

## BE WELL Stressed Much?

How does this stress affect your body and how can being mindful reduce these negative effects? Read below to find out...

The alarm goes off in the morning and despite feeling sheer exhaustion, you rise to quickly start your day so you can fit in a cardio workout before the rest of the house awakes and it is a flurry of breakfast-eating-preparing-lunches-commuting-to-school/work. Of course, there was construction, which delayed your trip to work and caused you to be late for your first morning meeting with a demanding client, who is now even more upset and anxious about the status of their case with the late start to your meeting. This seemingly minor delay has now caused a waterfall of morning problems: this meeting runs late and now you are late for a status interview with a judge that has not been favorable to your cases and is a stickler for timeliness. Opposing counsel will use this to their advantage and you will continue to dig yourself out of the judicial hole that has been dug even deeper. All of this "stress" and you are only 3 hours into your day. Does any part of this schedule resonate for you as an attorney? If so, the negative effects of chronic stress may be occurring in your body and life...

I believe there is **"Good Stress"** and **"Bad Stress"**

- **"Good Stress"** is part of our fundamental survival system and is an automatic biological stress response that can save our lives. Your fight/flight/freeze responses are for "acute" or "short-term" stress and last minutes to hours until you return to a resting or relaxed state. So, the norepinephrine, adrenalin and cortisol stress hormone levels rise and then disappear.



- **"Bad Stress"** occurs when there is chronic or ongoing situations in your life that do not provide you with time to return to a resting or relaxing state. This chronic stress can be activated for days, weeks, months and even years. In this case, the norepinephrine and adrenalin levels may lower, but the levels of cortisol may remain in the body and start to wreak havoc, as outlined further below.

Both **"Good Stress"** and **"Bad Stress"** start with a stressful trigger (traffic, late for a meeting, upset client, deadlines, heavy workload, challenging judge or opposing counsel) and your body reacts as though you are being chased by a saber-toothed

tiger, which means you need to activate your survival system and marshal the immediate support of your stress hormones within seconds: adrenaline (heartbeat increases, breath rate increases, surge of energy, start sweating, focuses your attention) and norepinephrine (backup to adrenalin, more awake and focused, shifts blood flow from non-crucial areas - skin and brain - to essential areas - muscles - so you can run or fight with superhuman skills and can last). Then in a few minutes cortisol hormones are released to sustain the stress response into the indefinite future, as long as the stressor is present (maintains fluid balance and blood pressure, regulates non-crucial body functions, suppresses the immune system, increases blood pressure, increases blood sugar levels, decreases libido, increases acne and decreases metabolism).

And for many of us as lawyers, the stress or never ends, it just takes a different form. It has been reported that chronic stress is the #1 cause of disease in Americans.

**"Bad Stress"** or **"Chronic Stress"** affects us in varied ways, including:

- **Physical Effects on our Body:**
  - Negatively affects all of your physical systems, especially your "weak health spots;"
  - Increased respiration and breathlessness;

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- Due to energy being mobilized to muscles there may be pain, tension and spasms in neck and back as well as jaw pain from teeth grinding;
- Narrows arteries in the heart, which increases heart rate and the risk of developing cardiovascular disease;
- Lowers metabolism, which leads to weight gain;
- Lowers immunity, which increases illnesses and infections;
- Increases overall inflammation and oxidative damage;
- Skin irritations and acne;
- Decrease in collagen, which keeps your skin elastic;
- Gastrointestinal effects, such as intestinal pain, gas or diarrhea, as the gut bacteria is changed;
- Overall body fatigue; and
- Increases blood sugar levels, which feels like:
  - Headaches and other aches/pains;
  - Hard to concentrate;
  - Thirsty or hungry;
  - Drowsy or tired;
  - Blurred vision;
  - Dry mouth;
  - Bloating; and
  - Frequent urination.

• **Mental Effects on our Mind:**

- Unable to focus, looking for distractions;
- Muddled thinking;
- Impaired judgment;
- Negative;
- Make hasty decisions; and
- Damage to short term memory due to a reduction in gray matter.

• **Emotional Effects:**

- Loss of confidence;
- More Fussy;
- Irritable;
- Depressed;
- Anxious;
- Apathetic;
- Alienated;
- Apprehension; and
- Feeling overwhelmed by life.

• **Behavioral Effects:**

- More accident prone;
- Loss of appetite or overeating;
- Loss of sex drive;
- Drinking more alcohol;
- Smoking more – tobacco or marijuana;
- Insomnia; and
- Restlessness.

There are many different ways to cope with stress, including:

1. Numb the pain caused by the Stress;
2. Tolerate the stressor until it passes or becomes less troublesome;
3. Change the source of the stress (quit the job, leave the relationship, move, etc.); and
4. Change your perspective of the situation by practicing being mindful.

I have tried all coping mechanisms and have had the most lasting reduction in my stress levels by practicing mindfulness. Mindfulness has been defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn as “Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” Essentially, you are choosing to be in the present moment instead of allowing your mind to wander. The best part about being mindful is that it is completely free, doesn’t require any special clothing or equipment and can occur at any moment. The hard part about being mindful is that despite its simplicity, it is perhaps the most challenging thing you will ever do in a disciplined routine way. There are many paths to practicing mindfulness, including meditation, mindful movement or yoga, awareness of the breath, being in nature, mountain biking, trail running, rock climbing or any activity that requires your complete and utter focused attention.

So, why should you even attempt being mindful in a disciplined and routine manner? Because, in my opinion, the documented benefits of being mindful can lower or eliminate the negative effects of “Bad Stress” or “Chronic Stress” in some really powerful ways, including:

- *Peace of Mind* by increasing the levels of dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin, which are naturally produced during the relaxed state of your parasympathetic nervous system;
- *Better Focus* to have an enhanced ability to sustain your attention despite distractions and with your increased concentration there is a substantial increase in productivity;
- *Less Stressed*, so you are able to cope with challenges, changes and obstacles in your life and work;
- *Improvement in Immunity*, so you can avoid illness and stay healthier;
- *Less Reactive* during conflicts;
- *More Present* during conversations, so you miss less critical information and data;
- *Better Memory*;
- *Increased Self-Awareness*, so you can see destructive habits within yourself and change them;
- *Better Work-Life Integration*, as you are mindfully creating a schedule that makes time for the things you love the most in life;

## Lost in a maze of numbers?



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- *Being More Creative* and able to engage in deeper thinking because it is the space in our minds that allows us to be creative and imaginative;
- *Enhanced Clarity* with the ability to actually see what is occurring without judgment; and
- *Increased Compassion* and empathy as you increase your ability to have a deep understanding and kindness towards yourself and others.

Mica Tucker and Samara Anderson are co-chairs of the VBA Attorney Well-Being Section. Please consider joining the online community so we can share experiences and support each other. If you are ready to dive into the mindfulness pool and need someone to help support you, please contact Samara Anderson at thehappyhuman-projects@yahoo.com to discuss opportunities to incorporate mindfulness and wellness into your stressful lives as attorneys through workshops, courses or coaching.

