

Chronic STRESS and the Practice of Law

BY JANET C. PANCOAST, ESQ.



Have you been chased by any wolves lately? Probably not, but your mind and body might think the wolves are at the door and surrounding you. Our hunter/gather ancestors' stressors were the wild beasts that were ready to devour them. Thankfully, we no longer have to fend off wolves or other wild beasts, but as attorneys, our occupation is, for better or worse, to "fight" with our opponents.

Do you have that "one" case that is driving you crazy? Do you have one (or more) opposing counsel who is being particularly unreasonable? Do you have a looming expert disclosure and you can't find an expert? Do you have a wife, husband, partner or significant other who wants more attention but you have to work? Do you have kids who just want you to come to their game, but you can't get away from work? These

are the modern-day wolves at our doors that activate the limbic system's "fight or flight response." Unlike our ancestors, we don't get to rest after we've outrun the proverbial wolf. The stressors we face as attorneys are chronic stressors. Eventually, if we are unable to establish effective coping mechanisms for the chronic stress we deal with, the chronic stress most likely will have a negative impact on not only our minds, but our bodies as well.

Symptoms of Chronic Stress

Chronic stress may result in anxiety or depression or both. There is increasing evidence of links between poor coping skills, stress and physical illness. Chronic stress can wear you down and overwhelm you. You may frequently be in a bad mood, your productivity may decrease, your relationships may suffer and you might even find it difficult to go about your normal daily routine. Have you felt any of the following in the last six months?

1. **Psychological/emotional symptoms:**
 - memory problems;
 - inability to concentrate;
 - poor judgment;
 - seeing only the negative;
 - anxious or racing thoughts; and
 - constant worrying.
2. **Physical symptoms of stress:**
 - aches and pains;
 - diarrhea or constipation;
 - nausea, dizziness;
 - chest pain, rapid heartbeat;
 - loss of sex drive; and
 - frequent colds.
3. **Behavioral symptoms:**
 - eating more or less;
 - sleeping too much or too little;
 - isolating yourself from others;
 - procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities;
 - using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to relax; and
 - nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing).



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- emotions feel wrong;
- everything is scary, frightening;
- feeling down in the dumps;
- feeling like things are unreal or dreamlike;
- frequently being on edge or grouchy;
- feel like crying for no apparent reason;
- have no feelings about things you used to;
- not feeling like yourself, detached from loved ones, emotionally numb;
- underlying anxiety, apprehension or fear; and
- you feel like you are under pressure all the time.

If you have experienced any of these physical or emotional symptoms, your limbic system may be in overdrive. You may not realize it, but your mind thinks you are being pursued by the metaphorical “wolves” that are attacking your sense of well-being.

Negative Coping Mechanisms

If we recognize we are exhibiting some of the symptoms above, the next step is to evaluate how we are dealing with our chronic stress. Do you see yourself exhibiting any of these behaviors?

1. **Denial** — People in denial may manifest this with anger and resentment when challenged.
2. **Workaholism** — As noted by Jon Kabat-Zinn:

If you feel stressed and dissatisfied by family life, for instance, then work can be used as a wonderful excuse for never being home. If your work gives you pleasure and you get positive feedback from colleagues,

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These symptoms of chronic stress can turn into depression, anxiety or both.

These are signs of depression:¹

- sadness most of the day;
- low energy or fatigue;
- loss of interest in favorite activities;
- feelings of hopelessness and/or pessimism;
- difficulty concentrating;
- irritability, restlessness or being slowed down;
- feeling worthless or guilty;
- trouble sleeping or sleeping too much;
- significant weight change; and
- thoughts about suicide or dying.

Below is just a partial list of how someone suffering with anxiety may feel:²

- always feeling angry and lacking patience;
- depersonalization;
- dramatic mood swings (emotional flipping);
- emotionally blunted, flat or numb;

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if you feel in control when you are there and you have power and status and feel productive and creative, it is easy to immerse yourself in work. It can be intoxicating and addicting, just like alcohol. And it provides a socially acceptable alibi for not being available for the family, since there is always more work to do than you can possibly get done.³

3. **Chemicals** — Alcohol, prescription medications, illegal drugs, nicotine, caffeine, sugar. Unfortunately, seeking the “chemical” fix in a moment of stress can become dependence in some circumstances and for some people. An increased dependence on alcohol, medications or drugs can lead to a precipitous downhill decline if the dependence turns into alcoholism or drug abuse. This is the negative coping mechanism that is, perhaps, the most self-destructive. Has anyone close to you expressed concern about your alcohol or drug use? Have you been concerned? Here is a self-test that you may find helpful: <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/addiction/alcohol-abuse-self-test#1>
4. **Food** — Ever heard of stress eating or “comfort food?” Even food, when eaten to excess, can become harmful. Food can also be used to cope with stress and emotional discomfort in a similar way, almost as if it were a drug. Many people eat whenever they feel anxious or depressed. Food becomes a crutch for getting through uncomfortable moments and a reward for afterward. If you have a feeling of emptiness inside, it’s only natural to try to fill it. Eating is an easy way to do it. How many times do you find yourself standing before the fridge when you can’t sleep at night?

These negative coping strategies, if recognized, can be turned into positive coping strategies that may actually help you deal with the chronic stressors in your life.

Options for Dealing With Stress

1. **Response vs. React:** Evaluate how you are reacting to a stressor. Remember, whether something is a “stressor” is based on “*your perception.*” Take time to appraise the situation causing you stress and evaluate your thoughts. Are your thoughts an accurate reflection of this stressor? Instead of reacting, take time to consider an appropriate response. Remember that scathing letter you wrote but held off sending? Remember how, when you looked at it three days later, you were glad you did not send it? That is the difference between responding to a stressor and reacting to the stressor. Think before you speak or write.
2. **Scale back:** The problem with over-achievers is they do too much. Do you need to scale back? What do you really need to do? What can you cut out of your life?
3. **Prepare:** No procrastination! For attorneys this is a significant issue since we have so many deadlines and, all too often, nothing will happen until we come upon a deadline. However, if we prepare as we go along, the stress can be reduced. Try getting that expert retained as soon as you realize you need an expert, *NOT* a week before the disclosure is due, is a good example of avoiding procrastination.
4. **Reach out:** Sometimes just helping someone else can be good for us. Even life insurance companies now ask prospective policy holders about volunteering, because there are multiple studies that show that altruism is good for you.
5. **Hobby:** Do something you enjoy. What pastime have you given up as the responsibilities of “adulting” have gobbled up your time? Maybe you should go back to some of those pastimes.
6. **Exercise:** Get your heart rate up! When you exercise, your body releases chemicals called endorphins. These endorphins interact with the receptors in your brain that reduce your perception of pain. Endorphins also trigger a positive feeling in the body, similar to that of morphine. Exercise is a very potent antidote to stress.
7. **Sleep:** Sleep deprivation can affect your mental state as well as your physical well-being.
8. **Meditation:** Kabat-Zinn developed techniques for a stress clinic to treat University of Massachusetts patients with chronic pain and other medical problems, which he called “Mindfulness Meditation.” The basis of this program is described in *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. For additional information on this practice, you can watch “Mindfulness with Jon Kabat-Zinn” on YouTube.⁴ You need not only do mindfulness meditation, any meditation will have the same effect. There are multiple apps available with guided meditations, and YouTube has thousands of meditation videos, both guided and with just relaxing music. You can find the type that is right for you. Try it before you dismiss the idea.



PHOTO CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK



Get your heart rate up! When you exercise, your body releases chemicals called endorphins. These endorphins interact with the receptors in your brain that reduce your perception of pain.



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family practitioner may prescribe medications for anxiety or depression. But, if there is something in your life causing such distress, you may wish to consult with a psychologist or counselor as well.

Stress is a part of every life; the challenge is to learn to recognize and deal with it. Just ignoring it may exacerbate the toll of chronic stress. If any of this information resonates with you personally or a colleague comes to mind who may be overly stressed, take some time to consider implementing some of the strategies for dealing with chronic stress.

1. <https://www.webmd.com/depression/guide/detecting-depression#1>
2. <http://www.anxietycentre.com/anxiety-symptoms>.
3. Kabat-Zinn, *supra*, Kindle Locations 4541-4546.
4. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nw-wKbM_vJc

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9. **Professional help:** If you have tried the positive strategies, but you are still feeling depressed or gripped by anxiety, it may be time for professional help. Your

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