

Stress Advice for Women Lawyers You Won't Read Anywhere Else



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I have had a love-hate relationship with stress my entire life. For the most part, I like me some stress. It keeps me focused, helps me generate ideas, and gives me a boost of energy. Unfortunately, I have also experienced the downside of stress, having been a high-achieving, competitive, go-getter for as long as I can remember. As busy women lawyers and law students, I'm sure you can relate. Your drive and ability to get things done helps you advocate for clients, close deals, tackle complex challenges, multitask with ease, and keep your families running, but it also makes you susceptible to bad stress. Why? You strive for excellence (often, perfection), are independent, focused, and responsive, but you also tend to over-commit, fail to focus on your own needs, and be somewhat inflexible and overly serious. In addition, you rarely slow down which means your tank is often running on or close to empty.

It wasn't until I burned out that I actually became aware of how few resources existed which identified, much less discussed, the impact that occurs when stress and high-achieving women collide. The fields of medicine, performance psychology, positive psychology and behavioral economics offer interesting insight.

Dirk Hellhammer, noted stress researcher, and Doctors Stephanie McClellan and Beth Hamilton have identified four stress types that specifically impact women. They are as follows:

1. Fried and frazzled. You are generally calm, but when stress hits, you have a big response. You are extremely sensitive to stress.
2. Life observer. This is the most rare stress type marked by an extreme state where you feel like you're living in a bubble watching life pass you by.
3. Constant overdrive. Your engine is always revved. You have a hard time sitting still, often tap your feet or hands, and frequently clench or grind your teeth.
4. Sprint and crash. Stress keeps you focused and running so you can close deals, prepare for trial, and manage all of your clients, but once the stress is reduced or eliminated, you crash.

Do these categories sound familiar? Whether you're one specific stress type or a blend of a couple, here are five ways to prevent bad stress:

1. Think like an athlete. Jim Loehr, co-author of the Harvard Business Review article entitled, "The Making of a Corporate Athlete," describes an ideal performance state as prolonged and sustained high performance over time. To achieve this, you must become adept at moving between energy expenditure (stress) and energy renewal (recovery).
2. Rejuvenate – often. Easier said than done, but in order to get the energy renewal required to live and work in an ideal performance state, you must refill your tank. Research shows that little mini renewals are needed about every two hours. Walking down the hall to grab a beverage, stretching, listening to music for a few minutes, or shifting your attention will give you the energy you need to finish important tasks in a productive manner. In addition to daily mini renewals, you need rejuvenate outside of work. Make a list of the different ways you like to rejuvenate and do something from that list each week.

3. Be a satisficer, not a maximizer. We live in a culture that rewards perfection, which is a state that is not sustainable. The pressure is on to make the perfect decision, write the perfect brief, or pick the perfect product (called maximizing). According to Dr. Barry Schwartz, this feeling stems from the fact that we have too many choices in today's modern world (when was the last time you felt overwhelmed buying a new pair of jeans, makeup, or even food because of the sheer number of choices that existed?) According to Dr. Schwartz, too much choice not only makes our decisions harder but also makes it more likely that we'll end up regretting our selection. As a result, eliminate choices by setting standards – what is your “good enough” (called satisficing)? Good mentors and clients don't want you to be perfect, they want you to do a good job and be you.

4. Establish goals that promote flow. Flow is another way of describing those moments when you're “in the zone.” You are at your most productive when you're in this state and time flies by. Flow happens when you find the right level of task challenge for your skill level and you're pursuing something that is intrinsically motivating. If you miss that sweet spot, you will either be bored (the task challenge is too easy) or anxious (the task challenge is too hard).

5. Pay attention to positive emotion. As lawyers, you are surrounded by pessimism and negative emotion. Barbara Fredrickson's groundbreaking research on positive emotion shows that those who most frequently cultivate it broaden and build their personal resources. Specifically, they have an increased capacity to find solutions to tough problems, improved health, and stronger relationships. Her research shows that in order to see the benefits that positive emotion can bring, you should be at or near a positivity ratio of 3:1 (positive to negative emotions). To find out where you're at visit www.positivityratio.com. The legal profession needs more of you – strong, talented women who are able to navigate the pressure that comes with being a high-achieving professional. These tools will help you not only succeed, but also thrive, allowing you to both live and work at a sustainable pace.

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