



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Addicted to Stress? Join the club....

“Stress is an ignorant state. It believes that everything is an emergency.” ~Natalie Goldberg

Due to hectic schedules and stressful work, judges, lawyers, and law students in particular need to carve out time to rest and relax. The jury is in on the health benefits of taking time out, even if it is just for ten minutes in-between appointments, taking a lunch hour, or relaxing before bedtime. Taking a full vacation to recuperate is the ideal, but resting and having fun once a year can't possibly combat the stress of the other 51 weeks. In addition, how many of us are still doing work on that vacation, or simply can't let go of our seemingly never ending thoughts about our to-do list? Being constantly on the go (physically and mentally) is a hard habit to kick. In fact, it is an addiction.

Our nervous systems have an amazing ability to allow us to keep up with the demands of daily life. Waking up at a certain time, getting the kids out the door for school, catching up on voicemails on the way to work, addressing e-mails and briefs at work, studying for exams, legal research, planning for dinner, trying to get some exercise in for the day, never ending meetings, etc., etc. The problem is that in order to meet all of these demands, our nervous system is assuming that there is some sort of threat in our environment that is requiring the release of adrenaline and other chemicals. These chemicals, and the biochemical chain reaction that results from their release, lead to mental and physical illness if the stress response is not allowed a daily respite. In the long run, the inflammation response in the body leads to issues such as diabetes, obesity, cognitive impairment, agitation, depression, and on-going anxiety. Simply speaking, on-going stress leads to a drastic decrease in the quality of our lives, and is essentially an endogenous addiction to the very chemicals that help us rise to the challenge of the demands in our lives in the first place.

When we become addicted to the chemicals released during our stress response, the cells of our body crave them. When the cells of the body crave adrenaline, but our environment isn't stressful at the moment, our minds will make up a story so we get agitated. We get reactive and angry about things that normally wouldn't upset us. Rather than shrugging off the fact that the car next to us just cut us off by thinking “maybe that driver was just in a hurry,” we degrade ourselves to typical road rage responses. Or, while on vacation with our family or friends, we find we can't relax because our body is so used to being stressed that we feel uncomfortable. So, we become snappy and agitated with those around us for no reason.

Some simple questions you can ask yourself to determine if you are addicted to stress:

- **Do I blame other people or circumstances for how I am feeling?**
 - If you are addicted to stress, your mind will produce thoughts that make you angry enough to produce the adrenaline your body is craving. Therefore, it is not actually the person who cut you off in traffic that “made” you angry. It was your addiction to adrenaline that dictated your emotional response to that situation. When you react to situations or people with a “knee jerk” type of emotional reaction, take a mental step back. Take a breath. Don’t let the addiction of your cells determine how you respond to the world around you.
- **Does my mind race at night with to-do lists for the next day?**
 - Part of the stress response is to prepare for potential future danger. Take the time to remind yourself that you will be able to take care of the future starting tomorrow morning. Write down your list or your thoughts, and put them away for the evening.
- **Do I usually feel deflated, exhausted and sometimes depressed after a busy day at work?**
 - What goes up, must come down. The body releases an arsenal of chemicals to compensate for the stress response in order to help us heal. However, when the whole system is taxed and our stress response gets more and more extreme, we can get sick or suffer from depression. Rather than getting to the point where your body and mind literally give out, take short breaks to breath during the day, plan alone time when you come home to decompress, or exercise for 30 minutes to an hour.
- **Of the 5 regular emotions I experience in a day, are one or two of those related to agitation, irritability, anger, rage, feeling overwhelmed, panic, or anxiety?**
 - Most people are addicted to their emotions. Therefore, we tend to experience the same types of emotions on a daily basis. Are the emotional states you choose to feel more related to negative stress, like the ones listed above, or are they more related to calm/peaceful/humor/excitement/joy/relaxation? Practice feeling a wider range of emotions on a daily basis. This will not only increase what therapists call your emotional intelligence, but it will increase your ability to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, and overcome challenges.

Did you answer yes to one or more of these? If you did, don't worry. So did the majority of judges, lawyers, and law students. The solution? Become mindful and aware of your stress. Just like any addiction, we have to spot it before we can do anything about it. Track your emotional states in a day. Rather than becoming immersed in the emotion, or feeling out of control, name the feeling. Experience what it feels like to have adrenaline in your system controlling your emotions. Subtly, and over time, you will begin to choose a different response. Ask yourself, "Rather than getting upset about this situation, can I see the humor in it?" or "Is there a different way I can respond to this?" The very act of hitting the PAUSE button on the emotional state puts a halt to the release of stress chemicals. It also helps you rewire your brain so you are not running on autopilot so much.

See the links below for information about managing an addiction to stress and for increasing your emotional intelligence:

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/eq5_raising_emotional_intelligence.htm

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mequilibrium/stress-addiction_b_3604754.html?utm_hp_ref=tw

http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/StressManagement/FourWaystoDealWithStress/Four-Ways-to-Deal-with-Stress_UCM_307996_Article.jsp

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