

A Primer on Stress

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Introduction to Stress

The stress reaction is a natural phenomenon which provides a valuable service. At its most basic level, it alerts us to danger and can protect us from harm. When properly understood and managed, stress can motivate us to achieve a successful and happy life. In this light, stress is a positive force in our lives because it helps build self-esteem and self-confidence. If, however, we don't take control of our stress response, it can become a deadly foe. Too much stress continuing over a long period of time, even if it results in accomplishing good things, is harmful to our health. Some researchers estimate that between 20 to 30% of all lawyers experience stress related career burnout which injures their health, happiness, careers and the quality of their personal relationships. It is well documented that lawyers suffer from depression at a higher than that of the general population. New evidence suggests a strong link between too much stress and depression. Understanding how our minds and bodies react to stress can help us to take control of the stress in our lives; then, we can make stress work for us to improve the quality of our lives.

Research is slowly revealing the mysteries of how our minds work and over time we shall better understand how and why each of our personalities develop in such uniquely distinctive ways. The good news is that even those born with a pre-existing condition (e.g., neurotransmitter deficiencies) or who have suffered through some form of childhood emotional trauma that makes them highly susceptible to depression, anxiety or low stress tolerance, can improve their situation through individual self-help programs, professional therapy and, in cases of serious anxiety or depression, medication.

The Stress Reaction

Stress is your personal reaction to the circumstances of your life.

Do you stay calm and unruffled, looking for solutions? Or do you get angry and look for someone to blame? Some people are stress hardy and don't seem affected by the pressures and problems of daily living. They seem to thrive on the challenges put before them. Others are unable to withstand any pressure or difficulty without getting upset or rendered unable to act. Most of us fall somewhere in between and our reaction to any given situation varies depending upon how we are feeling either physically or emotionally at any given time. Your stress reaction is the result of a complex interaction of memories, emotions, thoughts and automatic, physiological responses. How you cope with stressful situations (e.g., constant interruptions, unexpected changes in your plans, many things going wrong at the same time, failure or disappointment, illness or injury, financial setbacks, family problems) is the result of the interplay of your personal genetics, childhood experiences, adult experiences, lifestyle and other actions that you now engaged in as an adult. But all of us at any time when we are overtired, hungry, ill, depressed, anxious, angry or feeling overwhelmed, may overreact to situations that normally wouldn't bother us - which only makes matters worse and further increases our stress.

We will now look at the mental, emotional and physical responses to stress.

Our *mental response* reflects how you first perceive and, then, subsequently think about any given situation. The brain is constantly evaluating your present circumstances and defining it as rewarding, risky, dangerous or unknown. Our initial response operates on a subconscious level and it influences our emotional and physical responses (which are interrelated). Sometimes this leads us to take immediate action in an emergency which gets us out of harm's way, or, it may trigger a fear based response causing us to strike out in defense (only to regret our actions at a later time). We can, however, exert conscious control over our thoughts and emotions so as to put the brakes on impulsive, harmful or inappropriate emotions and behavior. This awareness of how and why we respond the way we do to certain events combined with proper training allows us to exert some control over the automatic physical and emotional responses discussed below. We can and must consciously change our reactions if we are to reach our full potential in life and find happiness. This subconscious and spontaneous analysis of every situation we encounter is a vital part of our instinctive survival mechanism and is similar to the animal kingdom's freeze, fight or flight response. The brain sends out signals to the rest of the body triggering specific chemical reactions as well as other specific physical and emotional responses.

Our spontaneous *physical response* includes the following as we go on alert:

- (a) the pituitary gland increases its production of adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH) increasing the output of the hormones cortisone and corticoid which suppress our immune system;
- (b) blood is diverted to the muscles - away from the extremities and stomach; digestion slows or stops; fats and sugars are released from stores in the body; ingestion of nutrients is impaired; cholesterol levels rise; the composition of blood changes slightly - more prone to clotting;
- (c) blood pressure elevates; blood vessels constrict; metabolism, heart rate and respiration rate increase; hearing becomes acute and pupils dilate; skeletal muscles brace; and
- (d) our abstract thinking is impaired.

Our initial *emotional response* to our present circumstances may be one of happiness or resentment; joyful anticipation or anxiety; calmness or anger. Happy, joyful and calm emotional responses reduce harmful stress. Resentment, anxiety and anger generate harmful stress. Our individual responses may differ from one another because of our individual differences in genetic makeup, childhood experiences and upbringing, present circumstances (e.g., health, finances, personal relationships), previous similar experiences, awareness and understanding of what is happening and what can be done, if anything, about the situation. Also, our individual response to the same situation may also vary depending upon how we are feeling physically

and emotionally at that time. Some days we deal well with the constant interruptions and other days we don't want to be bothered at all. The many variables that influence our initial emotional response include whether or not this is a first time experience for you; whether any past experiences were positive or negative; whether you are properly prepared for the situation; and your preceding physical and mental state. For example, were you hungry, angry, lonely, tired, ill or injured; taking medications; depressed; anxious or fearful; surprised or caught off guard? All of these factors affect how we perceive and react to our present circumstances.

The Distress Syndrome

The stress reaction is a natural part of our lives. It protects and motivates us.

Over time we have completed college and law school, gained admission to the bar, practiced law and developed our career path. Many of us have married and are raising a family, caring for our parents and helping other members of our family. We are active in the community and find our schedules filled with an increasing number of commitments.

But, too many events, changes or demands in our lives (even positive ones) can leave us feeling overwhelmed and sometimes paralyzed with worry about how we will get it all done and what if we fail? Or, we may launch into action but carry with us an attitude of impatience, irritability and resentment making life miserable for all with whom we come into contact as well as denying us any joy in what we are doing. At that point, when life seems too much for us to handle, stress has ceased to be our ally but now has become our foe. We have entered into a life of "distress".

Warning: we can be in distress and not know it.

Gradual, incremental increases in responsibilities, duties, pressures and demands at home and at work combined with long work days and weeks is risky. We may start off with good intentions (ambitious, career minded, wanting to do our best). Long hours, week after week, and hard work are the trade-offs for success and the rewards that come with a successful career in the law. At some point work dominates our lives; however, we may not be aware that we have lost all balance in our lives. In fact for some (i.e., a workaholic) trying to relax may create feelings of distress. Therapists tell us that workaholics "stuff" their feelings; that is, as they experience life's eventual troubles and periods of painful or difficult times, they stay busy with work and do not allow themselves the experience of feeling the pain or sorrow nor do they discuss their innermost feelings with anyone else. Then, in times of relaxation with no busy schedule in front of them, these feelings come back and cause discomfort. Their solution is to get busy - the vacation becomes scheduled with hectic days leaving everyone more tired at its end, or, the workaholic learns to forego vacations by either not planning for them or canceling them because of work related commitments and deadlines.

Distressed lawyers, including workaholics, eventually lose their efficiency and their effectiveness. The risk of burnout increases. Unaware of how they affect those around them, their family life disintegrates; they get divorced; friendships wither away and with them the loss of those with whom he or she can confide. Feelings of isolation, emptiness and unhappiness grow.

An overwhelming sense of loss of control may trigger paralysis or the need to work even harder. Either path eventually leads to failure because we have lost our focus as well as our balance. A condition of chronic distress leads to being unable to recognize or do the things which are important to us, becoming unsure of our goals or purpose for living, feeling a loss of control over our daily lives and leaving us susceptible to physical, emotional and mental illness.

The good news is that by understanding how and why we mentally, physically and emotionally respond in certain ways to life's events we can begin to regain control over our lives. We can learn to establish healthy thinking, boundaries and lifestyles which reduce stress and improves the quality of our lives. The next section explores the mind-body relationship as it pertains to the stress reaction.

Stress and the Mind-Body Connection

Modern research shows us that the mind and the body are one.

All of our thoughts, emotions and actions are the result of complex systems of communication and interaction between our mind and body. The following examines why some of us are more stress hardy and have better coping abilities than others.

The amygdala is that portion of the brain which is believed to automatically scan incoming experience for emotional significance, alert us to any perceived threat and decide how firmly a negative event is to be remembered. This is a major part of our built-in, subconscious survival system. The left prefrontal cortex (an area of conscious thinking) is thought to be involved with inhibiting the negative emotions generated by the amygdala as well as with establishing and maintaining positive feelings. If the left prefrontal cortex fails to fully activate, it no longer puts the brakes on the amygdala generated feelings of dread, fear, helplessness and negativity.

Recent studies show a link between a high left prefrontal cortex activity and low levels of cortisol, a stress related hormone. This implies that ongoing stress produces higher levels of cortisol in the left prefrontal cortex which interferes with its ability to inhibit the activity of the amygdala, thereby, allowing an increase in feelings of dread, fear, helplessness and negativity to occur (which can be symptoms of depression). This increases a person's vulnerability to becoming distressed as they are unable to appropriately cope with the problems of daily living not to mention the practice of law.

Depression affects lawyers more than other professions (Johns Hopkins University, 1991).

There may be a link between chronic stress and depression. Scientists now know that the brain has the capacity to change and adapt by developing new neural pathways through the sprouting of new nerve connections (“dendritic spines”). The brain’s neural pathways are one of the communication highways between other neural pathways and various areas of the brain. All of our thoughts, emotions and actions involve activity of these neural pathways. The development of new neural pathways is called “neuronal plasticity”.

Stress decreases the level of brain-derived neurotrophic factor resulting in reduced neuronal plasticity (i.e., reduced growth of new nerve cells and neural pathways in the brain). “BDNF” also strengthens the connections in the hippocampus, a center of memory and learning, and enhances the growth of neurons that respond to serotonin; hence, low levels of BDNF may contribute to the atrophy of hippocampus cells and the retraction of the neural pathways. This results in declining cognitive functioning, one of the symptoms of depression.

New research is studying the role early living experiences play in the establishment of neuronal plasticity activity throughout a person’s life. Stress early in life may permanently sensitize neurons and receptors throughout the central nervous system so that they perpetually over respond to stress.

Normal stressful events (a subjective perception of a threat to one’s physical or psychological well being) causes the hypothalamus to step up production of corticotropin-releasing factor which induces the pituitary gland to secrete adrenocorticotrophic hormone which in turn activates the adrenal glands to produce cortisol. (As mentioned above, high levels of cortisol in the left prefrontal cortex interfere with its ability to regulate the amygdala’s output of negative feelings.) Early trauma can lead to chronic over activation of this system. Corticotropin-releasing factor is known to act on various brain sites to create symptoms of depression. Studies show that patients who experienced early trauma reacted to experimental stress with elevated stress hormones. Those with current major depression had the highest levels.

It is very likely that some inherited factor (e.g., such as a flawed gene for BDNF) and individual differences in prefrontal cortex activity may create a biological vulnerability for having a low stress tolerance. An early stressful experience may then set up the brain to permanently over react to environmental pressures, triggering the chemical reaction discussed above that acts on multiple sites in the brain and body to produce the behavioral symptoms of depression (including physical and cognitive dysfunction) which increase the level of stress in the person. A vicious cycle can be set in motion consisting of susceptibility to stress, the occurrence of stressful events, impaired functioning causing more stress, the triggering of depression with increased dysfunction, more personal and health problems causing more stress, etc. But keep in mind, with knowledge and understanding come the power to effectuate change. We can learn to reduce our stress and its harmful effects.

Identifying the Sources of Stress in Our Lives

(Remember some stress is good ... but too much stress leads to distress.)

Stop for a moment and recall the last time you were acutely aware that you were under a lot of stress. It was probably some crisis that left you feeling not in control of the situation or its outcome. The truth, however, is that you were probably already under a lot of stress and the crisis merely accentuated your awareness. Many, if not most, lawyers are in a state of denial as to the amount of stress they are under. Becoming aware of what causes our stress is the first step toward better managing our stress reaction. For purposes of this paper, we will examine stressors by separating them into two groups: (1) *our internal, self-generating demands* and (2) *our external demands*. Keep in mind, however, that genetics, family upbringing, health and living habits can and do effect our personal response to stress.

Let's first take a look at our *internal demands*. If you were raised in a household which demanded a high level of achievement, berated failure and discouraged any discussion of feelings or emotions, you may be carrying some subconscious motivation to please your parents and prove to yourself that you are as good as everyone else. Thus, you push yourself to work harder and, despite a long list of achievements, you still don't believe you measure up. You may feel uncomfortable (shame, guilt) when not working or staying busy. Perfectionism is often present as is procrastination, crisis management, inability to delegate, chronic worrying and, for some, the need to please others and obtain their approval resulting in always putting their goals ahead of your needs to your detriment. Of course, there are those of us who care only for our wants and needs and help others only when it furthers our own self-interests. Both types lack balance in their outlook on life and probably suffer from low self-esteem and a deep seated fear of failure and rejection. Communication skills are poor at best and, most likely, are non-existent. Relationships at home and at the office suffer and we are often feel isolated, misunderstood and under-appreciated.

We may operate for years under the influence of these internal demands but remain unaware of their existence. These internal demands may be heightened by an inherited susceptibility to low stress tolerance, anxiety or depression of which we may also be unaware. Most families do not provide their members with disclosure statements and high risk warnings regarding the family history of depression or addiction or dysfunction. Let's face it - we don't discuss these matters at home or with anyone else because deep down inside most of us still believe these problems are the reflection of some personal weakness, character flaw, lack of sufficient morality or other conscious choice to be imperfect. Understanding their true nature is elusive. Thankfully, this is changing as new medical research is revealing a more accurate understanding of the behavioral causal factors over which we have no control and, also, those factors upon which we can take remedial action and effectuate positive change in our behavior.

Still in the dark about what is behind our unhappiness, we change jobs or careers, divorce and remarry, move to new homes or new cities, all in a vain attempt to find happiness. Until such time as we honestly search our past to identify these subconscious triggers and take constructive action to change how we think, feel and act in the present, we are unlikely to

affect any lasting or meaningful change. This program of self-discovery and personal action can go a long way to overcome genetic predispositions, family of origin issues and our present circumstances to restore balance, establish healthy relationships, build confidence, enjoy good health and enable us to lead to a useful and happy life.

Life has a way of gradually becoming more demanding and more complex (i.e., more stressful) to which we adjust rather quickly. These are the *external demands* put upon us by family, career and community involvement. To some degree, we all share this common experience as we strive for and reach our full potential. For the most part, however, we aren't aware of just how busy our lives have become until one day we feel totally overwhelmed and no longer in control of our circumstances.

Here is an example of how a "successful" lawyer's life became crowded with ever increasing commitments and responsibilities leading from positive stress to distress and disaster. Our newly admitted lawyer may be single, or, is married with no children. He/she is ready to go to work at a law firm, or, is opening up his/ her own law office. The emphasis is on the career; i.e., to become an experienced and competent lawyer, to build a good reputation, develop a paying client base, and earn enough money to pay off school loans and buy a new car. Stress levels are high as our lawyer struggles with such initial things as finding the courthouse and the correct courtroom, learning local rules and procedures, drafting pleadings, handling real estate closings, etc. Everything is new and the feeling of being ill-prepared and overwhelmed seems to never let up. Needless to say, our lawyer must never let on about these feelings of self-doubt. If a woman or a minority, there may be added stress arising from a perception that others doubt their abilities. Our new attorney puts in long hours and makes an extra effort to do their very best. Taking time to enjoy living is deferred until the practice is established and financial goals are met.

Within a few years there is a new car, a new house and a family in the picture. Becoming a new parent is great but with it comes added responsibilities and concerns, especially over future financial security for the family. Our attorney would rather be with his or her family but sacrifices must be made to build future financial security. Right now is the time to complete the task of building the practice. Living expenses keep increasing plus there is the new house to pay for not to mention someday saving for college and retirement. They'll be time later on to spend with family once the finances are in order.

It seems that the more successful our attorney becomes, the more he/she finds that client development and generating more fees takes on more importance - running a law office is not inexpensive and bringing in new business is an ongoing concern. The practice grows - there are more clients and more complex cases and more time (including nights and weekends) working to get it all done. Community commitments require giving up some nights normally spent at home. From the outside everyone thinks the attorney is doing well - the successful practice, a beautiful home, happy marriage and wonderful children. Our lawyer, however, is not feeling successful much less happy. At times he or she worries about spending too much time at work and how the marriage is suffering from it. This worrying turns to resentment because the family

fails to fully appreciate how much he/she has sacrificed to provide them with a fine house, clothes, automobiles, vacations, etc. No matter what our attorney says or does, the family is unhappy. They just don't understand the problems, pressures, responsibilities and commitments that the attorney is under. At home our friend encounters brief interludes of getting along but all too often there are fights and long periods of silence and brooding. Sometimes it is easier to work late and not go home.

A few years later there is a separation followed by a not-so-friendly divorce. There are alimony, child support, custody, and visitation issues with which to contend. The emotional hurt and strain of the divorce has taken its toll on our lawyer's practice. Time off to recuperate is needed but there are bills to pay and office overhead to meet, so a vacation is out of the question. Most likely, our attorney will work even harder in order to suppress the feelings of discomfort. After a while, the pain passes and our lawyer meets someone who understands their needs. A second marriage or live-in arrangement occurs and the family issues get very complicated, especially if their new spouse or significant other has children. The kids are more involved with after school activities or work and it is not always easy arranging transportation for them not to mention the routine visits to doctors and dentists and other day to day "emergencies" that crop up. Scheduling visitations, family holidays and vacations become problematic - the "ex" still doesn't seem to understand and, at times, appears to be uncooperative. Our attorney sometimes wonders how things got so screwed up.

Unfortunately, his/her problems aren't over yet. While still adjusting to the new marriage, the health of our lawyer's parents begins to fail. Doctors' visits, hospitalization, home nursing care and taking responsibility of the parents' finances add additional stress. Meanwhile, the teenage son or daughter is "acting out": problems at school, hanging out with the wrong crowd, drinking alcohol and maybe using illegal drugs. They are heading for serious legal trouble if something doesn't change. The automobile provided for them to get to school and work has become a major headache - joy riding with their friends instead of working or studying; costs of gas, insurance and repairs; warnings and tickets; and suspicion of driving under the influence. Our friend is worried but don't know what to do. Everything he/she says or does seems to backfire and the teenager just gets worse. What went wrong and who is at fault sets off major fights between our attorney and his/her new spouse. Now it seems that although our attorney has provided much financially, the second spouse is fed up with the long work hours leaving them alone to deal with the troublesome children and the aging parents. The spouse wants more time and attention from our lawyer, or else. It looks like a second divorce is on its way.

Our lawyer hasn't felt well lately (headaches, disagreeable stomach, short tempered, impatient, trouble concentrating) and the doctor is saying to slow down, exercise and eat better, or else. But how can this be accomplished? The attorney's finances are stretched to the limit and the firm's partners are complaining that he/she is not producing enough fees this year to justify their personal draw. The partners want more income generated, or else. There have also been complaints from clients of work not being attended or being handled poorly... even some threats of filing a grievance or liability claim if not rectified by the firm. The pressure at work is greater than ever. Our attorney begins to sense that he/she is no longer in control of his or her

life. Some days it just doesn't seem worth getting out of bed but there is so much work to be done at the office. Deadlines are past due and additional extensions and delays are not possible. Increased use of alcohol or tranquilizers may begin a dangerous descent into substance abuse or addiction.

Is a second divorce, runaway children, malpractice and disciplinary actions, losing partnership standing, and a heart attack or other breakdown inevitable? The answer is no. There is a way out of this mess and there is an alternative path to take that will lead to a balanced, healthy, happy and prosperous lifestyle. Please note, however, that the solution is neither easy nor painless nor quick. Before we find out how our friend can turn his or her life around, let's finish our discussion of what can and often does go wrong in the lives of lawyers.

An attorney's life is not always as traumatic as the one described above but many do experience some of these problems which have the potential to destroy the chances of a balanced and happy home life and career not to mention one's health, both physical and emotional. Major studies link prolonged periods of stress to depression and a depressed immune system. Sometimes substance abuse appears in the form of drinking too much or misusing tranquilizers. For some, increased use of alcohol or other drugs is really a symptom of an addiction. Health problems, substance abuse and addiction aggravate the situation by increasing the levels of dysfunction and stress which in turn generates more health problems and more dysfunction, etc. A vicious cycle can be set in motion that ultimately results in devastated reputations, lost practices and licenses, divorce, bankruptcy, criminal charges and, sometimes, suicide as the attorney comes to believe that they have no worth and there is no way out of their predicament. Nothing could be further from the truth.

What Is the Solution?

Take a minute to reread the history of our lawyer. He/she started off with legitimate goals and ambitions; then, something went wrong. What was it?

- It appears that work dominated our attorney's life creating an imbalance that contributed to problems with the marriage.
- Somewhere along the line there was a breakdown in communication in the marriage.
- Neither person understood what the other person was feeling. Probably neither party fully understood why he or she was feeling the way he/she did. Is this the result of a failure of each marriage partner to identify and discuss with the other what they thought was truly important and meaningful to them in their lives and in the marriage?
- Did either of them ever consider what was important and meaningful, or, did they unconsciously follow a path of what he or she felt was expected of them by parents, peers or society?

We believe that many marriages, other relationships and careers could be strengthened (and divorces, loneliness and job changes avoided) with some periodic introspection which might help answer the following questions:

1. Am I doing what I believe is important in my life?
2. Is my lifestyle healthy?
3. What attitudes are not helpful and produce self-defeating behavior?
4. How can I improve my life, health, marriage and family, and career?

When conducting this self-examination it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Do I have unrealistic personal or professional goals?
- Do I have unrealistic expectations about my spouse and family? ... my co-workers and colleagues? ... my friends?
- How good a listener am I? Do I focus on what I plan to say and interrupt the other person when he or she is speaking? Do I “go on and on” and never give the other person a chance to think. Did I ignore what the other person says and just talk about what is on my mind? Or, do I try to listen and engage the other person in a two-way conversation?

The following discusses the above in more detail. It is intended to help you identify specific changes you can make in your life to reduce stress and improve the quality of your life.

Question #1: “Am I doing what I believe is important in my life?”

List those matters which mean the most in your life in order of importance; e.g., health, happiness, marriage, children, family, career, etc. The sample chart set forth below can be modified to reflect your personal priorities.

Track your time for 7 days (168 hours) in a row. Add up how much time is spent involved in work related activities (commuting, working at the office or at home, attending meetings, etc.); marriage, family and household responsibilities (including, meals, doing things together, household chores, etc.); community service (volunteer activity not related to promoting your career); and your health (including personal time for relaxation, reading, hobbies, napping, sleep, exercise and diet). *Be honest.* You need to see clearly what is going on in your life. This is not the time to be in denial about how you allocate your time and energy.

Self-Assessment Balance Chart

<i>Most Important Areas of Life</i>	<i>Reasonable Weekly Hours Range</i>	<i>Actual Hours Spent by Week</i>	<i># Hours Exceeding Weekly Range</i>	<i># Hours Below Weekly Range</i>
Health <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sleep • exercise • personal 	49-56 hrs. 01-10 hrs. 07-14 hrs.			
Marriage/ Family	20-25 hrs.			
Work	40-55 hours			
Community Service	01-10 hrs.			

Based upon actual time spent, list your “real” priorities.

How do your real priorities match up with your stated priorities?

- Are you devoting too much time to work and not enough time to proper diet, exercise, relaxation and time with the family?
- Where do you need to cut back or add to?

The answers will point you in the correct direction to make positive changes in your life.

Question #2: Is my lifestyle healthy?"

Well if one look at the above chart doesn't answer the question, try looking in the mirror or, better yet, ask your spouse or children.

So, how is your health? Do you feel ill or get sick (headaches, insomnia, upset stomach, colds) at least once a week? Are you slow to get over sickness or injuries? Do you use alcohol or tranquilizers to relax, get to sleep or get through the day? Are you moody? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then perhaps your lifestyle is unhealthy and you are suffering from lack of balance and distress in your life. Schedule a full physical with your physician and ask his or her help to create a personal health plan. Your plan should include:

- ✓ Getting regular physicals and health check-ups.
- ✓ Remembering the 3 pillars of good health - sleep, diet and exercise – and do your best to follow your doctor's recommendations.
- ✓ Establishing and keeping a routine for work, relaxation, eating, sleeping, exercising and taking medications.
- ✓ Avoiding workaholism - plan and budget your time to work efficiently, then go home at a reasonable hour; periodically take time off from all work.

Now, before you run off and make major changes to your lifestyle, consider the following:

1. Set reasonable goals with regards to changes in diet, exercise, etc. Trying to do too much, too soon often results in failure, discouragement and giving up.
2. Aim for gradual change that will become a permanent part of your life. Changing our habits generally takes about 21 days. Be persistent and patient.
3. Discuss your plan with those who will be affected. Seek their support. Unless vital to your health and well being, don't make changes that will adversely affect their lifestyle unless they consent.
4. From time to time, review and re-evaluate your situation. Where necessary, revise your goals and plans. Be flexible.
5. When you have to, work hard; then, find time to slow down, relax and enjoy the moment wherever you are.

Question #3: “What attitudes contribute to self-defeating behavior?”

Do any of the following attributes apply to you?

Check (√) the ones that apply:

- chronic worrier
- overly critical of your work or that of others (perfectionist)
- impatient
- irritable
- unwilling to delegate work
- unwilling to ask for help
- workaholic
- procrastinator
- hesitant to say no when others ask for your help even if you do not want to help
- feel that your value as a person is based upon your work productivity

If you answered “yes” to any of these and you do not to continue feeling or acting that way, you can change. Many of us have once felt and acted the way you do. Sometimes our behaviors and emotions can be traced back to genetics, childhood experiences and our present health status (including the effects of certain medications that we may be taking).

A consultation with a qualified healthcare professional can start you down the path of positive change. And, many have found it helpful to talk to another lawyer or judge who has overcome these issues. LCL can connect you with these resources plus provide free literature on any topic of interest to you. Call our Confidential Helpline today.

The next section addresses:

- worry
- perfectionism
- procrastination
- self-critical
- resentments
- feeling down (a normal emotion, not depression the illness)

Question # 4: “How can I improve my life, health, marriage and family, and career?”

For those of you who worry too much, do the following: (a) make a list of what you are worried about; (b) ask yourself what the chances are of that “bad thing” happening - if it is remote, then don’t waste your time worrying about it; (c) if it is likely to happen, then apply your legal skills to get the facts, analyze the situation, decide what you can do about it and then do it; and (d) once you have done all that you can reasonably do under the present set of circumstances, quit worrying about it and go on to the next project. If you are still worrying about it, ask yourself what is the worst thing that can happen and come to terms with accepting it. The fact is that you can handle anything that happens if you overcome your fear by accepting the worst case scenario and by staying focused on what needs to be worked on right now. Do the next right thing and the future will take care of itself. Of course, sometimes, the thing to do now is to take time to plan for the future. Once you have properly prepared a plan of action you can attend to those things which need to be done instead of worrying about them. Stay focused on what needs to be done today. Let tomorrow take care of itself.

As for the perfectionists reading this article, seek to do the best you can under the prevailing conditions and available resources. Apply a rule of reasonableness to your goals and standards. You will never be satisfied and you will never find peace of mind if you:

- set standards that no one (including yourself) can reach,
- try to control all the events and people in your life, and
- believe that your self-worth is based upon someone else’s measure of success.

Seriously consider using therapy to root out and resolve the hidden springs that keep you wound so tightly. At work, assign time constraints based upon the level of importance of each project and stick to them. Experiment with delegating some work items to others accompanied by clear communication of your expectations and deadlines. Make a concerted effort to be more patient with those whose work needs improvement. Hold back on the anger and sarcasm and use constructive comments and training to help them improve. Try suggesting rather than dictating. Teaching others helps them to reach their full potential and become a more valuable asset to the firm; whereas, mere correction of mistakes does nothing but set the stage for resentment, frustration and more problems.

For those who procrastinate (for whatever reason), here is a little technique that may help you get started. Tomorrow morning (no need to jump into this too soon), clear your desk and hold your calls; identify the one project that you really don’t want to work on and put that folder on your desk; set a timer for 10 minutes; and then approach the file with the intent to spend only 10 minutes on it before closing it and going back to your regular work. Now all of us can deal with just about anything for only 10 minutes. So what can you do in 10 minutes? Chances are that 1 of 3 things will happen: (1) you will develop a to do list which will help you to keep the project moving (perhaps with another 10 minute session on the next morning); (2) you will work past the 10 minutes because now you have gotten over the mental block that caused your

procrastination; or (3) you will finally admit that you really aren't going to carry out this project and it is time to ask for help or let someone else take over. If you must abandon a project, bite the bullet and deal with any embarrassment, anxiety or difficulty that accompanies returning the file to a client or asking someone to take over. Your discomfort will soon pass while your relief from being done with it will last a long time.

Are you overly self-critical or resentful toward others? If so, take note that your attitudes define who you are and how others perceive you. This can set up a self-fulfilling prophecy of problems and unhappiness. For example, imagine that you are part of a team assigned to complete an important assignment. Because you are concerned about doing a good job, you become very demanding and impatient with the others on the team who seem too relaxed about the project and its deadline. They get annoyed by your attitude and now do their best to avoid having contact with you. You think they are unfriendly and lack team spirit. You develop resentment toward them. Your resentment manifests itself in your being more abrupt and short with them. They get resentful and find little ways to make your life more difficult. You begin thinking of ways to get even. The project eventually gets completed; however, new projects requiring a team effort with the same people will start with pre-existing resentments making everyone uncomfortable and uncooperative. Egos and control issues abound and everyone suffers including the project (or client).

What can you do different? First, try not to take yourself too seriously. Use a light touch when dealing with others. Be respectful and considerate of their feelings. Seek their input. Listen to them and identify their concerns and needs (expressed and implied). Express your understanding of their concerns and seek to address their needs even as you seek to address yours. Promote cooperation and go for a "win-win" solution to any differences with your teammates. Be patient and give them time to think about your position. Put off decisions that are divisive until everyone has had time to cool off and reflect upon the matter.

Life is too short to be chronically angry and unhappy. Is there anyone against whom you hold a grudge or resentment? If so, make a list of names. Don't think about getting even; rather, try to see things from their perspective. Forgive each person on your list for any past or present slights or harm done to you. If you can't forgive them at this time, ask for the willingness to forgive them and then forgive them when the willingness comes. Remember, resentment hurts only you - it is like taking poison and hoping the other person gets ill.

Feeling down? Learn to accept life on its terms when things don't go as planned. Make the best of unpleasant situations and bad news. Help someone with their problems even if it is just listening to them on the phone and letting them know you are concerned about them. You will be surprised how quickly you forget about your problems. Make a gratitude list and then count your blessings. Think positive thoughts about yourself and others. Focus on the good qualities in yourself and others rather than everyone's shortcomings. Practice accepting others for who they are and don't try to remake them into who you think they ought to be. Strive toward your full potential but don't berate yourself because you are not as good as or as successful as someone else. As for the critics, do the best you can and don't worry about what others think or say. Be true to yourself and forgive those who would attack you.

Successful Time Management

The secret to the successful management of your time is to work smart as well as to work hard.

Take the time to plan and prioritize before getting into action; delegate and/or ask for help; upgrade office systems; draw appropriate boundaries when asked to help (i.e., learn when it is appropriate to say “no” when asked to help); and schedule time off to relax and regain your energy and enthusiasm. There are plenty of self-help books available but the following will provide you with some basic ideas to get you started.

For each project you have, take no more than 30 minutes to complete the following [5 minutes per item]: (a) write down your long term and short term project goals; (b) prepare a list of what has to be done to reach each goal; (c) review each item on your to do list and take note of which items are dependent upon other items being completed before you can continue; (d) establish deadlines and priorities for each item - pay particular attention to those items which can't be completed until some preceding item had been completed; (e) identify which items are both “important and urgent” and try to maximize your time and efforts to accomplish them with secondary emphasis on “important but not urgent” items; (f) delegate wherever possible, especially the remaining “not-important” and “not-urgent” items to other parties; and (g) as a general rule, try not to waste your time on those items which are not important.

If you follow the above guidelines, you will have created a “master plan” which will help you to stay focused on how you should be spending your time. This creates a very real sense of direction and control in our lives that is missing when we work hard but not smart. By knowing what is important and what your deadlines are, you become realistic about what you can accomplish in any given period of time with an eye toward whether or not you need assistance (or whether you are available to give assistance to someone else). You will know when to say “no” to a request for help, when saying “yes” would interfere with your ability to meet your project's deadlines. A good plan will prevent the creation of false expectations upon which others rely and which later come back to haunt you (creating distress) as deadlines appear which you cannot possibly reach. Realistic goal setting keeps you from breaking commitments which generate resentments on everybody's part.

A Word on Marriage and the Family

Here are a few suggestions which may make your home life more pleasant. Before you enter the house, take a few minutes to shift gears, clear your mind of work problems and relax. Close your eyes and think about something pleasant; then, slowly take a deep breath filling your lungs; hold your breath for a few moments; and slowly exhale. Repeat until you feel yourself relax.

Once relaxed, concentrate on leaving work related problems, attitudes and attributes at work so that when you are at home with your family you are pleasant to be around. They will take

notice and appreciate this. Nobody wants to be around a “lawyer” except when they need a lawyer. Learn to listen to family members and don’t give advice unless asked. If they do ask, don’t get upset if they don’t follow your advice. Sometimes, they just need to know that you care enough to listen and are supportive of their needs.

Spend time with the family relaxing and take vacations. Remember, you don’t have to stay busy every minute of the day. The key is to spend time with your family so that they know you value time spent with them. Try not to take work home or on vacation if you have made a commitment to spend time with the family. “Be present” when you are with the family. Give them your undivided attention. Stay off the phone. Don’t sit around preoccupied with work.

If serious communication problems or other difficulties with family members persist, seek professional counseling (individually or family). LCL’s Confidential Helpline can assist you in finding a counselor.

Quick Fixes

Much of our discussion has focused on making changes in our lives that patient and persistent effort over a long term of time. Sometimes, however, we need a quick fix to get through the moment or the day:

- ✓ Pause - lean back - breathe. Give your eyes a rest.
- ✓ Focus on the immediate present - enjoy the moment.
- ✓ Stretch - walk - go out for lunch (without the cell phone).
- ✓ Maintain a sense of humor about yourself and others.
- ✓ Remember: “This too shall pass”. Then, make a gratitude list.
- ✓ Vary your routine - don’t get trapped in a rut.
- ✓ Volunteer / help others (within limits).
- ✓ Ask for help. Talk it out / confide in a trusted friend or a therapist.
- ✓ Prayer and meditation.

Risk of Self-Medication: alcohol, prescription drugs, marijuana, etc.

Some people use alcohol and other mood altering drugs to relax.

The problem is that alcohol and other drugs do not affect everyone the same way.

Most people can safely have a few drinks to relax without developing a problem. Others, however, are taking a big chance when they use alcohol, tranquilizers or sleep aids (even under a physician's care) because they are susceptible to alcoholism and other forms of drug addiction. These diseases are now thought to be brain illnesses involving neurochemical imbalances and other neurological dysfunction that existed before the first drink or drug was taken. Alcohol and other drugs appear to trigger an inherited condition ultimately leading to impaired control over one's choice to drink or use other drugs as well as how much drinking or "drugging" takes, place once started. And, it should be noted, that tranquilizers are so powerful that almost anyone can develop a substance abuse problem if not a full-fledged addiction.

Concluding Remarks

If you are chronically stressed out, anxious or feeling depressed, or, if you find that you are frequently relying on alcohol or other drugs to find relief, then you have a living problem that may require outside assistance to resolve. We sincerely urge you to call LCL's Confidential Helpline and schedule an appointment with a professional who can help you to determine what changes you need to make to restore you to balance and good health.

If you are not sure that you need help, try taking the two quizzes following this article.

Self-Assessment Quiz: Your Level of Distress

Do any of the following attributes apply to you?

Check (√) the ones that apply:

- Do you sleep less than 7-8 hours per night?
- Is your sleep restless or do you wake up a lot?
- Is it difficult to get out of bed in the morning?
- Do you exercise less than 3 hours a week (including walks)?
- Do you eat a lot of fast foods or junk foods?
- Do you skip breakfast or lunch?
- Do you drink more than 2-3 cups of coffee a day?
- Do you drink more than 2-3 alcoholic beverages a day?
- Do you take tranquilizers with/without a drink to relax or sleep?
- Are you more impatient and irritable than you would like to be?
- Do your pets hide when you come home?
- Do you feel that you are not in control of your life?
- Are you feeling worn out at the end of most days?
- Do you wish for more time to spend with family or yourself?
- Are you worried about your marriage, children or parents?
- Are you struggling to make (financial) ends meet?
- Do you work a lot of nights, weekends or holidays?
- Do you skip vacations?
- Do you feel that you don't have anybody to confide in?
- Are you feeling stressed over how many "yes" answers you just gave?

The more √ marks, the greater the likelihood that you are in distress.

Change is possible and help is available. Why wait any longer to feel better?

Call the LCL Confidential Helpline now.

Self-Assessment Quiz: Your Level of Happiness

Do any of the following attributes apply to you?

Check (√) the ones that apply:

Do you feel good about yourself?

Do you look forward to going to work?

Do you enjoy the company of your family, friends and colleagues?

Do you try to see the positive in all things including disappointments?

Do you see humor in life and enjoy a good laugh?

Do you take time to relax and enjoy the moment?

Do you do the best you can under today's circumstances?

Do you count your blessings and give thanks?

Do you treat others with respect regardless of their behavior?

Do you live in "day-tight compartments" or do you worry about tomorrow?

The more √ marks, the more likely you are healthier and happier.

Are you in recovery from anxiety, depression, substance abuse, addiction, etc. and have a high level of happiness? Will you consider sharing your experience with a colleague in distress? If interested, contact LCL Confidential and inquire about becoming a volunteer.