall into?

The Effects of Stress

Stress can become toxic to our bodies and mental health. Constant exposure to adversity, or stressful work conditions, can activate our fight-flight-freeze response. This is a biological response that, when used in small doses, is very helpful. It helps in the courtroom when you need to be on your feet and convincing. It can help you be aggressive in a meeting, and it gives you the edge over the competition when they aren't as passionate as you. It also can help you "walk away" from a bad negotiation rather than continuing to argue. The stress response can help you "freeze," when provoked, which may allow a better negotiating position later.

However, when the fight-flight-freeze system is *constantly* activated, health concerns may follow. The body and mind become depleted by the constant flux of hormones (cortisol) and neurotransmitters (adrenalin and epinephrine). Healthy tissues are degraded in the body, such as

cardiac tissue. The immune system is suppressed. Sleep patterns change and lessen. Fatigue increases due to the constant rushes of stress hormones. Digestion changes and the body's ability to lose weight is reduced. Sex drive decreases. Headaches, depression and panic attacks increase.

The effects of chronic stress often bring people to the doctor, but that "stress" usually carries other names — insomnia, impotence, constipation, frequent colds or flu, weight gain, fatigue, uncontrollable temper, high blood pressure, canker sores, ulcers, eczema, psoriasis, nightmares, chest pains, anxiety attacks, infertility, concentration problems, bodily pain, painful muscle tension or muscle spasms, and headaches.

Contrary to some beliefs, you don't have to have a diagnosed mental health condition to be affected by stress and burnout. Stress and burnout have their own independent effects on the body and mind. But, if another mental health problem is present, the stress and effects of burnout are going to make the original problem worse because any remaining emotional and physical resources that the person has will be expended with the additional effects of chronic stress and burnout. Burnout and stress will actually hasten a depressive episode, a drug relapse or chronic pain, and increase the frequency of panic attacks. That is why it is so important to address the signs of burnout as soon as they appear.

Taming Burnout

If you are experiencing the effects of chronic stress and burnout, there is hope. One method is to begin looking at your "energetic bank accounts," consisting of the physical, emotional and spiritual areas in your life. I encourage and coach clients to take an inventory of their physical health, their emotional state and spiritual connectedness.

Ask yourself the following questions:

► How is your health? Your energy level? What is your weight and strength level?

► How do you feel emotionally? Are you getting your needs met in relationships? At work?

► How connected are you to feeling like your work makes a difference? Is your work a meaningful path for you? Are you connected to any kind of faith, healing, charity or spiritual community?

If your answers are not what you wish them to be, it is important to start making "deposits" into these areas of your life.

For example, physical health can be changed by paying attention to eating habits and activity levels. Exercise is crucial to regulation of stress hormones, sleep, appetite and energy levels.

Emotional health can be refueled by increasing positive social interactions, learning meditation and relaxation techniques, attending psychotherapy or counseling, and learning time management and assertiveness skills (e.g., learning how to say no!).

Spiritual practices can be enhanced formally or informally through re-identification with religious beliefs, attendance at services, or spending time acknowledging a higher power or developing connectedness and mindfulness. The method must always match the person's preferences and needs. This is often the most challenging part of overcoming burnout: changing behaviors. Assistance from an experienced professional can help.

The importance of a program like the Louisiana Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (LAP) cannot be underscored enough. It is crucial to have support available from people in your profession, confidential and continuously available. Buddy Stockwell, the LAP executive director, is easy to talk to and not pressuring. He knows when a problem is serious and needs immediate help and when someone just needs to talk. Asking for help is hard, but the LAP program makes it easy. Stockwell and his team know all the best resources and can easily demystify the process of treatment support and recovery. They help people CHANGE and take control of their lives again. They will literally save months of extended suffering and many hours of searching for answers (and might just save your life).

The LAP program is a tremendous resource that should not be a last resort. Frequently in my mental health practice, I hear clients tell me they waited until things were really bad before coming to see me. Why? Why do we wait so long for help? Help can be given at any stage of suffering, but certainly it makes sense to use resources that are useful BEFORE a problem becomes severe (from a physical and mental health perspective, as well as a familial, personal and occupational standpoint). In the case of burnout, it is an avoidable phenomenon when the right steps are taken, early in the process.

The journey from burnout to recovery is well described in Joan Borysenko's book, *Fried: Why You Burn Out and How to Revive*: "Revival from burnout is always about the recovery of lost authenticity. It's waking up to who we really are and realizing that heaven is not a destination, but a state of mind. If being fried can bring us to a point where we reconnect to our own true nature, then it's worth every moment of separation to rediscover the heaven that has been inside of us all along."

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