



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Adaptability Reduces Stress

I don't think of myself as unbreakable. Perhaps I'm just rather flexible and adaptable.

~ Aung San Suu Kyi

For those of us who have long to-do lists and “very important places to be,” changes in our schedule can be upsetting and stressful. From the unexpected traffic jam or flat tire to health issues or a last minute assignment, everyday life seems to get in the way of our plans. The truth is, we are constantly bombarded by circumstances that we have no control over, especially in law school. How do you manage your reaction to sudden changes in your personal, professional, or academic schedule? Can you find something to be grateful for in the midst of being “out of control?” Being flexible and adaptable when our plans change due to unforeseen circumstances helps us stay mentally, emotionally, and physically healthy. One way to accomplish this is to focus on what you appreciate more than what might be “going wrong” in a given situation. Several university studies (California, Connecticut, Ohio State, and Carnegie Mellon University) suggest that people experience many health benefits from consciously meditating on what they appreciate in life, even in difficult or stressful times. When we can find that “silver lining,” and adjust our perspective to be more appreciative than grumpy, cranky, or negative, our body rewards us. People from these studies experienced:

- Reduction in chronic pain,
- Catching less colds,
- Having calmer nervous systems,
- Less anxiety and negative emotions that lead to stress related diseases,
- Increased immune function (specifically increased wound healing time),
- Reduction in risk of experiencing a second heart attack,
- Getting more and better sleep; and a
- More optimistic view of life.

See what happens when you look at situations for something to appreciate, rather than looking for something to be critical or judgmental about. A helpful exercise in accomplishing this is to mentally and emotionally let go of the things that do not serve your best interest and the things that you cannot control:

1. Start by writing down things that bother you. It can be anything, big or small.
2. Add things that make you feel guilty or shameful, even if they happened years ago.

3. Include any negativity in your life that is out of your control, such as other people’s problems or choices or how other people behave around you.
4. Add anything else you feel isn’t serving you in your life and then take just a few minutes to examine this list.

Think about the emotional, behavioral, and physical reactions you have to holding on to these things. Clinging to negativity, grudges, and anger takes a lot of energy, and it compromises your immune system and your cognitive abilities. See the chart below for examples:

Emotional Symptoms	Behavioral Symptoms	Physical Symptoms
Depression, anger, nervousness, tension, irritability, overly serious, diminished sense of humor	Withdrawing from family or friends, excessiveness, avoidance of issues, scapegoating, passive aggressiveness	Headaches, digestive problems, frequent colds, poor concentration, change in sleep habits, adrenaline rushes followed by fatigue

Allow yourself to sit with the emotions, thoughts, and reactions that the topics on this list bring up for you. Identify what you learned from the situation, identify your role in the situation, and put yourself in the other person’s shoes before you let it go. Understand that your stress hurts you more than the person or situation that is the source of the stress. So name it, put wings on it, and let it fly!

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