

Managing stress – a guide for legal practitioners

What is stress?

One of the most commonly reported mental health issues for lawyers is work-related stress. Stress can be both helpful and unhelpful. In general, when people refer to stress they are discussing unhelpful stress which compromises your ability to function in work and life.

Stress is a natural response which occurs when you appraise a situation and perceive that you do not have the ability to manage the demands of the situation, particularly if some aspect of the situation is out of your control. Thus, you perceive a gap between what you believe you can do and what you are expected to do.

When you feel stressed, your brain releases two hormones – adrenaline and cortisol – which activate a series of physiological, psychological, and behavioural changes to help you cope with the situation. In the short-term these changes are adaptive. However, when long-term or chronic stress is experienced, levels of adrenaline and cortisol remain abnormally high which is detrimental to physical and psychological wellbeing.

Stress in the legal profession

More than any other professionals, lawyers may be subject to higher levels of stress due to a unique set of factors present in legal practice. Factors which are commonly cited as contributing to stress within the legal profession include:

- billing targets, time pressures and excessive workloads
- unrealistic expectations of demanding or difficult clients or managers
- real or perceived ethical conflicts
- coping with emotional or confronting clients and situations, particularly in family law matters or victims of crime
- adversarial and critical nature of the profession
- hierarchical and competitive culture within some law firms
- interpersonal and communication difficulties with colleagues and clients
- prevalence of 'type A' personalities and perfectionistic personalities
- for younger lawyers, difficulties adjusting to the realities of legal practice, particularly with respect to professional status, salary and day to day tasks
- vicarious trauma particularly among criminal lawyers
- lack of work/life balance and work intrusion into family time
- perceived expectation of constant availability via email, phone etc
- low control over workload, deadlines and how the work is to be done
- stigma around asking for help or admitting to feeling overwhelmed
- prevalence of more introverted personality styles, resulting in a work environment with low social interaction.

Identifying the issues in your workplace and developing skills to manage these pressures will enable more effective functioning in the workplace and life in general.

Checklist: How do I know if I am stressed?

There are a variety of signs and symptoms that may indicate someone is feeling stress. If you answer yes to any of the questions below, you may be experiencing stress.

- Is your sleep disturbed? Do you experience difficulty getting to sleep or waking up during the night?
- Do you feel you are constantly rushing and unable to slow down?
- Are you drinking alcohol or using substances to relax?
- Do you experience 'butterflies in the stomach' or nausea and digestive upsets?
- Is it hard to think clearly or to focus on tasks?
- Do you feel your heart is racing or that you have a rapid pulse rate when you are not exerting yourself physically?
- Do you experience rapid breathing or breathlessness when you are not exerting yourself physically?
- Are you irritable or impatient, particularly with others?
- Do you fidget or experience difficulty keeping still?
- Have you noticed increased sensitivity to light and noise?
- Do you 'startle' quickly?



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Eight strategies for managing stress

1. Become aware of what stress feels like for you

The first step in managing stress is being aware of the signs that you are feeling stressed. Although there are some commonalities in symptoms, stress manifests differently in everyone. For instance, some people will experience a racing heart while others will feel butterflies in the stomach.

- Reflect on the most recent time you noticed you were stressed. Review the checklist of signs overleaf and note the ones that apply to you.
- Develop a habit of scanning your body during the day to quickly notice any signs that you may be feeling stressed.

4. Use questioning and reframing

Use a series of questions to get perspective and enable problem-solving in a stressful situation.

- What is my belief or my assumption about the situation?
- Am I jumping to conclusions or using faulty thinking?
- What are the facts of the situation?
- What data or evidence supports my assumption?
- What data or evidence does not support my assumption?
- Am I thinking rationally or am I reacting emotionally?
- How can I gather more information about the situation?
- How else could I view this situation? How would someone else view it?
- What can I do to manage the situation effectively?

5. Apply scaling techniques to get perspective

When you are feeling stressed your brain will typically weigh all issues as equally important or urgent. Scaling techniques can help re-gain perspective so you can prioritise effectively.

- Make a list of your current issues or things that are stressing you.
- Rate each issue on a scale of one (not very important) to 10 (vitaly important).
- Apply a time-scale – what will the effect of this issue be on me in one month? three months? or 12 months?
- Focus on addressing the most pressing or important issue.

2. Take action early

Delaying action sets up a cycle in which stress increases, work productivity decreases, leading to increased stress. This cycle is unsustainable and has the potential to lead to emotional and physical breakdown. Taking action early prevents serious long term consequences on your work performance and personal functioning.

- Become aware of your initial physiological indicators so you can quickly recognise when you are becoming stressed.
- Take three to five long, slow breaths to slow down the physiological response.
- Pay attention to the environment around you, notice sounds, sights, smells, until the physiological response weakens.
- Identify the trigger – what was being appraised as being unrealistic or unmanageable?
- Use a cognitive strategy to appraise the situation and to assess your ability to manage rather than react to it.
- Develop a strategy to manage the stressful situation yourself or seek support if you need it.

3. Be aware of faulty thinking

We all have a tendency to adopt particular thinking styles when we're reacting to situations. However, these approaches are not always helpful. Being aware of when you are using faulty thinking will enable you to take corrective action. Some examples of faulty thinking are:

- Rigidity – fixed rules or beliefs about how you and others should behave irrespective of the situation or context.
- Catastrophising – predicting the worst possible outcome without considering alternative scenarios.
- Personalising – assuming responsibility for things that are not your fault or assuming that actions are directly related to you rather than looking at the facts of the situation.
- Mind reading – assuming you know what other people are thinking and basing your conclusions on that assumption rather than checking whether the assumption is correct.
- Labelling or stereotyping – using broad categories to explain or predict people's behaviour rather than realising everyone is unique.
- All or nothing (black and white) thinking – seeing things in a polarised way rather than realising there is middle ground and 'shades of grey'.

6. Switch off from work

Thinking about or doing work at home prevents you from having sufficient 'switch off' time which is vital for your brain to refresh and re-energise.

- Implement an end of day routine where you list tasks that are outstanding on a 'to-do' list, shut down your computer, tidy your desk.
- Reflect on your achievements for the day, what went well?
- On the way home, review your day and consider what tomorrow looks like; then move your focus to what the rest of the day will be – who will you be with, how do you want to be with them and what will you do.
- When you get home use a transition strategy such as changing your clothes or having a shower to signal the change of environment.
- Manage your technology use – turn off phone during meals or when having time with partner or children; turn off emails at night or over weekend.
- If you work at home schedule a time, go into a separate room and close the door so you can focus and get the work done in the allocated time.

7. Develop healthy habits

- Eat well and regularly – focus on fresh foods.
- Avoid excessive caffeine, alcohol and nicotine.
- Go outside at least once a day for 20 minutes.
- Schedule a break (even a small one!) every work day.
- Set aside time each week for catching up with friends or engaging in an enjoyable activity.
- Join a gym or play a sport to release excess adrenaline.

8. Develop your skills

- Work on your time management skills to gain control of your workload.
- Develop your assertiveness, negotiation and communication skills to assist in dealing with difficult clients or colleagues.
- Seek clarity from your supervisor about tasks and processes.
- For supervisors, develop your leadership skills to get the best out of your team and to address any performance issues.



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