

Stress Management

Healthy vs. Unhealthy

By Tish Vincent

Merriam-Webster defines stress as “a physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation.”¹ Stress in the legal profession starts early and keeps building.

August 14, 2003, was the day the north-east United States suffered an enormous power outage that affected 10 million people. The figure noted below shows the area of North America affected.²



This outage was very stressful to me because it occurred the night before I started my law school orientation and I was worried I would not be able to have my coffee before the day began. There was no power at my house and no power at the convenience store or the coffee shop I relied on as backup. When I arrived at Michigan State University College of Law (Detroit College of Law at Michigan State University at that time), I was happy to discover that the university had electric generators and thus power and coffee. The next stress to hit me was the size of the entering class. My graduate program had approximately 100 students; my law school class had 325.

These stresses paled in comparison as the year progressed. The stresses of my

personal life combined with the stresses of learning to think like a lawyer, do quality legal research, learn to cite check, run student organizations, compete for summer jobs and externships, and study long hours while existing on very little sleep challenged my coping strategies. Did I mention I was working part-time in my first career through all of this?

Stress sounds like a negative term but, in truth, it is neither negative nor positive. The manner in which we deal with stress can be positive or negative. The choice is up to each individual. In this column, we focus on positive methods for dealing with stress so wellness can be established and maintained.

My son moved to California in 2007. In the month before he departed, he took his car in for a thorough maintenance check. Before he drove 2,209 miles, he wanted to be sure the car was functioning as well as it could before it endured the stress of such a long trip. This is a metaphor for the approach we need to take to deal with stress. First make sure you are in optimal health—mentally, physically, and spiritually. Then, from the available stress management strategies choose the ones that fit your lifestyle and personality.

Healthy Strategies

Peter Jaffe describes prevention strategies in his work on vicarious trauma in judges.³ His organization of this information offers a memorable acronym for coping strategies—ABC, for awareness, balance, and connection.⁴

Awareness implies acceptance of what is true. Being aware of one’s own strengths, shortcomings, and situation is a healthy strategy for coping with stress. Letting go of circumstances beyond one’s control, learning to identify critical tasks and ones that can

wait for another day, and not taking other people’s moods or behaviors personally all spring from awareness.

Awareness grounds us in the possibility of solutions. As stress mounts, awareness often dims. At times of stress, an effective strategy is to withdraw the mind from the ongoing stress and breathe deeply in and out 10 times with all awareness focused only on breathing. Allow your mind to go blank and say slowly to yourself, *relax*. This momentary break to center and ground your mind will increase your self-awareness and your ability to be calm and deal with the stress that confronts you.

Awareness is a state of being that individuals can cultivate.

Balance involves responding to needs identified through awareness. Human beings are social and have basic needs for companionship, community, and relationship. We also need nutritional food and exercise. We need entertainment and down time as well as meaningful work, and the sense that our contributions make a difference in our work world and life.

The practice of law is a compelling and satisfying endeavor. The time pressures in this field and the sense of responsibility to others can eclipse the balance necessary to maintain health. This must be recognized and dealt with. Whether a law student, new associate, practicing attorney, law professor, or judge, individuals must strive to introduce and maintain balance as a prevention method.

Mental health professionals use a simple formula to encourage balance for depressed people. They ask individuals to allocate 15 minutes daily to the following four activities: talking to someone who listens to them, doing housework, exercising, and engaging in a hobby. This simple formula can be adopted and adjusted in the life of any legal professional. Despite the burdens

and demands of legal practice, have you taken care of yourself today?

Balance is a principle that must be followed daily or our lives become top-heavy with work.

Connection requires us to step outside of ourselves and find others with whom we can relate. The practice of law can be isolating. The practice of conducting therapy also can be isolating. The therapy field has an institutionalized tradition of supervision that mitigates isolation. Therapists are required to be supervised by a more experienced therapist in the early years of practice. After those formative years, they are encouraged to maintain regular contact with a supervisor or engage in peer supervision. This allows the development of a comfortable, trusting relationship in which challenges and emotional reactions to work can be discussed.

The competitive nature of legal practice can make establishing connections with colleagues somewhat more challenging, but it is still a necessary and worthwhile goal. In law school, I found collegial support and friendship in student organizations and journals. In legal practice, I have found support from colleagues in professional associations. The relationships I have formed in the American Bar Association Health Law Section, the State Bar of Michigan Health Law Section, and the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan provide personal and professional connections. Some employers offer collegial support, but others foster a competitive spirit that makes connecting more difficult.

Connection needs to be nurtured in both the professional and personal spheres. Relationships with significant others need to be protected from the time pressures and stresses of a legal career. Date nights for couples and vacations from work without smartphones are important methods of maintaining connection with your partner. Friendships are important sources of connection as well. Involvement in volunteer activities, community groups, and faith groups offers the opportunity for social connection that protects against the detrimental effects of stress.

Connection requires commitment to the need and the process, or it can easily slip off our busy calendars.

Unhealthy Strategies

I attended law school as a full-time day student. I was assigned to Section 1, which included 110 students from all over the United States and a few foreign countries, most of whom had recently graduated from college. During the third week of classes, one of my sociable classmates in Contracts took the podium before the professor arrived and announced that a kegger was taking place at his apartment complex. Standing in line to pick up forms for a class, I heard my classmates discussing which bar they would go to. As the semester progressed, some of them started showing signs of the wear and tear of using this coping strategy.

Five years of performing assessments for law students under scrutiny because of drunk-driving charges sensitized me to the problems my classmates might be court- ing with their coping strategies. During the eighth week of classes, we received news that a recent graduate, a star in his class, died in an accident over the weekend. Rumor had it that his blood alcohol level was 0.3, more than three times the legal limit.

Reversing our ABC formula from healthy coping strategies we get VEI, for vagueness, extremes, and isolation.

Vagueness permits us to stay unaware. We are exhausted and hungry, but stay in the law library finishing a paper or studying for an exam or at the office writing a brief, eating candy and drinking soda, stopping only when we must use the restroom. Bills need to be paid and money is in the account, but vagueness keeps us from setting aside 15 minutes to tend to the task. We are unhappy with our present work and need to launch a job search, but whisk that thought away and slog through the days. I have lost count of the number of assessments I have conducted in which individuals explain to me that their blood alcohol content was so high because they had not eaten that day.

Vagueness offers temporary relief from stress, but the stress continues to build and will ultimately come to a head. It is just a matter of time.

Extremes invite us to over-work, over-study, over-prepare, and then crash into weeks of procrastination or inactivity. Engaging in excessive amounts of activity de-

signed to cope with stress might make us feel like we have blinders on and stress is being managed. Our lives are out of balance and while we hyper-focus on something else, the obligations we neglect and the stress we are avoiding build.

Extremes offer the illusion of dealing with stress and may contribute to a list of accomplishments but keep us off balance and create more problems.

Isolation saves us from imagined stress coming from others in our lives. Closing the door at work keeps coworkers from wasting your time with chitchat. Withdrawing from problems seems to make them go away, but only blinds you to reality. People may isolate physically by walking or staying away, or by using drugs or alcohol or having an affair. This coping strategy gives the illusion of dealing with stress when, in truth, the person is creating more stress that will need to be dealt with at a later time.

Isolation causes individuals to believe in the insular world they create and weakens their ability to deal with reality.

We cannot arrange a life without stress. We can learn to recognize stress and choose healthy strategies for coping with it. ■



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FOOTNOTES

1. Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2004), available at <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stress>>. All websites cited in this article were accessed June 18, 2012.
2. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:North_America_blackout.png>.
3. See Jaffe, *et al.*, *Vicarious trauma in judges: The personal challenge for dispensing justice*, 54 *Juv & Fam Cr J* 1, 1-9 (2003), available at <<http://www.thegreenbook.info/submit/documents/ressup2.pdf>>.
4. Jaffe, n 3 at 5.