

# Lawyers and Stress: Small Changes for a Better Life

by Helen Chong, Tammy George, and Brent Mattocks



Working around the clock and making sure each of your clients is treated as if they are your only client are just a few of the “norms” in the legal profession. Clients trust us to carry their legal burden and advocate for their best interests. Across the table is another attorney with the same objective for his or her client. As lawyers, we operate under an adversarial system, so taking on stress is comparable to taking on air. Stress, whether you are a trial attorney, in-house counsel, or non-profit advocate, is a part of our daily life.

The practice of law involves learning and applying legal skills. Similarly, living a healthy lifestyle while under stress requires understanding and exercising stress management skills. The tools will vary from attorney to attorney. However, the strategies described

below come from two health professionals and can be incorporated as you begin, or continue, your journey to a healthier life.

## **Insight from a Licensed Professional Counselor: Healthy Lifestyle Habits**

Over the last 20-plus years, study after study shows high rates of depression, anxiety, and substance addiction among practicing lawyers and law students. Stress-related illnesses are on the rise in the United States in general. In order to avoid the negative mental and physical consequences from the stress of being a lawyer or law student, it is imperative that you establish healthy lifestyle habits. Below is a sample of recommended healthy habits.

**Prioritize your time.** It seems rudimentary, but many do not recognize that too much time is wasted on low priority tasks. Have a list of priorities, but be careful not to have unrealistic expectations about how much needs to be done. Also, do not forget to add the non-work-related priorities such as relationships, exercise, hobbies, etc.

**Engage in personal interests and hobbies.** In other words, make time for fun things

outside of work. If you don't create space for the things you love to do, then your stress reaction increases over time leading to anxiety, depression, and burnout. When you build positive emotional experiences into your life, you build resilience to stress.

**Attend to relationships.** Make time for those you love. Social interactions are an important part of our well-being, and a lack of social support is an indicator of high risk for depression.

**Exercise regularly.** Make time — don't find time. Mind and body are all part of the physical experience. You can't expect one to function optimally if the other is compromised and vulnerable. Anything is better than nothing. Start where you are, not where you think you should be or where you used to be. Break it up into smaller increments during your day if necessary.

**Practice relaxation techniques.** There are plenty of ways to find and learn these techniques. YouTube, apps, and professional counselors are all good resources to learn specific ways to relax mind and body. Relaxation skills override the physiology of the stress reaction, or "fight or flight reaction." Deep breathing, relaxed muscles, and a quiet mind result in lowering stress reaction and improving our ability to fall and stay asleep.

**Establish good sleep hygiene.** Just like personal hygiene, we need to pay attention to our sleep routine. Sleep problems are an epidemic in our country. Unplug from your technology for an hour before bed and get into the habit of going to bed and waking up at the same time every day. Avoid watching television, playing games and, of course, working while in bed. Instead, do quieting activities such as reading a magazine, doing crossword puzzles, listening to quiet music or sleep stories from an app. If you have difficulty, wait for about 15 minutes, then get up to sit in a dark quiet place and wait until you start to get sleepy again. This is also a good time to practice those relaxation techniques. Avoid turning on lights (including your phone, laptop and/or tablet) because the light signals the brain to be alert and wakeful.

**Practice mindfulness and meditation.** Mindfulness and meditation have proven to be effective in building resiliency to stress. There are many resources out there to aid in developing this practice which involves learn-

ing to pay attention to the present moment and helping manage thoughts and emotions more effectively. Calm, Headspace, and Simply Being are apps that teach mindfulness and meditation practices. There are also many books, magazines, websites, and podcasts that are excellent resources for learning and building your practice. Also, do not forget that yoga is a mindfulness practice that isn't just good for your body's strength and flexibility, but also for your mind's focus and attention.

#### **Insight from a Fitness Expert & Personal Trainer: Diet and Exercise to Combat Stress**

Stress is defined as any environmental or physical pressure that elicits a response from an organism. In most cases, stress promotes survival because it forces organisms to adapt to rapidly changing environmental conditions. As humans, we normally use stress to create positive outcomes. The competitive nature of sports is a stressor which pushes athletes to run faster, jump higher, and work harder. At work stress enhances focus, motivation, and critical thinking skills. An individual's ability to handle stressors dictates the effect on the body.

A strong body is better equipped to handle stress induced physiological changes including increased heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension. A critical variable in the determination of the body's reaction to stress is health and fitness. Exercise reduces stress and improves a person's ability to handle a larger degree of stress. Exercise also produces endorphins or hormones that improve mood, increase the quality of sleep, and reduce stress. Consuming healthy food such as oatmeal boosts levels of serotonin, a calming brain chemical, while reducing cortisol and adrenaline levels, which go up as stress increases. Stress overwhelms a person who is unprepared to deal with it. A crucial upcoming case, combined with unhealthy food choices, lack of exercise, and any additional personal issues is a recipe for stress overload or an anxiety attack. Do yourself a favor and exercise a minimum of 30 minutes per day, while eating fruits and vegetables, and you will be well on your way to ensuring that stress will not impede your productivity and success.

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**Helen Chong** is a board member of the Virginia State Bar Young Lawyers Conference. She has overseen several programs, including the Children and the Law Commission and Immigrant Outreach Committee, that have received national awards and grants from the American Bar Association. Chong was the recipient of the R. Edwin Burnette Jr. Young Lawyer of the Year Award in 2015. Recently, Chong was featured in the August 2017 issue of *Virginia Living Magazine* for her contributions to serving the public as a criminal defense attorney.

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