

Quality of Life
(Taking the Stress out of Success)

Webster's New Collegiate dictionary defines *stress* as a constraining force or influence exerted when one body presses on, pulls on, pushes on, pushes against, or tends to compress or twist another body; the intensity of this mutual force is commonly expressed in pounds per square inch.¹

The word *stress* has been applied in human actions and reactions as a physiological and psychological response to negative or positive changes or influences.

The Mosby Medical Encyclopedia defines stress management as methods of controlling factors that require a response or change within a person by identifying the causes of stress, eliminating negative stresses, and developing coping mechanisms; i.e., progressive relaxation, guided imagery, biofeedback, and active problem solving.²

Stress is normal but can be disabling. Everyone experiences stress. Stress can be stimulating or it can be harmful. Positive stress is called *eustress*. Negative stress is called *distress*. An overabundance of positive stress can become stressful. Easing the burden of stress must begin by recognizing some of its causes and symptoms.

Examples of *eustress* may be:

Marriage or reconciliation, outstanding achievements,
family gatherings, holidays or vacations.

Examples of *distress* may be:

Death of a loved one, marital tension, separation,
divorce, financial strain, change in work conditions,
holidays or vacations.

When stress occurs, the adrenaline and hormone levels quickly rise as the body gets ready to take action. For example, when the cave man encountered the saber-toothed tiger, his adrenaline quickly rose to prepare for the fight-or-flight response. Modern men and woman are not prone to physically engage the fight-or-flight response. The unused stress released adrenaline and hormones released in the body can be harmful.³

Stress is often caused by our perception of what is happening rather than what is actually happening. Many of the long-term sources of stress are mental or perceptual.⁴ The mind sometimes reacts to a non-dangerous event as if it were a real threat, e.g.

Taking a test,
being stuck in traffic,
holidays perceived in a distressful manner.

In mental or perceptual stress, the body pumps out adrenaline and hormones to no avail. The fight-or-flight relief is not available when the *enemy* is perceptual or in the mind. In the words of the great philosopher, Pogo, *I have met the enemy and it is me.*

Examples of some of the stressors lawyers encounter are:

Pressure to do things better instead of doing better things
Unnaturally having to become aggressive/assertive/adversarial
Must hurt someone to help someone
Alienation from one's natural tendencies
Mismatch between personality and work
Long hours
Pressures to bill
Not seeing results of long hours of work
Not separating work from social or personal environment
Increasing competitiveness and cost pressures
Declining professional identity due to business concerns

Loss of sense of collegiality
Society's distaste for what lawyers do
Clients expectation of a scorched earth representation
Being subservient to firm or client
Trying to meet conflicting demands
Dull, too detailed or obsessional workload

Some stress warning signals or symptoms are:

Physical symptoms

tics, nervous habits
restlessness
teeth grinding
pounding heart
colds, minor ills
weight change
headaches
hypermobility
(the need to move)
fatigue, low energy
skin rash
accident prone
digestive problems
muscle aches
insomnia
muscle tension
stiff joints

Mental Symptoms

memory loss
forgetfulness
dull senses
inability to concentrate
low productivity
confusion
lethargy

Emotional Systems

excitability
self-doubt
little joy
easily discouraged
nervous laugh
depression
irritability
crying spells
nightmares
bad temper
mood swings
frustration
anxiety
disruption of body rhythms
(sleeping, eating)
the "blues"
appetite change

Behavioral Symptoms

overuse of alcohol
compulsive eating
critical attitude of others
excess smoking
bossiness

Mental Symptoms (continued)

no new ideas
poor time management
poor priority setting
unclear planning
boredom
negative self-talk
disorganized thinking
excessive worry

The emerging field of behavioral medicine has spawned a methodology for treatment of stress and stress-related symptoms. More than twenty-five years of scientific research and clinical practice at Harvard University medical school and one of its teaching hospitals, the New England Deaconess Hospital in Boston, produced a method called *Relaxation Response* which evokes beneficial physiological changes as a means to manage stress.⁵ By simply altering thought contents, often called meditation, the rates of metabolism, heart beats, breathing and blood pressure are lowered. slower brain wave patterns, associated with deep rest, are developed. Programs utilizing *relaxation response*, along with exercise, nutrition and other behavioral medicine methods, have been developed by the mind/Body Institute of the New England Deaconess Hospital and Harvard Medical school for the treatment of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, anxiety, chronic pain, cancer, insomnia, menopause, infertility, general stress-related symptoms and other medical disorders. Relaxation response methods are not an alternative to traditional medicine but are designed to complement and interact.

The body's normal response to stress can be controlled or reversed by learning to relax. Identifying the five categories of stress is important. They are: (1) stress you can avoid; (2) stress you can modify; (3) stress you contribute to; (4) stress you create, and (5) stress that cannot be avoided.

The relaxation response method of dealing with stress begins by developing an awareness of your body and your mind, increasing the awareness of how you feel, physically and emotionally, when you are relaxed and when tense. You must learn to perceive stressors, think about possible responses and execute the response. This may be accomplished by initiation of the *stop-take a breath-reflect-and choose* technique. When stress, or symptoms of stress occur, the technique should be implemented as follows:

Stop and take a breath,
reflect upon the situation causing stress,
reflect upon the physical signs (tenseness, heart beat, etc.)
reflect upon automatic thoughts or emotions (feelings, i.e. anger)
reflect upon the practical problem,
reflect upon coping responses (physical coping with physical signs,
emotion-focused coping with automatic thoughts/emotions,
problem-focused coping with practical problems).

Explore your thoughts and emotions. Physical discomfort and emotional distress are messages from your body. Ignoring them leaves the underlying problem unresolved and contributes to illness.

Identify the major stressors in your daily activities and use the stop-take a breath-reflect-and choose technique to focus upon a coping response. Make a strong commitment to always initiate the coping response to stressors as they occur.

Relaxation response is a state of profound rest. It is initiated by slow diaphragmatic breathing, accompanied by repetitive letting go of tension with each out-breath. By mental focusing, meditation and imagery, you are mindful of letting go of troubling thoughts and worry. Repetitive exercises, prayer and progressive body scan muscle relaxation leads to an enhanced ability to relax. These techniques have two basic features: (1) the repetition of a word, sound, phrase, prayer, image

or physical activity, and (2) the passive disregard of everyday thoughts. Common focus words or phrases may be:

Peace	Let go	Rainbow
Calm	Love	Sunshine
Relax	Ocean	Quiet

Regularly practice initiating the relaxation response, initiating it in either two ten-minute sessions or one twenty-minute session each day. In addition, initiate a "mini" relaxation response of three to ten breaths in dealing with stressors as soon as they occur. Development of a daily exercise regimen and healthful nutritional habits are also helpful in effective stress management.

Several hospitals have developed a Mind/Body Institute and offer a Healthy Lifestyles Program of approximately five two-hour sessions. These institutes are affiliated with the Mind/Body Medical Institute of Deaconess Hospital and Harvard Medical School and focus on the relaxation response, other stress management methods, and specializes in treatment of conditions caused or complicated by stress.

END NOTES:

1. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1977 Edition, p. 1143
2. The Mosby Medical Encyclopedia, 1992 Edition, p. 731
3. The Wellness Book, Herbert Benson, M.D., Eileen M. Stuart, R.N., MS., 1992, p. 35
4. Id., p. 180
5. Id., p. 33