How lawyers can avoid burnout and debilitating anxiety

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BY LESLIE A. GORDON

Soon after graduating from New York University School of Law and joining the corporate practice of a white-shoe Manhattan law firm, Will Meyerhofer gained 45 pounds, was sleep-deprived and was frequently sick. “I was a nervous wreck. I was shattered,” says Meyerhofer, who’d also graduated from Harvard. “Even though I got to the very top, I was treated like an idiot and I felt I didn’t belong in the field. I was a mess. At the end of the day, I really only looked forward to seeing my dog.”

Not surprisingly, this experience triggered major anxiety for Meyerhofer, who often found himself “curled up in a ball, crying, losing it.” Even after he left the profession, he had panic dreams about being back at the firm.

Meyerhofer's experience is not unique. A 1990 Johns Hopkins University study examined more than 100 occupations for anxiety-related issues and found that lawyers suffer from depression at a rate 3.6 times that of the other professions studied. A National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health study—based on data from 1984-1998—concluded that white male lawyers are more likely to turn to suicide than nonlawyer professionals. Falling Through the Cracks, a 2014 survey of Yale Law School students, found that 70 percent of them have struggled with mental health issues during their time at law school.

“"The official number is that something like a gazillion lawyers are stressed out, and that amounts to a bajillion percent of the profession,” observes Meyerhofer, who became a licensed clinical social worker after benefiting tremendously from therapy he himself underwent to “get a grasp on what happened to me in BigLaw.” Counseling stressed-out attorneys has since become a specialty for Meyerhofer, who’s also written a book, Way Worse Than Being a Dentist: The Lawyer’s Quest for Meaning. In his practice, lawyers complain frequently and primarily about depression and anxiety. “I see it like crazy.”
Gayle Victor says two traits—perfectionism and pessimism—are prevalent among lawyers and may make them prone to anxiety. Photo by Wayne Slezak.

Two character traits—perfectionism and pessimism—are prevalent among lawyers and may make them prone to anxiety, according to Gayle Victor, who worked as a consumer debt attorney for 25 years before becoming a social worker. “Perfectionism helps lawyers succeed in practice because the profession is excessively detail-oriented. In the Johns Hopkins study, optimism outperformed pessimism—except in the legal profession, because lawyers are hired to always look out for what can go wrong.” Stressed-out lawyers account for 75 percent of Victor’s practice (http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/longtime_attorney_gives_up_law_practice_to_help_others_deal_with_spirit-kil), Care for Lawyers, which is based in Evanston, Illinois.

Taken to the extreme, perfectionism transforms into a feeling that nothing is good enough. “Attorneys develop an overdeveloped sense of control, so if things don’t go as planned, they blame themselves. They think they didn’t work hard enough or they were careless,” explains Tyger Latham, a Washington, D.C.-based psychologist who treats many lawyers and law students. “Paid worriers, lawyers are expected to predict the future, to anticipate threats and guard against anything that could arise. So they learn to see problems everywhere, even when they don’t exist. And they start to perceive threats as if they’re life-or-death matters. That’s the very definition of anxiety.”

What can then happen is that looking for risk and problems moves beyond just being a job or a profession and becomes the way that lawyers approach life, says Alan Levin, who spent 34 years as a labor and employment lawyer before co-founding the Care for Lawyers therapy practice with Victor. Lawyers tend to perceive far higher stakes when they encounter adversity, Levin says. “It’s like coming home with four A’s and a B and only focusing on the B. Mistakes are not tolerated well. Plus, the atmosphere of law offers minimal support amidst the high pressure,” contributing to a profound sense of isolation for lawyers. As a result, “without a doubt, every lawyer I see has anxiety greater than the average population.”

Mental health disorders can profoundly affect attorneys’ daily functioning. Irritability, obsessive thoughts, feelings of inadequacy, difficulty concentrating, a sense of worry and impending danger, sleep disturbances, heart palpitations, sweating, fatigue and muscle tension are all side effects of anxiety and depression, according to Latham. Some attorneys withdraw from peers, friends and family or engage in “maladaptive coping behaviors,” such as self-medicating with alcohol and other substances. Meyerhofer, too, has seen “strange compensatory behavior” among lawyers eager to gain a sense of control over their lives, including “hair pulling, hand washing, food disorders and gym anorexia,” he says. “I’ve seen weird stuff—lawyers who stay up all night playing video games, guys
Will Meyerhofer underwent therapy for anxiety while working at a corporate law firm. He now has a practice counseling stressed-out attorneys.

What's notable about lawyers' unhappiness is that there's a sense of acceptance rather than outrage, says Jeena Cho, a San Francisco bankruptcy lawyer who blogs about anxiety and mindfulness and is working on a book. "Why do we accept this as the norm? Why do we have to accept that our jobs have to be miserable?"

**AVOIDING ANXIETY**

The good news is that healthy coping mechanisms are available and are proven to reduce anxiety and depression among lawyers. Chief among them is meditation, which is not surprising given the media attention it has received in recent years. And the practice is gaining momentum in the legal profession. The law schools at Yale, the University of California at Berkeley and the University of San Francisco have begun offering mindfulness courses. In Northern California, Spirit Rock Meditation Center offers weekends solely for attorneys—the only profession-specific retreat the center offers.

In addition to her law practice, Cho teaches meditation courses for lawyers, coaches attorneys on stress and anxiety management, and produces the Resilient Lawyer podcast. She says a meditation practice will bring notable changes to stressed-out attorneys. "Start a daily meditation practice," Cho says. "It doesn't have to be long. It may just be a couple of minutes. It doesn't even have to be a formal meditation practice: Just sit at your desk, close your eyes and breathe."

Professionals such as attorneys can be resistant to meditation because of prevalent but erroneous stereotypes. Karen Gifford, a lawyer-turned-executive coach and co-founder of Broad Ventures Leadership in San Francisco, tries to demythologize meditation. "You don't have to go to the top of a mountain or wear funny clothes" to bring mindfulness to your day, she says. "The territory you're heading into is yourself, which is a very safe place to be. And it doesn't involve giving up your logical mind."

Criminal defense lawyer Brian Berson of San Francisco took Cho's meditation course after experts at the Stanford Center for Sleep Sciences and Medicine suggested that he try meditation to help with his profound sleep disturbances. "I have a high-stress business. All of my clients are desperate. I've had various sleep disorders, including waking in the middle of the night thinking about work," Berson says. "The meditation class was very soothing; and overall, it's helped me with everything."

The basic idea, according to Berson, is to just be in the moment. "All of us have a tendency to think about other stuff no matter what we're doing. But it's counterproductive and prevents you from enjoying life if you're doing something pleasurable—or even if you're doing something mundane that can be pleasurable, like taking a shower. You should stop and really feel the water instead of thinking about what you need to do when you get out. When you're walking down the street, enjoy it. Smell the air, look at the surroundings instead of thinking about where you're on your way to. Mindfulness is more than just meditation. It's a whole different way of thinking."

Berson continues to do online meditation sessions with Cho whenever he can fit it into his schedule. Because he has "trouble getting into that zone" on his own, he says, he likes the structure of a guided practice. "It's a really good thing for anyone with a stressful job," he says. "Most lawyers are under a lot of stress. We're advocating for people who are desperate—not just criminal defense lawyers like me whose clients are in prison. Litigators, too, are warriors. We've got to fight people. The aggressive state of mind is hard to turn off. That's stressful. It's bad for your health and for your state of mind."

Even if lawyers don't want to take a class or begin a formal meditation practice, Cho suggests they at least try adopting what's called the STOP approach to daily tasks: Stop. Take a breath. Observe. Proceed mindfully.
"Studies have shown that people literally hold their breath when they look at emails. It triggers the fight-or-flight response," Cho says. She recommends simply taking one long inhale and exhale before opening your inbox.

Small changes like mindfulness can have huge implications, particularly for lawyers who tend to be incredibly disconnected from themselves, according to Gifford. "When you sit with your own mind every single day, you see what your thought patterns are. You soon realize that certain thoughts aren't based on anything real or true—it's just a pattern. So you learn not to take yourself so seriously, which is incredibly freeing. You learn not to always think that opposing counsel is this horrible human being set out to ruin your life. All of a sudden, negotiation with that person has so many more possibilities."

FOCUSING ON THE PRESENT

Cho noticed a tremendous shift in her own law practice when she brought mindfulness and meditation into her life. For example, "You see your own role in the relationship with opposing counsel. You start to ask, 'What am I doing to contribute to this relationship?' Holding a mirror up isn't easy, but meditation creates the space to do that," she says. "Doing dishes, sitting in traffic, someone cutting you off—the knee-jerk reactions, the state of constant annoyance: That's all gone away. Because of meditation, I'm able to do everyday things with more joy. I'm not living in the future, not living to cross things off a to-do list. I live more presently."

From their first days of law school, lawyers are taught to vigilantly search the horizon for problems—to anticipate, prevent and resolve problems. But many attorneys lose the ability to choose when to approach the world that way, and a meditation practice can reverse that trend, according to Richard Carlton, acting director of the State Bar of California's Lawyer Assistance Program, which helps lawyers and bar applicants grappling with stress, anxiety, substance abuse or career concerns.

"When I teach CLE programs throughout the state, I insist that thinking like a lawyer is a legal skill, not a life skill," Carlton says. Adopting mindfulness, "just paying attention to the present moment," is a great way to combat this tendency. A mindfulness practice can be as simple as closing your eyes and counting backward from 100, he says.

Experts insist that staying present is essential not just for mental health but also for effective law practice. In the Yale Law School study, 50 percent of respondents indicated that mental health challenges affected their ability to perform academically. Stressed-out lawyers make poor decisions, leaving them open to liability. As a result, the benefits of mindfulness have become a big topic of discussion and education among professional responsibility groups, according to Terry Harrell, chair of the ABA's Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs.

"Meditation and mindfulness are not just good for us the way things like fish oil are. They actually affect the quality of legal work," Harrell says. "A mindfulness practice makes us better decision-makers, better ethical decision-makers. And that translates into better lawyering."

Along those lines, the promotional materials for Spirit Rock Meditation Center's weekend for lawyers say that "law students, law professors, corporate attorneys and public interest attorneys alike have found that incorporating mindfulness into their life and law practice leads to greater effectiveness in skills such as client interviewing, managing the stresses of oral argument or a complex trial, and cultivating greater equanimity within a challenging profession."

In addition to meditation, eating both healthfully and mindfully should not be underrated as a method of combating anxiety, according to Cho. "Most lawyers eat at their desks or in front of the TV—that's no rest or digestion. But it's important to pause and do nothing but enjoy your meal. Eating properly, sleep and exercise are such foundational practices for managing the stress of lawyering, she insists.

"I strongly urge everyone to find a physical activity: karate, yoga, swimming. Exercise releases endorphins. It will do wonders. The benefits are enormous."

Exercise, too, is one of the best natural antidepressants and cures for anxiety, Meyerhofer notes. "Sleep deprivation and resulting tiredness can make you even more vulnerable to stress and anxiety."

Even the busiest lawyers can incorporate more walking into their everyday routines as a physical boost, suggests Victor of Care for Lawyers. Yoga, with its emphasis on transferring attention to the body and to the breath, can help reduce anxiety while also releasing physical tension and restoring energy. Adequate rest, too, is essential for regulating mental health, she says. "Sleep deprivation and resulting tiredness can make you even more vulnerable to stress and anxiety."
SACRIFICING HEALTH

Lawyers “intellectually know” that sleep, diet, meditation and exercise are important, according to Latham. “We know we feel better when we get a good night's sleep. But attorneys sacrifice sleep and healthy habits to meet unrealistic expectations. They skip meals, eat out, skip exercising. It's a snowball effect. Lawyers may also start to pull away from friends and family, to withdraw. But it's important to feel connected to other people or the problem compounds with isolation and shame.”

In recalling his own experience with anxiety, Meyerhofer notes that one of his “profoundest regrets” is having remained so isolated from his peers at the firm. "It would have helped so much to have someone to talk to who understood."

Despite the proven benefits of healthy habits like meditation, nutritious diet and exercise, there's no blanket panacea for anxious lawyers, Latham cautions. "What may be helpful for one person may not be especially helpful for another. I always inquire about previous coping skills and what has proved helpful in the past." That inquiry—in the form of therapy—may truly be the key to mental health for many lawyers.

Meyerhofer similarly notes that it isn't that lawyers are unaware of wellness solutions like exercising and getting a good night's sleep. "It's that they are driven by financial considerations to earn as much money as possible by billing as many hours as possible, and that means they sacrifice other things—like time with friends and family, a healthy diet and exercise—to the almighty billable hour. How are you expected to get to the gym or yoga class or the pool when you're billing 300-hour months?"

"How are you supposed to get the recommended seven hours of sleep every night, which is critical to good mental health, when you're expected to pull all-nighters and work weekends?" Meyerhofer asks. "People don't need good advice on getting to the gym and eating their vegetables. They need a time out, to listen to themselves and process the static in their heads."

Because medications treating anxiety and depression only do so much and can sometimes be addicting, Meyerhofer says, it's far more effective to combat such conditions by getting to the root of a problem through therapy. Therapists can help lawyers reality-test common thoughts, such as "I'm not any good. I'm going to fail. Someone will criticize me."

Expressing feelings of anxiety to another person who listens, cares and understands can be enormously therapeutic, "simple though it may seem," Levin adds. Sadly, while attorneys are statistically the professionals most in need of therapy, they're also deeply resistant to it, instead expending precious energy to hold everything in, according to Levin.

"Lawyers are a help-rejecting population," he says. "They mistakenly believe that if you're vulnerable, you're weak. There's this notion of being the rock of Gibraltar for your clients." But lawyers who seek and get help "can be more effective helpers."

Latham adds: “There are cultural variables that contribute to lawyers' feelings of isolation from colleagues and prevent them from seeking help. There's a stigma to any perceived weakness because it runs counter to the idea of attorneys being invincible and resilient." In the Yale Law School study, a chunk of the students who considered seeking treatment for mental health challenges opted not to because they feared exclusion from faculty, administrators, peers and state bar associations, which sometimes request information about applicants' mental health history.

Professional organizations, including the ABA and state and local bar associations, can educate lawyers about these issues, encourage them to seek help and, importantly, challenge the long-standing cultural factors that contribute to attorneys avoiding aid, Latham says. "These organizations can play a role in destigmatizing therapy, making it more acceptable for lawyers who are suffering to seek help and be able to talk openly," he says. "There should be no shame in that."

In a Psychology Today article, Latham wrote: “Just as any psychologist would consult an attorney when addressing legal issues outside of their area of expertise, so, too, an attorney should be prepared to consult a mental health worker if he or she feels ill-equipped to address the psychological stressors in his or her life."

In California, all lawyers are entitled to at least two free counseling sessions with a professional who specializes in working with attorneys, says Carlton of the State Bar of California. But typically only about 200 lawyers out of more than 183,000 active bar members take advantage of this benefit at any given time.
KNOWING THERE ARE CHOICES

It's important to note that no strategy should be touted as a cure-all. "The implication can become that you're struggling with anxiety or depression because you're not doing your yoga or not meditating or not eating right or somehow choosing to go without sleep," Meyerhofer says, "that it's your fault for not having mastered some 'effective strategy' that would make all these issues disappear." The fact remains that law can be brutal, and most young associates are not equipped for what they find when they enter the profession, he says. "You're not tossing and turning in bed, rolled by anxiety, because you're choosing to eat badly or to skip your yoga class. It has a lot more to do with being thrown into the deep end in an extremely competitive, exploitive business driven not by compassion or collegiality or the desire to mentor, but by profit and money and competition for prestige."

The perfectionist and competitive ideals are so entrenched in the profession that lawyers may be unaware of those questionable values and how damaging they are, Levin says. "It's great to make $1 million a year but when all your competitors are making $1.1 million or $1.2 million, that's hugely anxiety-producing," he says. "What's missing from all of this is the notion of quality of life, of feeling a connection and belonging in a common enterprise." What's needed is, essentially, a profound shift from the four-A's-and-a-B attitude, he says.

Changing the culture of the profession can go a long way toward curbing the epidemic of lawyer anxiety and depression, according to Levin. He recounts a conversation he once had with a law firm partner who criticized a young associate for expressing lack of confidence when the associate was about to do something for the first time. The partner worried that the associate would express that insecurity to the client.

"I thought: 'Give the associate some credit for being smart enough to know the difference.' And if an associate can't get support from an older mentor in private, then where will he get it? That associate needed to hear: 'It's natural to be afraid.' An associate who hears that is going to do a much better job, as opposed to someone simply working just to avoid a mistake. Lawyers need to be willing to let go of the belief, endemic to the profession, that expressing vulnerability is weakness."

Meyerhofer, too, laments the "hypercritical environment" of law firms. "Lawyers don't understand proper management and the value of praise," he says. "You don't beat the horse or else the horse turns into a shaky mess."

In his own case, anxiety disappeared once Meyerhofer left BigLaw and found a supportive mentor at his next job.

"Often, frankly, the 'solution' to lawyers' anxiety is to take a pay cut and work at a smaller, less hectic job, whether at a smaller firm or in-house or in a different field." Meyerhofer tells his clients that everyone has a right to look forward to what they're going to do each day.

Lawyers need to understand that they're not trapped, and that changes are possible, Levin adds.

"They can go to a smaller firm, create their own practice, teach, go to a corporation," he says. "We do a lot of work in our practice about getting lawyers to realize they have choices. Lawyers don't ask themselves 'What do I really want?' They're not used to it."

This article originally appeared in the July 2015 issue of the ABA Journal with this headline: "Stressed Out: How to avoid burnout and debilitating anxiety."

Leslie A. Gordon, a former lawyer, is a legal journalist based in San Francisco.

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associate said:

Article posted tomorrow?

Posted: Jun 30, 2015 08:32 am CDT  
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New Idea said:

Yes. Originally it was posted with news of tomorrow’s DJIA results and the final score from tonight’s US-DE soccer game, but then the editor’s thought better of it and retracted the confidential stuff.

More seriously, the formal Magazine articles come out officially as of the first of the month but are available here earlier.

Posted: Jun 30, 2015 03:36 pm CDT  
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associate said:

Worried about the difference between 1 million and 1.1 million? This article wasn’t written for anyone living on this planet. The stress is that you have just enough business to stay in business and losing even one client (which is what happens when you make a single mistake) will result in you being homeless. That’s stress, and that’s how the other 99.99% are living.

Posted: Jun 30, 2015 08:44 am CDT  
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fiction fan said:

Agreed. The ABA Journal should organize a separate category dedicated to the articles where they indulge the rants of self-absorbed narcissists like this guy wanting all the struggling lawyers to feel sympathy for him because he dropped to a one million dollar annual salary in order to achieve a work-life balance.
The can also put in that category the recent ABA Journal article positively talking about the 'efficiency expert' who, after realizing that she was wasting so much time each morning standing in line for coffee at Starbucks, brilliantly decided that she would still stand in line every morning at Starbucks, however, she would no longer spend time at the counter putting sugar in her coffee, saving valuable seconds!

Posted: Jul 01, 2015 12:34 pm CDT
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B. McLeod said:
Yes, it's like a megahumblebrag.

Posted: Jul 02, 2015 06:43 pm CDT
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fiction fan said:
Nice use of the callback! I forgot about the humblebrag.

Posted: Jul 05, 2015 11:14 pm CDT
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Yankee said:
1. You suggest to ABA Journal Staff that they "...organize a separate category dedicated to the articles where they indulge the rants of self-absorbed narcissists..."
Very funny... and very accurate.
2. Although I may have missed it in my quick read through the article, I would think that these anxious lawyers would find some meaningful relief if they became less inward focused and looked beyond themselves to the lives of those around them.

Posted: Jul 02, 2015 07:16 pm CDT
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john2 said:
okay, so what I get is don't be a lawyer to begin with. And that is probably good advice for many considering law school. But man, it pisses me off that the ABA would publish this kind of story with that headline. It should be "How people can avoid burnout and anxiety by figuring out that law school is not the way to go to begin with." Or even saying that dropping out after 1L may not be a bad idea if you you don't like it - it'll save you a bunch in loans, and you'll still probably have the same job/income prospects as if you had finished LS and tripled that loan amount.

Posted: Jul 06, 2015 01:24 pm CDT
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Timothy Belt said:
Too true. I have office staff and an associate to feed not to mention my family. They have to be paid every week regardless of whether or not I am making any money.

Posted: Jul 02, 2015 01:28 pm CDT
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John said:
Avoiding stress, anxiety and depression of being a lawyer is relatively simple....don't be a lawyer or become a judge.
Richard said:

It doesn’t help that lawyers’ regulators, State Bar committees, have decided to police lawyers - clients are right, lawyers wrong. This is especially true for solo practitioners. And, competitors, other sole practitioners, are fierce and often vicious.

Last note - it’s anxiety that creates mindfulness of deadlines so…

Rather sell cars.

John said:

Clients are right, lawyers wrong? With all due respect, Richard, certain professions are as close to bulletproof as one can be.

What, are police officers, judges and attorneys “wrong” like .000000000000000000000001 percent of the time by governing boards or the law?

Try being on the other end of that, as a regular citizen.

That said I do think being a lawyer is incredibly high stress and that’s why after setting that as a career goal I changed my mind.

Eric said:

This is an excellent article that really hits home on some of the serious psychological issues that non-lawyers do not realize that lawyers really face in all areas of law.

Pete said:

There’s more than the usual amount of good information in this article. One point especially resonated with me—that the job of many lawyers is to anticipate problems and reduce the risk of failure, so that they perceive negative events as their fault. As the article points out, this can leak into one’s personal life. I disagree with one thing though: mindfulness is good, but when I’m taking a shower in the morning, my mind is at its most creative. It would be a waste to spend the time every morning concentrating on the droplets of water on my shoulders. Much better to compose the first paragraph of the memo due later in the day.

DJ said:

I attribute most of the problem to the billable hour system of delivering legal services. When you think about it, it is rather absurd. Surely successfully completing a project has independent value to the client regardless of whether it took the attorney three fifteen hours or thirty hours. But, through the ethics code, our profession severely limits charging civil matters other than in six minute increments. After all, a project that took me thirty hours the first few times, but now only takes me half that amount of time cannot be charged for thirty hours as that would constitute an unreasonable fee. Doubling the rate due to me having only sixteen years of experience would be unreasonable, too. Unlike the health care profession, we cannot hide all the charges and simply expect the bills to be paid as that, too, would be unreasonable. And, sadly, the substantial majority of attorneys, unlike many other experts in
different fields, seem incapable of estimating the costs of a project and quoting a price for it. So, for most of us we are forced to cram as many billable hours into a ten plus hour day to make enough billable hour money (after write-offs) to make it worth staying in what is, obviously, a high stress profession.

If the ABA and other major bar associations would look for real solutions at the economics level of the profession (like making the bar exam harder to pass, forcing weak law schools to close, reducing the cost and length of a legal education, reducing the financial burdens of endless pretrial discovery and litigation, expanding the use of paralegals without increasing malpractice liability to attorneys, and changing to a flat fee based or performance-based system of compensation), maybe we could remake our profession into something much more rewarding.

And, I hear the cry for the classes of people who cannot afford an attorney at higher rates. Maybe the profession should develop some more ways for paralegals to practice at the municipal courts, domestic courts, and criminal courts and to prepare basic contracts, benefits applications, etc. working under the supervision of real attorneys. That way, an attorney who wants to focus on helping lower income people can actually make a decent living at it and be professional satisfied.

Let’s fix this.

Posted: Jul 02, 2015 08:35 am CDT
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Retired Atty said:
Agreed re “billable hour system.” Wholeheartedly.
Our profession has been changed into a collection of clock-watchers and, in some cases, fiction-writers.
The billable-hour approach encourages inefficiencies.

Posted: Jul 02, 2015 08:14 pm CDT
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Trial Dawg said:
Interesting article. As a trial attorney, I’ve always wondered what the health effects (mental and physical) will be of a lifetime of constant fighting/arguing.

Posted: Jul 02, 2015 08:46 am CDT
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Trial Dawn said:
*constant

Posted: Jul 02, 2015 08:47 am CDT
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Mc said:
All this fine advice from people who abandoned the practice of law on how to fee good in the practice of law. Losers.

Posted: Jul 02, 2015 08:54 am CDT
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B. McLeod said:
Jeena Cho at least claims to be a practicing bankruptcy lawyer.
Sonja said:
I don’t think you get it.
They are making a fine living doing this. You know, someone pays them and stuff.
But you, on the other hand, felt compelled to add to your reflections a certain insult, namely, “losers.”
Since you couldn’t, or wouldn’t, stop yourself, I wonder what that says about you. Because it never crosses my mind to denigrate anyone who decides to change jobs or professions, as long as they are doing honest work.
Indeed, why would it?

Mc said:
They bailed. Where’s the advice for lawyers?

Pete said:
You want advice from a lawyer? You’ll have to pay my hourly rate.

Sonja said:
Nice! :)
the departing associate, and to dissuade the associate from stealing the firm’s clients if he/she joins another firm or goes solo. Law schools should teach students to expect these business tactics if they join a law firm right after graduation.

Xx_faLL_oF_goD_xX said:
I thought substance abuse was how we’re supposed to deal with all the stress.

Ken-do said:
I graduated from law school seven years ago and decided recently to sit for the bar. I’ve been working for two attorneys to gain some experience while I study.

Seriously, it makes me not want to practice! I am seriously stressed out. Nothing I seem to do is ever right but how can I learn if I don’t make mistakes? One of the attorney’s doesn’t trust anything or anyone so I always feel guilty.

After reading these comments and this article, I’m inclined to go back to the nonprofit world I’ve spent 20 years in.

TMH said:
Find a place and a position that suits you. Set limits and boundaries. Yes you can learn from mistakes but to head them off ask more questions. Asking for help is one way to show you are invested in your work. It is daunting at first but every week you gain more knowledge. If you don’t like it then hey you gave it your best shot.

J. Hoefken said:
Perfectionism is not bad in itself, it is the expression of one’s own professional responsibility, and it is not the monopoly of lawyers. I see it in many other professions, e.g., architects, engineers, etc..

Robert said:
Unnecessarily long article.
I can sum it up thusly:
If you have too much stress at work....
Retired Atty said:
1. Be civil to others.
2. Provide legal services for set fees instead of charging hourly rates.
3. Marry a good spouse who appreciates you.
4. Express genuine gratitude towards others.

Raghavendra Rao said:
Article is excellent, profession is challenging, dealing with humans (opponent & judge) result oriented, so stress is inevitable

LSGLaw said:
It is interesting to me that the levels of stress generated by the profession would come as a surprise to anyone. After all, at its core, aren’t we really in the business of being paid to take on the problems of others? I’ve often told clients at initial meetings that they could now take the problem from their shoulders and put it onto mine. This “visual,” while providing palatable relief to the client, inevitably adds to the attorney’s burden. So yes, stress - a lot of it - comes with the territory. And that stress is intensified when results from a burden you are carrying on behalf of another who has entrusted you with its resolution.

One final point. I don’t agree that opening your own firm will reduce your stress level. In such a scenario, you will continue to have the same job stressed that are inherent to the profession, but you will then add all of the major stresses of business ownership such as cash flow, employees, cash flow, business development, cash flow and all of the other challenges.

You call this coffee!? said:
If your career choice is killing you, man (or woman) up and choose a new path, or a less stressful position in the field. Getting the credential and then deciding that practicing is not worth is not admitting defeat or failure. Recognizing you hate your life and making change can take more courage than dealing with 40 years of pure BS because you care so much about how others perceive you.

Sonja said:
“It’s great to make $1 million a year but when all your competitors are making $1.1 million or $1.2 million, that’s hugely anxiety-producing,” he says.

I’m sorry, but you lost me there. If that isn’t an example of a purely self-generated problem, then I don’t know what is. An average middle-class American worker in a large metro area will make something like $50K per year for about 40 years in constant dollars. If you can
make that much in a few years' time, just how needy are you that that doesn't translate into a deep sense of security for you? You will not be on the street. You will be fine.

What do you think the vast majority of your fellow Americans face each day? This self-obsessed, envy-driven obliviousness is incomprehensible.

Posted: Jul 03, 2015 04:30 pm CDT
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Tom Youngjohn said:

Before I read this wildly long looking article, I'd like add my two cents in advance. My advice? Outline a novel. And while you do, read about outlining and structuring novels. There are many sensible rules to follow. For me, this has been the key to make my feet dance to work again after the Office of Disciplinary Counsel sucked dry my blood and sense of fairness.

Posted: Jul 03, 2015 10:12 pm CDT
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B. McLeod said:

Tom, as Phil Ochs at times pointed out, you need to remember you are a song writer.

Posted: Jul 03, 2015 10:53 pm CDT
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Tom Youngjohn said:

But I started novel writing long before I ever came up with any songs. The point is not writing a novel anyway, but to be able to give your full creative attention to a project. What did that wise guy say? Hope is the fiction we carry in our heads.

Posted: Jul 04, 2015 01:22 pm CDT
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B. McLeod said:

Sometimes I think you might have been happier in the arts than trying to practice law.

Posted: Jul 04, 2015 11:52 pm CDT
I Flag this comment for moderation (http://www.abajournal.com/report_abuse/?comment_id=407288)

DeadHead said:

As NeighborDaveSays, “Not everyone can be Hemingway (Not even Hemingway)

Posted: Jul 06, 2015 07:01 am CDT
I Flag this comment for moderation (http://www.abajournal.com/report_abuse/?comment_id=407353)

dr.j said:

I really appreciated this article and wish it would have been available to me prior to law school (so I wouldn’t have gone) or after (so I wouldn’t have practiced in BigLaw). But I did, and it whacked me, but I survived and became a psychologist. Anywho, while I appreciate the author’s article. I must comment on one thing. You cannot avoid anxiety on any level. You can manage anxiety, deal with anxiety. However, if you tell someone not to do something, then they will do it or think about doing it. Don’t think about pink elephants! What did you think about? See. Overall, coping with anxiety requires compassion - not a stop doing it approach. Lawyers overthink everything because as she notes they are “paid worriers.” The primary cure for anxiety is exposure. So figuring out what you are avoiding and why, and then touching fire and living.
Dan Hull said:
Will anyone talk about clients—and protecting the public interest—in these kinds of pieces? Clients with anything at stake should not be subjected to the kinds of “sensitive” lawyers featured in this article. Listen up, campers. 1. Students who are nice and smart but not much else make poor lawyers. 2. The wrong people are going to law school. 3. The wrong people are entering private practice.

jules said:
It’s fine working really hard for a while if you know why you’re doing it. Too many lawyers just get caught up in the means and forget about the end. I would totally work super hard for a few years billing a bazillion hours and then retire early. But when billing as much as you can simply becomes who you are and a way of life, that hamster wheel is harder to get off of. Or you start committing all your hard earned big money to big expenses, which means you have to keep working at that same rate to maintain those living standards and bills. I make half as much as some attorneys I know and yet they’re always shocked to hear I went on yet another vacation to a nice place. It’s not that they don’t have the money or the time, it’s just they forget what it’s all about. If you just stop and ask yourself simply - what am I really doing this for?? It might save you a lot of issues and anxiety in the end.

Dan Arno said:
I am 65 and have been involved in criminal and civil tax litigation for 40 years, stress and anxiety are inevitable, the issue is to minimize them not eliminate them (which I don’t believe is possible). One does not have to be a master of Taoism to as the Jesuits would say “live a balanced life” focus on friends and family take up a sport(s); sure you may not be at the top of the pyramid financially who cares? you’ll probably enjoy your spouse family kids and life a lot more and longer, at the end of the day don’t take yourself so seriously (remember weather your are a king or a street sweeper your still gonna dance with the grim reaper)

ReallyTrying said:
This too-long article doesn’t offer anything new (although it’s not bad to be reminded to take care of ourselves). At the outset, it refers to studies from 25 and 30 years ago. Is there no newer data? Are you really trying to get us to believe that nothing has changed in the past three decades? The only recent data is based on law students, who, while deserving of attention, I suppose, are not practicing lawyers and do not share the same issues and concerns as practicing lawyers.

Mel said:
Interesting and only makes sense. We don’t just pass down our eye color and height to our children. We also pass down functional traits. Mel at clearpanicaway
Dick said:

This article sums up why addiction rates among attorneys are likewise astronomical. For more information about what’s it’s like to be a lawyer dealing with addiction and recovery, read http://soberlawyer.com

Posted: Jul 27, 2015 03:49 pm CDT
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FT said:

At the age of 25 I was under so much stress I ended up in the ER with ulcers. My health and well being had completely deteriorated. I was working 18 hour days, and when I was not at work, I was thinking about work. It finally came to a head and I decided I was not going to be able to function in my chosen career, for which I was devoted to and passionate about. So I decided to go to law school instead. And while the practice of law can and is very stressful, it is nothing compared to what I had experienced before as a high school special education teacher working with students with emotional disabilities. Part of it is that I have learned how to manage my stress. (The other part is that in my current line of work, no one dies.) I think this artical was well written and futher education about handling stress is extremely important for lawyers, and really all high stress professionals.

Posted: Jul 31, 2015 02:35 pm CDT
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