**How To Be a Lawyer and a Human Being at the Same Time - A Primer on Lawyer Stress**

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Lawyer stress is a topic that virtually everyone in the profession deals with, yet it is one that is rarely discussed in any meaningful way. We know that legal practitioners can be subject to extreme stress and we know that there are empirically proven techniques out there - legal and healthy ones - for relieving stress, yet we continue to operate as though our stress level is out of our control. In discussing this seeming disconnect, I invite you to stay open and view this subject with new eyes. One can repeatedly hear a topic discussed and yet not truly assimilate what’s being said.

So what is stress? Let’s go to the engineering definition – and it is from Wikipedia so we know it must be correct: “stress is a measure of the forces acting within a body. It is a measure of the average force per unit area of a surface within the body on which forces act...The dimension of stress is that of *pressure*” It is startling how applicable this definition is to the experience of lawyers. Pressure experienced as excessive amounts of stress acting as a force upon the body (and the mind).

Stress is not an event; it is your reaction to an event. When your body responds physically and mentally to uncomfortable external stimuli, stress results. It can also be generated by thoughts, feelings or expectations about things that are real or imagined. A phobia, for example, which is an exaggerated and sometimes illogical fear, can cause its sufferer as much stress as real danger. In addition, a series of small events, seemingly insignificant in themselves, may accumulate, inducing a stress reaction.

Put simply, stress is the clash between the demands in your life and the means you have to deal with those demands. When the demands overtake your ability to cope with them you can become overwhelmed. This is not a foreign experience for lawyers. And it`s not uniformly experienced. Stress is very subjective and is experienced differently by each person, both in form and in intensity.

To be clear, not all stress is bad. Some can even be pleasant, such as the kind you experience when cheering on your favourite team in the NHL playoffs or when conducting a particularly challenging cross-examination. Many people do their best work under pressure. This is positive stress. Normally, a little bit of stress is stimulating. But too much stress runs the body down. At the same time, too little stress can also be harmful. The sudden inactivity which follows retirement from a demanding legal career can be very stressful unless new interests are discovered.

One study found that: 48.1% Of Supervised Lawyers from all practice sectors agreed with the statement: “I Feel Stressed And Fatigued Most Of The Time.” And it often gets to the point that a person decides to leave law altogether, with women more than twice as likely as men (21 per cent vs. 9 per cent) to cite work-life balance as the reason for leaving practice.

So what are the symptoms of stress? Our bodies are quite good at sending us warning signs – sometimes bright red flashing neon warning signs. Physical symptoms take the form of headaches, high blood pressure or racing heart, breathlessness, chest pain, fatigue, difficulty sleeping, muscle tension or eyestrain. Some emotional signs include depression, irritability, anxiety, feelings of guilt or shame, mood swings, anger, loss of confidence or self-esteem, loss of concentration, and apathy. There are also behavioural indicators like overeating or undereating, an increase in smoking or drinking, forgetfulness, insomnia, and careless driving, including road rage.

Of greatest concern is when stress leads to conditions like depression, anxiety disorders or substance abuse. It`s not a coincidence that lawyers are approximately 4 times more likely to experience depression or alcoholism than the general public. And we know that lawyers, being the self-sufficient fixers we are, resist asking for help in these situations. We endure the pain, we intellectualize, and that just makes our distress worse.

In the past 12 months, at least five lawyers – that we know of – have killed themselves in Ontario. People don`t believe this happens to lawyers but it does, and it’s not, as some lawyers are want to think, the weak people. This past year, a prominent US Supreme Court litigator killed himself. Depression is not about weak character or constitution, it is about a treatable medical condition that if left untreated, like many other medical conditions, can be dangerous.

The staff at the Ontario Lawyers’ Assistance Program (OLAP) often encounters a unique phenomenon which I call the Lone Sufferer Myth. It occurs when caller after caller to OLAP discloses their challenges and then invariably asks whether others in the profession have similar problems or whether they’re the only one. Hundreds of people are asking whether they’re the only one. If you want to know what’s stressful, walking around suffering and thinking you’re a freak for it is stressful. Judging yourself for not being good enough and comparing your perceived lack of success to the perceived success of your peers is stressful. There is nothing more stressful than being in pain and judging yourself for it, as though you don’t have the right to suffer because others suffer more and you should just be stronger. You’re not weak, you’re just human.

We have observed that the single biggest lawyer stressor is not having enough hours in the day to get everything done. A Canadian Bar Association-Ipsos Reid survey found that 68 per cent of those surveyed said that they have difficulty achieving a balance between their professional and personal lives and the biggest challenge, according to 84 per cent of lawyers was time demands. And yet, despite extreme time pressure, we still seem to also find ways to become less productive. Procrastination is endemic, which only renders the pressure more acute.

When you`ve got too many things on your plate, sometimes it`s tempting to do three things at a time thinking we`re being efficient, we`re likely not. Sometimes putting the hard things aside may seem to reduce stress but we all know it actually increases is – exponentially for some. So my first suggestion for stress reduction is to learn techniques to avoid procrastination! (One excellent resource for this is PracticePro’s online Overcoming Procrastination Workshop).

Another significant stressor in the past three years or so has been the economic downturn. Jobs have been scarce, as has business for many firms. Economic pressure leads to firm pressure, which leads to family pressure which leads to personal pressure and often, illness. It is especially important during these times to pay particular attention to self-care.

All of the foregoing may seem daunting but there is good news. There are things one can do to reduce stress. You know most of them already: eat right, exercise, etc. It`s a mantra you`ve heard a thousand times yet you may not have actually heard it. We all want to be our best. We admire Olympic athletes, for instance, because they excel. What we don`t always think about is how much conscious self-care goes into that type of excellence. Olympic athletes make sure they get enough sleep, they are careful what they put in their bodies, they rest, they exercise their bodies, and they even have coaches to help them. Yet as lawyers who strive to excel, many of us act as though those things are quaint luxuries we cannot afford.

The truth is that we cannot afford not to engage in active self-care. And this starts with a simple but often misunderstood piece of advice: endeavour to live consciously. Lawyers are often reflexively resistant to being described as anything but conscious. Let me explain. When I talk to law students, I often describe an unconscious treadmill in which one says: “I got into law school so I have to go. I graduated law school so I have to article. I finished articles so I have to be called. I was called, I have to practice. I’m practicing, I have to make partner...” This scenario often leads to lawyers waking up one morning in their 40’s, not entirely sure how they got where they are but not liking what they’re feeling. A client of mine once described himself to me as similar to a boiling frog. If you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will of course frantically try to clamber out. But if you place it gently in a pot of tepid water and turn the heat on low, it will float there quite placidly. As the water gradually heats up, the frog will sink into a tranquil stupor, exactly like one of us in a hot bath, and before long, with a smile on its face, it will unresistingly allow itself to be boiled to death. My client’s life had become an unconscious treadmill rolling in a direction he hadn’t planned and he found himself in crisis as a result. How many of you are on that unconscious treadmill right now? In other words, are you where you want to be or are you where you’ve ended up?

With only one life, if who you are and what your values are is not reflected in what you do, when will it? In our profession, an significant amount of the stress we see is based on the fact that a lot of people simply dislike what they’re doing and should be doing something else – like me (I was a lawyer and now I’m a social worker). There are not a lot of things more stressful than having to go into a job everyday that you hate, but some lawyers feel trapped. Some are just in a bad office environment or with people that are hard to work with. Some are in the wrong area of law. Some are just not private practice types.

Not all stress-reducing changes are big ones. Some are simply about not always being tethered to your iPhone. The key is to acknowledge what’s not working and to know that you have the choice and the ability to make a change. Maybe not immediately for some, but nothing is irretrievable. The fact is, virtually everything involves choice. This means that your life belongs to you so if change needs to happen, it’s on you to effect it. That’s a responsibility but it’s also an opportunity. It means that while often exceedingly difficult, change can happen. For many, not changing is often harder. For example, people with addictions fight to keep using but not changing that behaviour can make life unmanageable. Of course, I’m not saying everything that causes stress is a choice. Some people experience unforeseen illnesses or family discord, to name just two things that happen to people by no choice of their own. But the fact that one even has choice in how one deals with those stressors is empowering and hopeful.

I mentioned at the beginning of this piece that there are concrete strategies which one can employ to reduce one’s stress levels. I also mentioned that people often hear these suggestions but then let them roll past without embracing and implementing them in their lives. And all of this is in the context of highly stressful lives, in desperate need of effective and timely stress reduction. Will you employ any of these in your life?

The first suggestion, in no particular order, is to practicerelaxation techniques such as meditation and deep breathing. When you're under stress, before speaking, take three deep breaths. It serves as a proverbial reset button. That said, this may be the suggestion which, while being the easiest and cheapest stress reduction technique we can offer, is the most consistently ignored by people who need it. This is despite the fact that there exists empirical data which proves that these techniques assist in the reduction of the stress hormones, Cortisol and Adrenaline. Perhaps the concept of simply breathing deliberately seems too simplistic to be effective, but it is.

Have you heard that you need to eat a well balanced diet enough times? Well, we make sure our children get a good breakfast before school because we know they are more successful when they do. Don’t we deserve the same consideration?And this includes not skipping meals and drinking lots of water, because dehydration leads to exhaustion, which lowers our productivity and our ability to endure stress. This is true as well for engaging in regular aerobic and strength building activities.

Reducing or eliminating the use or abuse of alcohol, tobacco/nicotine or caffeine goes a long way to reducing stress. So too does the monitoring of your use of prescribed drugs to guard against either physical or psychological dependence or addiction.

Perhaps the most overlooked stress reduction strategy relates to getting sufficient sleep. It allows the body and mind to recuperate and recharge. I remain startled how many OLAP clients speak of their personal distress only to recount how they rarely sleep. These conditions are inextricably bound up with each other. Your ability to endure stress is directly proportional to whether you get enough sleep.

One of the most prevalent stress-inducers in a person’s life is the absence or insufficiency of personal boundaries. If you are letting others treat you badly, or if you constantly do things for people out of a feeling of obligation, whether you want to do them or not, your boundaries need shoring up. An example of a boundary is telling your clients that you are not available after 5:00 p.m. and then consistently enforcing that boundary. You are teaching them how to treat you. In other words, learn to say "No!" to demands that are too much or which violate your values.

Another way you can honour your values and reduce stress is to do things that you love. You’ve heard the saying: “Work to live, don’t live to work.” If your existence is dominated by work and devoid of fun and play and passion, that’s no life. You have unique loves and interests which fuel you and recharge your batteries. You deserve to have a life filled with those, and doing them will make the other parts of your life, including the stressful parts, better.

We know from study after study that stress is manageable. You manage tooth decay by brushing your teeth every day. You manage avoiding having your car break down by keeping the tank filled and changing the oil periodically. So which of the stress reduction suggestions that I`ve made will you actually implement. What strategy or technique did you read that you’ve heard a thousand times before but perhaps, you really heard it today for the first time? My wish for you is spectacular success as a lawyer and equally spectacular success as a human being. It can be done.