

Top 14 Ways Attorneys Can Avoid Burnout from the Stress of Practicing Law

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Summary: Attorneys face massive amounts of stress on a daily basis due to the nature of their work. Here are 14 ways attorneys can avoid burnout from practicing law.

Excessive stress is taking its toll among lawyers everywhere, especially in metropolitan areas. Unless stress is met with the same care and sensitivity as a client's pressing problem, dire consequences can ensue.

Here are some resources about attorney stress and ways to help you handle it:

[Survival Tips for a First-Year Associate](#)

[Understanding Stress and Attorney Relations](#)

[Attorneys, Life Events and Stress: Causes and Palliatives](#)

[Lawyer Stress](#)

[Talk Straight if You Want to Handle Stress in Law Firm Offices](#)

[Ways to Cope with Stress in a Legal Career](#)

[Ways to Effectively Manage Stress](#)

A large number of lawyers are suffering from burnout, and many are choosing to leave the profession. In today's competitive legal environment, the first step in managing stress is to recognize its causes and symptoms before they lead to negative results.

[Learn More About This Video](#)

Warning Signs of Attorney Burnout

There are three major warning signals for burnout:

Emotional exhaustion-feeling drained, not having anything to give even before the day begins

Depersonalization-feeling disconnected from other people, feeling resentful and seeing them negatively

Reduced sense of personal accomplishment-feeling ineffective and perceiving that results achieved are not meaningful

If you recognize any of the warning signals in your life, look for other burnout symptoms:

Working longer hours but accomplishing fewer results

Seeing less of your family and friends

Feeling exhausted, irritable, anxious, and beset by physical ills

HOW TO IDENTIFY THE PHYSICAL AND BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS

Excessive stress can cause lawyers to experience a variety of health problems from headaches, lower back pain, ulcers to more serious ailments such as heart attacks and strokes. Other lawyers suffer from lack of concentration, procrastination, missed deadlines, insomnia, depression, anxiety, nervous breakdown, and attacks of rage. After

of working 60 to 80 hours per week, many lawyers find their family support base has eroded or even disappeared. This adds to their stress, and the vicious cycle continues. Often lawyers seek relief from stress through alcohol and drugs, risking their standing in the profession.

WHAT CAUSES STRESS?

Almost everything! Most attorneys are experiencing increasing job dissatisfaction. Representing all levels of seniority in all kinds of practice, 3,200 attorneys reported feeling less fulfilled, more tired and stressed, more caught up in office politics, more likely to be in unhappy marriages, and more likely to drink excessively than ever before. Adverse economic pressures and a volatile marketplace also contributed to heightened stress and substance abuse.

Associates have gripes such as:

"Law-firm practice slowly kills your spirit and your soul. I'll never practice in a firm again."

"We are well-paid slaves [who] are expected to drop everything in our lives to meet false deadlines and non-emergencies."

"To say I was treated as a galley slave would imply that partners actually thought about how to treat me."

Statements like "being expected to bleed for the firm" expressed a feeling of being trapped and betrayed that many of the 3,200 respondents echoed.

"When associates leave the firm, they are congratulated as if they just broke out of prison," said one of the survey respondents.

For women, an additional stress factor has been gender bias - the "glass ceiling" imposed by the "old boy network." In the 1980s, women lawyers entering male-dominated law firms found that benefits such as flexible work schedules, child care, leave, and day care were still practically unknown. Female lawyers frequently have to work much harder than their male counterparts to be taken seriously as professionals. In some law firms, becoming pregnant has been viewed as a sign of disloyalty, with appropriate penalties such as reassignment of lucrative clients to other firm members and subtle discouragement to leave the firm.

For many lawyers, passion and commitment to making a difference in society have been dulled by unwieldy court procedures, unrealistic client expectations, and a few unscrupulous lawyers who have tarnished public respect. In addition, the pressure to succeed among people of high ideals to burn out more quickly than other people has been noted in a study called "Career Burnout: Causes & Cures."

Some common job-related frustrations for lawyers that can contribute to their risk of suffering from burnout include:

- competition for a finite source of clients;
- the litigious nature of our society;
- the adversarial nature of the practice of law;
- growing court documentation requirements;
- malpractice prevention concerns such as memos, checklists, and formal client communications;
- client demands for more services and faster turnaround, yet unwillingness to pay higher fees;
- soaring overhead expenses and plummeting profits;
- law firm expectations of unrealistic billable hours;
- new associates clamoring for quicker rewards; and
- inflexible traditions that demand total immersion in the practice of law, to the exclusion of a balanced personal life.

When faced with these unrealistic demands, many lawyers reach their breaking point, as the following anecdote illustrates.

FOUR CASE HISTORIES

One partner of a small insurance defense firm knew he was burned out when he found himself depressed all the time. The stress caused by an excessive caseload and unrelenting deadlines - made him want to avoid the office. In examining his life, he realized he was working murderous hours to support two houses, imported cars, and "yuppie" trappings that did not enhance his quality of life. In fact, he didn't have the leisure time to enjoy them!

He also realized that changes in the legal profession had added stress. "The practice of law is so much more competitive today," he said. "You can't settle anything with a handshake or a phone call. You have to commit everything to paper. You can't trust attorneys to keep their word. We've been bombarded with all the new rules, and it's become a paper war."

Other stress factors include more litigious opposing counsel, who are less willing to work things out, and more junior attorneys inexperienced in civil cases, making the courtroom a "crap shoot," said the lawyer. "I see the legal profession deteriorating. Much of it is due to increased competition. Eighty percent of civil lawyers are pounding the streets trying to get clients. I took a year's sabbatical before rejoining his former firm as a partner. He now reports being able to handle his caseload with renewed vigor and increased satisfaction."

A criminal specialist realized she was burned out when her temper became explosive. One of her colleagues warned her to better start taking things easier or risk having a nervous breakdown or heart attack. "I can't stop now" was her immediate response. "There's too much to do."

Forced to examine her behavior, she recognized a chronic pattern of denial. "I had been trying for too long to be a supermom, and superwife, as well as superdaughter to my aging parents," she said. "I internalized the stress, which led to headaches and exhaustion."

She decided to leave the practice of law permanently and reports that her headaches have disappeared.

After several months of working 270 to 300 hours, an experienced insurance defense [litigator](#) with a well-known firm approached her supervising partner for help. She was told to "work harder" to handle her gigantic caseload. "I remember the trouble when I felt so stressed I couldn't concentrate and didn't know where to start," she said. "I was tired before I got to the office and had a knot in the pit of my stomach driving in to work. I always felt that something was going to go wrong. As deadlines got closer and closer. The stress was affecting my personal relationships, too, and I felt that I just couldn't go on."

To prevent any further downward spiral, she left the practice for six months, "sat home, and tried to figure out what I wanted for the rest of my life," she remembers. She knew she couldn't handle another full-time position with the inevitable 60-hour-a-week commitment and the pressure of million-dollar cases where opposing attorneys frequently manipulated witnesses testifying their way. She decided to take a graduate-level class in fine art while starting some part-time work as a writer and lawyer.

Through a project lawyer service, she was sent to a firm where 45-hour weeks (total, not billable) were considered normal. She was amazed. In a matter of days the firm offered her a permanent position, which she accepted. She is now happily working and relishing her home life.

The firm's attitude toward her pregnancy was enormously stressful for another bright attorney. Although her commuted billable hours hadn't decreased, the perception was that she was no longer committed. She found herself suddenly removed from choice assignments that were crucial to her progress with the firm. "I was devastated, even though it was made clear that my ability was never in question," she said. "The lack of intellectual stimulation, growth, and positive reinforcement made me seriously consider [leaving the practice of law](#). Also, most partners had stay-at-home wives and made no bones about the fact that pregnant women should be at home where they belonged!" Three months after returning from a three-week leave, her firm asked her to find another position. One week after leaving the firm, burned out on politics, she opened her own practice. "Initially it was hard financially," she reports, "but now I feel so much better about myself and love what I'm doing."

These case histories illustrate the importance of monitoring your ability to cope with the many pressures that confront you. You can then take steps to improve the quality of your life.

TAKE ACTION - A 14-POINT CHECKLIST

The following suggestions may help you cope with stress and still [enjoy the practice of law](#):

Cut your workweek to "human" limits, ideally 45 total (not billable) hours.

Change focus. If you're a firm partner or law office manager, opt for another meaningful but less demanding role. If you're a sole practitioner, use project lawyers to assist you when you're overloaded, share space with other lawyers, or join a firm with whatever capacity works for you.

Eliminate areas of the law that drain your energy.

Drop unprofitable or excessively difficult clients.

Instead of litigation, consider alternative dispute resolution (mediation and arbitration) to resolve client problems.

Become an independent contractor or a legal consultant.

Never take work home!

Block out specific times each week when you can work on files or other matters, uninterrupted by phone calls or interruptions from clients.

Don't postpone vacation time! Take advantage of regularly scheduled, planned absences from the office.

Take a sabbatical or leave of absence for at least six to eight weeks to give your mind and body a break. Of course, your financial situation needs to be weighed against the cost of your mental health.

Exercise regularly. Physical activity dissipates stress.

Enroll in a stress management seminar to learn new skills you can use every day.

Liberal consult health professionals who can provide personalized programs for stress relief (e.g., osteopathy/chiropractic therapy, therapeutic massage, biofeedback).

Utilize lawyer assistance programs offered by your state bar association. Counseling is available for behavioral and substance abuse problems. Help is often available for law practice management issues as well.

While stress is a certainty in the practice of law, it can be kept to a minimum. Heed your own "inner counsel."

Source for three major warning signals for burnout: [Caring for Oneself As a Caregiver](#)

See [Why You Should Quit Practicing Law](#) for more information.