
PEAK PERFORMANCE & STRESS MANAGEMENT

BY CARRIE BOWERS, CAS

The glorification of stress in the legal profession, a myth that assumes that if we compromise our well-being it will improve our performance, has been disproved by science again and again.

Committing to a career in law is akin to training for and running a marathon: there are strategies to enhance performance, prevent injury, and keep your passion lit in order accomplish your goals and reap the benefits of your hard work. Serious and dedicated runners know injury and overextension of joints, tendons, and muscles is to be avoided. Long-term overexertion can lead to progression overload and accumulated fatigue. Lack of preparation and “warming-up,” poor training habits, and insufficient recovery or “cooling-down” can result in adrenal fatigue and acute injuries. Boredom or feeling plateaued may lead to eventual disinterest, as the rewards are no longer worth the effort, and runners may abandon their practice all together. For people who love running, or the rewards of running, pushing themselves too hard can waste months of effort and training. Even worse, a serious injury could force you out of the running world for a long time, if not entirely.

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How does this relate to a legal career? Law school, the bar exam, and early years in practice are a mixture of training and main events. Then you review the results of your efforts and recalibrate your training, focus, and motivation to stay engaged. Maybe you got into the “race” to make a difference in the world, to assist others through difficult times, for the income opportunities, and/or for the challenge. Remind yourself of how your goals motivated your participation in, and training for, the marathon of the practice of law. But what if you are finding yourself continually exhausted, foggy-minded, lacking in patience with colleagues, clients, or family, or feeling anxious, moody, or depressed? Different from runners, many stressed or burned out attorneys don’t or can’t acknowledge their depleted condition.

Historically, many members of the legal community have regarded their stress levels and lack of work/life balance as almost a badge of prestige. Imagine if a runner bragged about how many injuries or the severity of an injury in such a way; it would be like bragging about a failure of preparation. The glorification of stress in the legal profession, a myth that assumes that if we compromise our well-being it will improve our performance, is an antiquated and inaccurate narrative that has been disproved by science again and again, and yet many attorneys buy into this myth. Neurologically speaking, when stress accumulates, it becomes harder to maintain both passion for your career and compassion for yourself and others. If you are going too hard, too long, and too much, you are at risk for burn out. Working 60 or more hours a week is not a sustainable situation, regardless of how many say they have done it for years. It begs the questions: how much of life have you missed out on during that time and what is your blood pressure/cholesterol/ or cortisol levels like these days? The last thing you want to pursue is continual peak performance.



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After over two years of a global pandemic that completely altered our lives, we continue to face local, national, and global events that can distract and devastate us, taxing our resiliency. Many of us feel overwhelmed and even burned out. Yet we have to attend to both work and our personal lives while attempting to juggle the “extra” stressors. We all need to support our well-being and mental health during these times. Perhaps you overlooked the importance of pacing yourself, warming-up, or cooling-down. Perhaps you are experiencing the effects of accumulated stress. When stress accumulates, it becomes harder to maintain passion for your career and compassion for yourself and others. If you are going too hard, too long, and too much, you are at risk for mental, cognitive, and even physical health ramifications.

- ☛ **Train up:** Don't jump into marathons or trail running – build up to them. If you have a trial coming up, or other deadlines with massive deliverables, don't wait until the last minute to get busy. Increase your workload slowly over the preceding weeks and ensure you are well-rested and fueled on the big day. Don't jump from 8-hour workdays to a solid week of 16-hour stints of manic production-you will just hurt yourself.
 - ☛ **Keep it light most days:** Runners can experience adrenal depletion if they constantly run at their peak. It's called "peak" for a reason – by definition it is not sustainable. Instead, know when to hold a solid, steady pace and when to rev it up.
 - ☛ **Listen to your body:** Where does it hurt? When is it harder to breathe? Being mindful of the signals your body is sending is key to mitigating stress. If you are getting sick, having chronic pain, or other issues such as anxiety, depression, mental fog, or mood swings – this is your body trying to tell you something. Chronic stress is likely to blame. Runners can't go at top speed for too long, and your body likewise was not designed to endure long-term stress.
 - ☛ **Rest, Refuel, Recover:** The intense schedules, long hours, and the amount of sustained mental concentration that the legal profession demands means taking time off to recharge is a necessity, not a luxury. Get enough sleep, eat well, and maintain a habit of physical activity (it doesn't need to be running!). Schedule time during each day to get outside or just move around a little bit. After large deadlines, trials, or other events, take a day of personal time to do something you enjoy. These breaks are essential to stress recovery and stress resilience.
- Training, prepping, or changing paths can be difficult, but not as difficult as bearing the burden of long-term mental and physical stress. Talents may be pre-determined, but skills are learned and habituated through practice. For lawyers and judges there are rewards, but the profession is ultimately one of service and hard work. If you are committed to doing right by your clients and the law itself, it is your duty as an attorney to keep yourself fit for practice: limber, rested, and fully hydrated for the road ahead. Not only will you enjoy your career longer and recuperate faster from the uphill sections, you will also have energy for other activities beyond the race path. 🌿

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