

Proactively Reduce Your Stress: Adapt or Change Your Career

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Many lawyers enjoy the perks, prestige and high pay that their jobs bring—but not the stress. After years of highly demanding law practices, many lawyers begin to feel burned out by their jobs. Often this stress takes a serious toll on their professional performance and personal lives. Many lawyers want to reduce their stress, but they frequently feel trapped by their financial obligations and the expectations of clients, friends, family and colleagues.

Some lawyers cope with their stress by piling on more work and wearing it like a badge of honor; working too much also becomes a way to avoid dealing with personal problems at home. Other attorneys try to counteract stress by treating themselves to lots of material possessions or other rewards. However, if the stress continues unabated, it will cause health problems—often both mental and physical.

Specifically Identifying Stress Factors

Common stress factors include: client demands; pressure to bring in new clients; travel; lack of time for family, friends and hobbies; and financial pressures. Changes in the law caused by tort reform and the like have also negatively impacted many lawyers' practices, making it hard for some lawyers to maintain their accustomed lifestyles.

A lawyer suffering from stress should first work to identify the precise cause(s) of stress in his or her life. Systematically charting specific causes and ranking them from greatest to least will give the lawyer clear feedback about which factors are causing the most stress—and what needs to change most urgently in the lawyer's life.

For example, instead of naming “dealing with difficult clients” as a source of stress, a lawyer should try write something more specific like, “representing clients in divorce cases with child custody issues,” or even “representing Mrs. Smith in her divorce.” Similarly, instead of listing general “lifestyle pressures” as a cause, a lawyer should add detail, such as, “pressure to maintain vacation home, send children to private school, and keep club memberships.”

I always encourage my lawyer clients to specifically describe their causes of stress in as much detail as possible; the more clearly that a lawyer can accurately pinpoint the sources of his or her stress, the more easily that the lawyer can subsequently modify the particular causes.

Once an attorney identifies specific stress factors, he or she should explore *why* stress results. The attorney may discover that he or she no longer enjoys representing a certain kind of client or working in a particular area of the law. Or, the attorney may find that expensive lifestyle perks are actually causing more pain than pleasure, and should be eliminated.

Implementing Change

Although it is often easy to name the causes of stress, taking steps to reduce stress can be daunting. Sometimes the necessary changes are fairly straightforward, like transitioning some work to a colleague, or hiring or retraining support staff. Sometimes an attorney just needs time management and organizational techniques to make work flow more smoothly. However, sometimes reducing stress requires more radical steps like transitioning to another area of the law or even to a non-legal career.

Barriers to Change: Golden Handcuffs

Many lawyers don't take the necessary steps to reduce their stress for fear of losing the prestige and lifestyle that comes with practicing law. Sometimes they are afraid that their family, friends, clients and colleagues won't understand and support their desire to transition careers. Some attorneys simply don't know what else to do; they have practiced in a particular area of the law for a long time, and they can't imagine doing anything else.

Money—and the fear of living with less of it—keep many lawyers bound in golden handcuffs. Money also causes many lawyers stress because they have no realistic sense of how much money they make, spend or really require. Often their money flows in and out without being tracked by a good recordkeeping system. Busy lawyers also end up paying for things—both personal and professional—that they don't use, value or need.

Having a true grasp on personal and professional finances is critical to moving forward. Just knowing their real financial situation—even if it is a bleak one—relieves stress for some attorneys; at least then they have the information to grapple with their situation. Taking the time to understand professional and personal finances, to establish a realistic budget, and to collect outstanding accounts receivable, are imperative for stress reduction.

Self-Assessment

Once a lawyer knows how much income he or she truly needs to live on (after eliminating luxuries), the lawyer can move towards career change. The next step to living a satisfying life is to engage in some soul searching and clearly identify what is really important. While embarking on self-assessment, lawyers should temporarily put aside their concerns about making enough money so that they can freely imagine

their possibilities. Questions to explore include: When I am happiest, where am I and what am I doing?; When was I last so engrossed that I lost track of the time?; What would I do if money were no object?; and When I review my life, what will have made it fulfilling? Books like Deborah Arron's *What Can You Do with a Law Degree?* propose other thought-provoking questions.

Clarifying fundamental values, whether on their own or with the help of a trained lawyer coach or other professional, can help stressed lawyers focus on future career objectives. When I coach attorneys considering career change, we start by gathering objective feedback about the lawyers and their individual personality types, strengths and communication styles. Meyer Briggs™ and DiSC™ are two of the helpful tests that give some of such objective feedback. Combining data about a lawyer's personal strengths, interests, personality traits and communication style with data about his or her values, can guide a lawyer in career decisions.

Analyzing Possibilities

Once a lawyer has identified his or her causes of stress, has committed to making changes, and has gathered some objective feedback, the lawyer should brainstorm about potential solutions. Attorneys who are overcome by exhaustion and stress particularly need help in this process. Because a lawyer's spouse may be constrained by the same golden handcuffs, initial brainstorming is often more effective when done with a creative-thinking neutral party like a trusted friend, peer, career counselor or lawyer coach.

Using the lawyer's chart of stress factors, the lawyer should strive to list as many solutions as possible—from the realistic to the unrealistic. For example, if working with one particular client is causing most of the stress, the lawyer could chart possible solutions ranging from the simple (continuing to represent the client but ignoring the problem), to the manageable (trying new communication techniques), to the extreme (referring the client to another lawyer or, if appropriate, terminating the client).

Seeing possible solutions listed in black and white can help the lawyer to recognize that he or she really does have choices—albeit some more realistic than others. Just knowing that there are solutions can bring relief.

Sometimes the stress is so pervasive that the lawyer wants to consider a career switch. One easy and inexpensive way to jumpstart job-related brainstorming is to peruse classified advertisements and circle jobs that appeal regardless of salary or category.

The lawyer should then look for common characteristics among the jobs marked as appealing. This simple and fun exercise can give a searching lawyer invaluable clues about his or her ideal job. For example, a lawyer drawn to a park ranger post may discover that he would really like to spend more time working outdoors. Perhaps another attorney is attracted to a research position because it guarantees a tranquil, book-filled environment.

Professional career assessments also provide invaluable feedback. The attorney can compile all of the feedback and use it to find a law-related (or other) job with such characteristics. The solution may simply mean keeping but altering an existing job, such as by going part-time or changing practice groups or geographic locations. Sometimes the solution requires a minor tweaking of the lawyer's existing life—and other times a radical departure.

Again, because many lawyers think analytically, charting career options is helpful. Depending on type of career change required, charts can be used to compare choices like: (a) change job, (b) keep current job but implement change, e.g., part-time hours, reduce travel, delegate duties, (c) maintain the status quo, or (d) not work at all, e.g. sabbatical.

Lawyers can chart the qualities of their current positions with jobs they would enjoy, together with the pros and cons of each. Lawyers should note which jobs mesh with their particular values, involve their unique strengths and talents, meet their income requirements, and use their transferable skills.

Resources

Books like these often stimulate career ideas: *Careers in International Law* (American Bar Association's Section of International Law and Practice); *Changing Jobs: A Handbook for Lawyers in the New Millennium*, edited by Heidi McNeil Staudenmaier; *Nonlegal Careers for Lawyers*, edited by William Henslee and Gary Munneke; *Running from the Law: Why Good Lawyers are Getting Out of the Legal Profession and What Can You Do with a Law Degree?: A Lawyer's Guide to Alternatives Inside, Outside and Around the Law*, both by Deborah Arron; *The Lawyer's Career Change Handbook: More than 300 Things You Can Do with a Law Degree*, by Hindi Greenberg; and *The Right Moves: Job Search and Career Development Strategies for Lawyers* by Valerie Fontaine.

Others enjoy perusing websites like: www.careerjournal.com (maintained by *The Wall Street Journal*); www.careerstorm.com (career assessment tools); <http://www.job-hunt.org/international.shtml> (listing many of the Web's job resources); and <http://www.netshare.com> (executive job postings).

Any lawyer suffering from stress should also consult George Kaufman's *The Lawyer's Guide to Balancing Life and Work* (Second Edition). Young lawyers may particularly enjoy *Life in the Balance: Achieving Equilibrium in Professional and Personal Life*, produced by the American Bar Association's Young Lawyer Division.

Life with Less Stress

By brainstorming, introspection, analysis and creative strategizing, even the most entrenched and fatigued lawyer can break the golden handcuffs and relieve stress. The first step is admitting that the stress exists, and then courageously taking more steps to become free.

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