

# Strategies for stress-proofing



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Many factors contribute to lawyers being recognised as the professional group most vulnerable to mental health problems, especially depression. The causes go far beyond the expected long working days and often unrealistic deadlines. Lawyers are expected to aim for perfection; they live in an environment where winning is often crucial, more important than feelings and relationships; emotional detachment is encouraged; and their environment is competitive, even among colleagues.

## What's wrong with stress, anyway?

Many lawyers perceive stress as a badge of honour. But what is stress? At best, it can be a motivator. Too much stress, however, is actually harmful, especially when the demands of our environment tax or outweigh our perceived abilities to cope. Stress is often accompanied by biochemical, physiological, cognitive and behavioural responses to either alter the stressful event or accommodate its effects.

When we encounter stressful situations, we are designed to react with short, sharp bursts of energy, for a “fight-or-flight” response. The body becomes rapidly aroused and motivated via the sympathetic nervous system and the endocrine system. Breathing and heart rate accelerate, and digestive processes are reduced.

## Harmful stress: know the signs

Stress-related depression and anxiety are different for each person. You might have feelings of profound sadness and emotional emptiness, a sort of “flatlining” of the spirit. Or you may experience severe irritability and anger over small things.

You may feel tired and unmotivated much of the time. You may not want to get out of bed. You might feel as if you are dragging yourself around.

YOU'VE SPENT YEARS HONING YOUR MIND AS A PRECISION LEGAL TOOL. PROTECTING IT FROM STRESS IS SOUND MAINTENANCE.

If you experience anxiety, you might feel nervous and have fears that seem to make little sense. Anxiety makes it nearly impossible to function and relate to others. You may worry all the time and feel your thoughts are out of control.

## Symptoms of unhappiness, depression and anxiety

- You frequently experience intense sadness or loneliness.
- You often have negative thoughts about yourself, your life and your future.
- You are often irritable and get upset over small things.
- You are tired all the time and lack energy.
- You have lost your appetite or you overeat.
- You have difficulty remembering things, concentrating or making decisions.
- You are frustrated at your inability to have fulfilling and lasting relationships.
- You experience intense, irrational fears or panic attacks.

Sometimes it's hard to know if depression or anxiety is causing the problems in your life and relationships, or if your life experiences are causing the sadness and anxiety. The truth is, it could be both.

## Seek help sooner

Don't think that you're less of a lawyer because you are struggling with depression or stress. This is not a personal failure – but failing to address it in time may well be. Remember how prevalent mental health problems are in the legal profession and treat those who are struggling, including yourself, with kindness and compassion.

Honesty helps. Speak to trusted friends and family, your GP and/or a psychologist.

## Five steps to success and happiness

### Keep your body in shape through:

1. **Healthy regular meals.** (yes, that means a lunch break)
2. **Adequate sleep.**
3. **Exercising.**
4. **Limiting your intake of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.**
5. **Make time for partners and friends, they are good for you.** A happy personal environment increases professional effectiveness, and vice versa. Do not get conned into neglecting your personal life – it is vital.
6. **Set achievable goals.** Start each day with a realistic list of tasks. Meeting your goals will give you confidence and energy. Unrealistic goals will result in a sense of failure. Regard mistakes as an opportunity to learn and improve.
7. **Value your boundaries.** Make a deal with yourself about working hours and stick to it. Leave work at the office at the end of your day. Learn to say “No”. Remember, mobile phones can be switched off.
8. **Take weekends and holidays off.** Use weekends and holidays to regenerate energy simply by not checking phone and email messages. ●

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