

Banish stress with balance



WHETHER IT'S DEALING WITH COMPULSORY ACQUISITION, A MURDER TRIAL OR A MESSY DIVORCE, THE LIFE OF A LAWYER IS FILLED WITH RESPONSIBILITY, BUT IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT ONE'S FIRST RESPONSIBILITY IS TO ONESELF.

The 'S' word – we hear it a lot in our demanding profession. Billable hours, late nights, demanding and unappreciative clients; the reaction these words evoke can be summed up in one word – stress. The word might be overused, but that doesn't make it any less real; it is no secret that the job of a lawyer, by its very nature, invites stress. For a lawyer practising in regional or suburban areas, this can be exacerbated by feelings of isolation, particularly if you have moved away from family and friends in order to secure that job or are the only young lawyer in a small firm.

By our very nature, lawyers are judgemental. This helps with our daily tasks, but it also means that we've been trained to judge and criticise ourselves, which often leads to stress, depression and anxiety. These feelings can be further compounded if we have vocal clients wanting more and more and projecting their antagonism for the "other side" on to us.

A fundamental part of a lawyer's job is being adept at seeing and planning for the worst case scenario. Unfortunately for many of us, this skill can leak into other, less appropriate, areas of our lives.

The profession and its high-stakes work also have a propensity to attract and mould perfectionist personalities. Again, this attribute can make us great lawyers, but the demands of our workloads mean that if we can't give the attention we want to give to each and every task, each and every day, it can be a cause of constant worry.

Stress, depression and anxiety are serious issues, yet many people are too scared to talk about them, which further exacerbates the problem. Sure, most of us are happy to sympathise with and discuss the issue, but there seems to be a real taboo being a sufferer. But if the statistics are accurate, you or someone you know definitely is.

The good news is that steps can be taken to minimise the feelings that lead to stress. Here's how:

Put down the heavy burden

Many of us choose to leave the legal profession we love because of its emotional demands, sometimes thinking, in error, that we are just not cut out for the stress involved. Imagine you are holding a glass of your favourite drink (whether half full or half empty). You hold that glass for 10 minutes while you talk to a friend with a smile on your face, then for an hour, then two hours, then a day, a week, a month. As time goes on, that glass of your favourite drink gets heavier. It doesn't make you like the drink any less, nor does it make you a lesser person if you put it down and have a rest. In a similar way, we all need to take a break, or at least a step back, in order to ensure that we don't become overwhelmed by stress.

Balance the scales

Likewise, if you keep adding ice to your drink, it will eventually overflow. There needs to be an outlet that drains out water before more is added. This is the same with our jobs. Don't take on too much, and learn to say no, or it will adversely affect aspects of your personal life, not just work commitments. It is imperative that we learn to balance the scales and commit to more than just our jobs.

Return to your earlier days

Do you remember the carefree days before you were introduced to the laws of the land? If you feel that your life is being consumed by your work, think about finding a hobby that will help you relax, perhaps something that you used to enjoy when you were younger. This could be reading, writing, playing your favourite sport, even letting off steam by taking up boxing or Taekwondo. Sometimes it's a good idea to commit to a regular hobby that makes you leave the office on time at least once a week.

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Talk, laugh and seek assistance

It is common for people suffering from depression or anxiety to push others away and become more isolated. Even though it may be hard, remember that no one is an island and laughter is a great form of medicine. Maintain your ties and let your friendships grow. Push yourself to be involved. For example, you might attend your local Young Lawyer networking functions.

Finally, if it becomes too much, don't be afraid to ask for help from friends, family and colleagues. You'll be amazed how many people can relate to or shed light on what you are experiencing. Visit your doctor, feel free to contact the Vic Lawyers Health Line on 1300 664 744 or use the LIV mentoring program. Most importantly, remember that you are not alone. ■

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