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# Feeling Exhausted Lately?

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“A day of worry is more exhausting than a week of work.”

~John Lubbock<sup>1</sup>

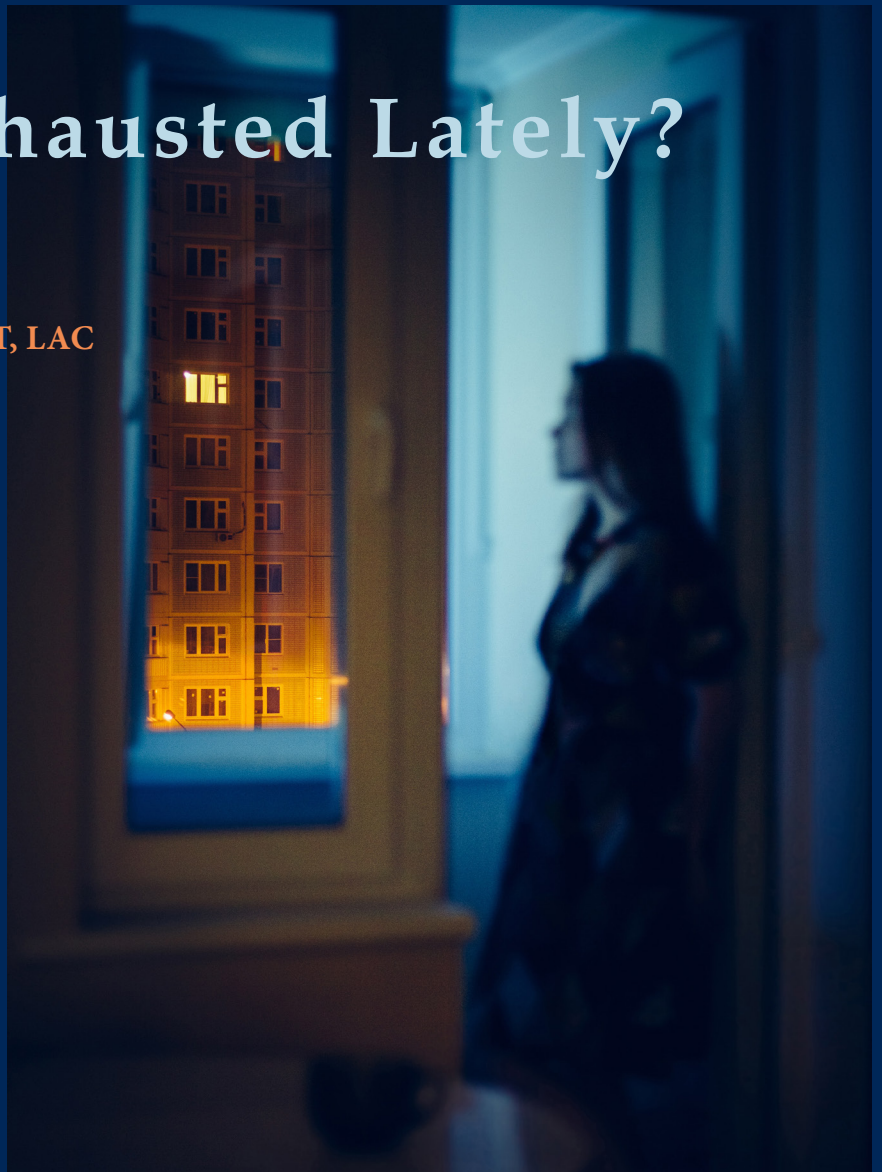


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**M**any lawyers complain of feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and exhausted. The nature of legal work means that attorneys will spend most of their time responding to external demands that require mental focus and emotional energy. Over time, we can become depleted from feeling overwhelmed, experiencing anxiety or depression, becoming isolated, or feeling a general lack of love, joy, and happiness. The strain on our cognitive ability, emotional stability, and nervous system can create physical and mental illness, the potential for client harm, or at the very least, a compromised work product. Additionally, this unmanaged stress can compromise our relationships with friends and family.

## Common Causes of Fatigue

Because of the large amount of pressure attorneys feel, many do not believe they have the time to deal with their personal stress or unhappiness. Thus we create a situation where we are “running on empty” for long periods of time. Below is a list of common causes of attorney burnout and fatigue. Do any of them resonate with you?

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- ☛ Taking on many different roles, or wearing many masks, throughout the day. The more roles we take on, and the more personality traits we exhibit as we fulfil our responsibilities, the more exhausted we can become. In addition, many lawyers are in the “sandwich generation,” meaning we are taking care of both our children and elderly parents while working and trying to manage personal relationships.
- ☛ Being micromanaged. When we feel like we don’t have control over decision making—when we have to “dance to someone else’s tune”—our physical health suffers. Whether at work or home, healthy environments support individuality and foster creativity.
- ☛ Neglecting to set boundaries. Many lawyers are people pleasers or perfectionists. But when we take on more than is realistic and healthy, and when we don’t learn to say no when we need to, we ultimately experience burnout and resentment.
- ☛ Suffering from medical or emotional/mental health issues. Exhaustion is a symptom of many common health issues (depression, anxiety, chronic fatigue, diabetes, anemia, thyroid problems, sleep apnea, etc.). And when we are tired, it is even more challenging to engage in the self-care necessary to treat these issues. This becomes a vicious cycle that leaves us depleted.

The truth is, anyone who works in a helping profession is going to become overwhelmed or stressed at some point. And we all go through cycles of feeling down, irritable, or just negative in general. If those cycles don’t balance themselves with periods of joy and laughter, or if we aren’t successfully integrating our work and home life, we might end up sabotaging our health, our careers, or our personal relationships.

## Finding the Balance

The key is to take action long before the tipping point occurs—when chronic occupational stress becomes long-term exhaustion, also known as burnout. Investing our mental and emotional energy in others doesn’t have to deplete us. Here are several ways we can take care of ourselves:

- ☛ Learn Calming Techniques. When you calm yourself down, or when you can have a compassionate and calming effect on others, you produce serotonin, a neurotransmitter that produces relaxation and calm. Individuals who know how to self-soothe and handle their emotions in a mature and mindful way have a greater impact on their environment and naturally produce more serotonin.
  - ☛ Be yourself. Sounds easy, right? This is trickier than it seems. First, we have to know who we are, and then we have to be dedicated to speaking and behaving in ways that align with that self (which is also, by the way, a fluid and changing concept since we are always learning and growing). Start with a small step: begin to speak your thoughts or true opinions more often with people you trust. Also, when you feel overwhelmed and need to rest, look at your to-do list and learn to say “no” to demands that are not immediate priorities. Establish boundaries to take care of
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yourself. It takes a lot of energy to suppress your ideas or your true personality, and to wear different masks to please (or confront) those around you. That is an unnecessary drain on your energy.

☛ Don't compare yourself to others. We all learned how to speak and behave by watching those around us, either emulating the traits of those we admired or developing the opposite of those we didn't. As adults, we no longer need to compare ourselves to others, nor should we rely on (usually incorrect) assumptions about what other people think of us. When our choices and behaviors are dictated by what we think others want of us, we aren't being authentic; rather, we're trying to meet what we believe is someone else's expectation. The bottom line? Be who you want to be, not who you were taught to be.

☛ Change your opinion of vulnerability. Being vulnerable is a strength, as is asking for help when we need it. Be honest about how you are feeling and recognize that being human means we all have limitations. People who believe they are exempt from this rule end up feeling isolated and often sabotage their professional or personal lives in some way.

☛ Appreciate yourself and others. Appreciate who you are, because your opinion of yourself is the only one that really counts. Appreciating others is also important; when we recognize other people's uniqueness and special qualities rather than being judgmental or jealous of them, not only does our mood improve, but our cognitive abilities improve as well! Often we feel too rushed to give a few words of congratulations or praise to those around us, or to ourselves. Give at least three compliments per day to those around you, and spend at least a few minutes a day reflecting on the pride you feel in your own accomplishments, particularly if you have been berating yourself or focusing on what's going wrong lately. Shining a light on what's going well instead of what's going wrong will improve your ability to problem solve and your overall health.

☛ Create quiet time for yourself. If you have created a personal or professional life where you are always there for everyone else, you have to be particularly proactive in setting your limits and boundaries. During an especially demanding, high-paced workday, we can end up losing ourselves in other people's needs. We all need time every day to relax and to refrain from responding to anything from the external world. Take just 10 minutes every two hours to breathe, center yourself, and collect your thoughts. Make sure to do this in an environment where your technology is either turned off or muted so there are no distractions.

## Prioritize Your Health

Your well-being is the most important aspect of your career and personal life, yet for many of us that is the first thing sacrificed when we are stressed or overwhelmed. Self-care is not optional; it is essential. It just takes a few small adjustments in your outlook or routine to get the ball rolling, so don't let a busy schedule get in your way! As you invest your time and energy into helping others, remember that making the investment in yourself has the highest rate of return—not just for you, but for everyone around you. ●

### NOTES

1. Lubbock, *The Use of Life* (1894).

Sarah Myers, Esq., LMFT, LAC, is the Executive Director of the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). COLAP is the free, confidential and independent well-being program for the legal community of Colorado. For more information, go to [www.coloradolap.org](http://www.coloradolap.org). For a confidential consultation, discussion about your stressors, or to obtain helpful resources, contact COLAP at 303-986-3345 or [info@coloradolap.org](mailto:info@coloradolap.org).