
Most attorneys have felt, at least at some point in their career, that they were underperforming, that they were “winging it,” that they knew less than those around them, and that their mistakes were unacceptable, shameful, or embarrassing. We are, as a group, extraordinarily hard on ourselves, and it can be near impossible for a person to engage a sense of humor under those circumstances because the two abilities are located in different parts of the brain.

Some members of the legal community deal with these pressures by covering them up with bravado, gossiping about others, spreading fear or panic, and, in extreme cases, bullying behaviors. But most of us cope by working long hours, double-checking emails we’ve already sent, agonizing over the brief, and spending too much time second-guessing ourselves, or berating ourselves for past mistakes. And some of us cope by emotionally numbing, isolating, and self-medicating with drugs or alcohol.

Lightening Up

There’s no magic solution for coping in extraordinarily stressful times, or for behavioral health issues like imposter syndrome, perfectionism, anxiety, depression, and any of the other common side effects of being well-educated, and achievement oriented. There are, however, several daily practices that are free and don’t take much time. Research shows that each of these can reduce our suffering and increase and improve our productivity, efficacy, relationships, and quality of life. Try some of these exercises when your seriousness and stress are getting in your way:

1. “Though you can see when you’re wrong, you know, you can’t always see when you’re right.”— Billy Joel.⁵ When you catch a mistake or an error, ask yourself what was done correctly or right, and focus on what you can learn rather than on what was done wrong. If possible, try to have some amusement and humor about mistakes, or at least find something ironic about the situation.



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2. “Remember that if you are feeling like an impostor, it means you have some degree of success in your life that you are attributing to luck. Try instead to turn that feeling into one of gratitude.”— Arlin Cunci.⁶ Especially during moments of distress, take several deep breaths and come up with at least three things in the moment that you are grateful for or appreciative of. Research shows that people who focus on what they appreciate have higher resiliency to stress.
3. “Don’t let the sound of your own wheels drive you crazy; lighten up while you still can.”—Jackson Browne and Glenn Fry.⁷ When things seem overwhelming, repeat this mantra: “This is not the end of the world, it seems much worse than it is, and I have the resources and the problem-solving ability to figure this out.” Then distract yourself with something else, preferably something enjoyable. When you are no longer upset about the situation, you will be able to find the solution.

Conclusion

4. “Joy is the most vulnerable emotion we experience. And if you cannot tolerate joy, what you do is you start dress rehearsing tragedy.” — Brené Brown.⁸ When you find yourself focusing on what could go wrong, imagine how things would look if they were going really well to balance out the negative.
5. “Without leaps of imagination or dreaming, we lose the excitement of possibilities. Dreaming, after all, is a form of planning.”—Gloria Steinem.⁹ Spend at least a few minutes every day focusing on your dreams and aspirations. They can be big or small, but create lists of them, or a vision board. Or simply put inspirational images and quotes in visible areas, like your workstation, to remind yourself of possibilities when you feel stuck or stagnant.

It is estimated that while children laugh upward of 300 times a day, the average adult only laughs between 15 and 25 times a day. When speaking to legal audiences about the health benefits of laughing, I’ll often ask attendees to estimate this number for judges and lawyers. Responses have ranged from negative five to two times a day. While the work we do is important and can have serious consequences, it doesn’t mean you have to take yourself too seriously. And, while at any given time the world might seem to be falling apart, there is always something we can focus on to balance the “doom and gloom” with some level of positive engagement, joy, and interest. In fact, you serve everyone in your life better when you lighten up; after all, your resiliency, grit, stress hardiness, intelligence, cognitive abilities, and professionalism rely on this ability!🌸

NOTES

1. McCarten, “A (not so) scientific experiment on laughter,” (TEDx Nov. 2014), <https://singjupost.com/anthony-mccarten-on-laughter-at-tedxmunichen-transcript/>
2. Fox, “Stress Makes You Stupid (The Neuroscience of Survival)” (Jan. 26, 2019), <https://alexander-fox.medium.com/stress-makes-you-stupid-the-neuroscience-of-survival-8c19c25b0f3d>
3. Richard, “Herding Cats: The Lawyer Personality Revealed” (2002), https://www.lawyerbrain.com/sites/default/files/caliper_herding_cats.pdf
4. Cuncic, “Imposter Syndrome and Social Anxiety Disorder,” Verywell (Updated on May 23, 2022, Dec. 9, 2019), <https://www.verywellmind.com/imposter-syndrome-and-social-anxiety-disorder-4156469>.
5. Lyrics to “Vienna” (1977).
6. Cuncic, “Imposter Syndrome and Social Anxiety Disorder,” Verywell (Updated on May 23, 2022, Dec. 9, 2019), <https://www.verywellmind.com/imposter-syndrome-and-social-anxiety-disorder-4156469>.
7. Lyrics to “Take it Easy,” 1972.
8. Okura, “Brené Brown: ‘Joy Is The Most Vulnerable Emotion We Experience,” (Updated Dec. 6, 2017), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/brene-brown-joy-numbing-oprah_n_4116520
9. Steinem, “News,” Gloria Steinem (May 25, 2022), <http://www.gloriasteinem.com/news>

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