

Beyond Stressed: A Lawyer’s Guide to Managing Mental Health

Career Development





The alarming rate of mental health challenges that lawyers face is an enduring concern for me. Last year I wrote “The Work-Life Balance Paradox” for *ACC Docket*’s July/August 2018 issue, in which I shared the statistic that one in three lawyers has a mental illness.

That's a startling number, even in a high stress field such as law. This May, in recognition of Mental Health Awareness Month, I want to focus on how in-house counsel can seek help for — and prioritize — their mental health.

The first step to addressing your mental health is to remain self-aware and honest with yourself.

> *If any of your symptoms are unrelenting and unusual, or if you are abusing substances or have violent thoughts about harming yourself or others, please seek help from a professional immediately.*

If you have insomnia, find yourself irritable, or are suffering from any number of manifestations of stress or anxiety that do not rise to the level of the foregoing, this article will provide some tools to help you cope.

Don't be afraid to ask for help

If you find yourself overwhelmed with work, ask a colleague to pitch in and help. If that is not an option, have a conversation with your boss about the specific challenges you are facing and suggest ways to lessen the burden. Perhaps your department needs more staff, an improved workflow process, or a better division of work. The point is to bring it to your boss's attention and provide ideas for solving the obstacles you're facing.

Additionally, those closest to you can be valued resources. There is no reason to suffer in silence. If you have trusted loved ones, confide in them. Ask them for advice and for help to finish tasks that may be overwhelming you. Bring your worries to them and they may be able to help in ways you haven't considered.

In addition to seeking help at work and from loved ones, it's okay, and admirable, to admit that you need the help of a professional. If stress, depression, or anxiety becomes too hard to handle on your own, do not hesitate to seek the counsel of a trusted psychiatrist or psychologist.

Manage responses to stress

One way to manage stress responses is to spend time unwinding. Find your happy place or ways to decompress. For me, I write, go on a weekend getaway, catch up on my favorite television shows, dance, or enjoy dinner with loved ones. Find the activity or the place that makes your mind shut off and lets you live in the moment. This may be enough to recharge your soul.

In addition to finding ways to unwind, educate yourself so that when stress strikes, you're better equipped to handle it. One way to continually educate yourself is to subscribe to health newsletters from trusted sources. For example, I get emails on a variety of health topics from WebMD. I never know what will show up in my inbox and as I prepared to write this article, this slideshow on dealing with panic attacks came in my *WebMD* newsletter.

Another way to manage stress responses is to get a pet if you're fond of animals. Studies show that pets aid in relaxation. If your anxiety is severe, you may even need an emotional support or therapy pet. A mental health professional should be able to help guide you through the process of getting a service animal.

Additionally, you can make use of your smartphone's apps to manage mental health. There are several apps on smartphones to help you meditate, develop a movement routine, and relax.

For example, Happify helps increase happiness through content, activities, and games. Pacifica uses Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, mindfulness, and wellness in order to address stress, anxiety, and depression. SAM aids in learning about and managing anxiety. NOCD and GGOC assist in managing OCD. Calm and other apps can further help with many mental health challenges you may face.

There are too many apps like this to list all of them, and they are often free, or their basic features are free; the key is to find the one or many that can help you manage the challenges you face.

To some extent, you control your levels of stress by controlling your reaction to stressors. With the advice above, you may be able to better control your mental state and be a more productive and happier person and professional.

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