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Clear Mind, Healthy Work

Skills and Professional Development



I recently attended a conference where the luncheon speaker gave a presentation to satisfy California's "competence" continuing legal education requirements (formerly, substance abuse). He talked about how the legal profession exhibits high levels of alcohol and drug abuse; that suicide was the number one leading cause of death of lawyers; and that it is the nature of people who seek law as a profession coupled with the competitiveness of law school and the career that underlies all this.

He went on to tell us that stress is natural and a good thing in the right context; namely, for survival. Stress is what made it possible for us to run when confronted with a saber-toothed tiger. We're born with a flight or fight nature. But what has happened over the centuries is that most of us are no longer facing those types of daily life or death situations and the need to use our fight or flight response is relatively nonexistent. However, the response reflex has not diminished and it rears its head in situations that don't really call for it.

For instance, it's a Friday around 4:30 pm and you are in the middle of wrapping up to head out for your weekend and dinner with your family. In walks your boss with a project that quite frankly you both know should have been delegated to you earlier in the day. She says you can go as soon as it's done. The project will take a minimum of two hours and your dinner reservations are for 5:30. What do you do? How do you handle the mounting anger that is welling up inside you?

Most of us will accept the work as assigned and make the phone call telling our families that dinner will be delayed or postponed, something they are no doubt used to. Others will accept the work grudgingly and might even grumble about it to our bosses. Yet a few others might be more assertive and take the stand that we were just heading out the door and will take care of it over the weekend or first thing Monday morning. And still a few others might simply say it will have to wait. The response we take depends on our personalities, our relationships with our bosses, and our willingness to deal

with conflict on the front end or be stressed for a period of time and deal with conflict down the line.

I doubt that it is lost on anyone that stress works for and against us. When it is managed well and motivates us to get work done, it is positive. When it weighs us down, makes us irritable and begins to impact our health and productivity, that stress is negative. So, what to do about stress?

When possible, avoid it. I'm sure you're thinking easier said than done, but as I listened to the speaker I realized it was easier done than we've generally allowed. When looking about at the point of stress and our fight or flight response, the vast majority of the reasons that we experience stress are concocted in our minds. It's not that there are not situations that create stress in our lives, but rather that we need to look at our situations and decide whether being stressed is the appropriate response, or if we've unnecessarily created stress by viewing things in a less than optimal way.

The challenge for lawyers in particular in avoiding or managing stress is that we are paid to find the risks, the challenges, and then do the forward thinking for our clients and that's where much of stress comes from — worrying about things that have not or may not happen. One of the things we can do is attempt to separate that aspect of our jobs from who we are as people. We have to intentionally try to keep work separate from our personal lives and live in the moment as much as possible.

One of the ways we can accomplish this is to take breaks throughout the day to just be and let our clients' matters wash over us. The luncheon speaker walked us through an exercise of sitting comfortably, closing our eyes and counting backward from 100 to one. He cautioned us that it was not a race to see who reached one first, but who reached one last. Further, after about five minutes, he simply said you all just meditated. He demystified the process of how to introduce a five-minute meditation practice into our day, and explained the benefit of taking any stress we can off the table and off our shoulders.

We all live busy lives, but when we can clear our minds even for just a little while, it makes for healthier lives and healthier work.

[Whitnie Wiley](#)



Former ACC Docket Columnist

Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.