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Seven Ways to Help Lawyers Deal With the Stress of 2020

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Special to the Legal

This has been a particularly stressful year for everyone, lawyers included. We have had to figure out how to have videoconferences with judges and clients and adapt to trying a case via telephone. Programs for video conferencing in many counties are different, and as attorneys we are expected to not only learn how to use these applications well, but also explain to clients how to navigate them.

After being shut down for almost two and a half months, the reopening of courthouses created other stressors for attorneys. Our schedules are now jam-packed with rescheduled and newly scheduled hearings. At my firm, a family law practice, we are managing a large influx of new clients who determined they would like to file for divorce during the pandemic or are trying to deal with resulting custody issues. It is easy to feel overwhelmed as a young attorney at a time like this. Here are seven habits I have adopted over the years that have proven to be helpful in my practice, during regular periods and especially now:

- **Set "away" messages to set response expectations.**

Like many offices, we use Outlook for our emails. I once worked in an office where we were not permitted to use the automatic reply feature when we knew we would be out of the office (even for vacations). Although I do periodically check my emails while away in case of emergencies, this would leave clients unaware that I was on vacation and would not be responding immediately. This is not fair to the client or you. I now make it a practice to set automatic replies when I am away or know I will be in court for most of the day. If I am in court with one client, they deserve my undivided attention. If I am away, clients will know to not expect an immediate reply. In case of emergency, the auto reply will direct them how to obtain help right away.



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- **Keep your workspace clean.**

Whether you are back in the office full time or working from home, keeping your work area clean is good for your peace of mind. When things are cluttered it creates more stress and ultimately makes you less productive. Try and clear your desk at the end of every day or at least when you leave for the weekends on Friday afternoons. Coming back to a messy desk on Monday morning does not set the right mindset for the week. In addition, it is never fun to look for that one piece of paper you are missing at the end of the day after touching many files. Most of us do not have an assistant like in the movie "The Devil Wears Prada" who knows exactly what you mean or appreciates when you request, "Find me that piece of paper I had in my hand yesterday morning."

- **Set a time at night when you stop checking emails.**

When I was newly practicing, I would often check my emails all the time, including right before I would try to go to sleep. This would often result in insomnia as I would be thinking about the email the client sent and what I need to do the next day. I try and set a time when I will stop checking my emails at night so I can get proper rest for the next day.

Also, I try and resist the temptation to check my emails when I first wake up in the morning. Turning away from emails during a set period of time affords you the ability to step back and recharge, giving you the rest you need to better represent your clients.

“Taking simple but significant steps each day to take care of yourself and better manage the demands on your time will result in well-served clients, a stronger practice, and a happier you.”

- **Be courteous with opposing counsel.**

Always go above and beyond to establish yourself as an affable professional to your colleagues—especially opposing counsel. Whenever possible, grant reasonable accommodations when asked. You never know when you yourself will need the same courtesy and, as the saying goes, "what goes around, comes around." In January, an opportunity for a free vacation with my husband popped up, but the opposing attorney rejected my request to continue a discovery hearing scheduled a month away. Even after explaining the circumstances, the attorney still refused to agree to my request (and who knew that March would pretty much put an end to vacations?). When you extend courtesies, they will often come back to you. This makes for a happier practice and stronger connections.

- **Set realistic goals for each day.**

You are not going to complete every item on your to-do list. Be realistic with yourself about what you can accomplish in a day. That way you do not feel like a failure when you leave knowing all the boxes have not been checked off. Try to accomplish the items that are causing you the most stress and anxiety first thing in the morning. You can leave at the end of the day knowing they have been completed.

- **Use a meditation app.**

I have never been a big fan of meditation or yoga. During a particularly stressful period early in my practice, I experienced an extended bout of insomnia. It was during this time that I discovered the meditation app "Calm." The app offers a number of different programs to help deal with stress and calm anxiety and even sleep stories to help you drift off at bedtime. I have found this program to be extremely helpful when I encounter especially busy or demanding times.

- **Don't be afraid to take a vacation.**

Most law firms offer paid time off. As a young attorney, do not be afraid to use this valuable time. Once, after I had selected vacation days for time I had saved between Christmas and New Year's, a former boss stated, "some of us do not need mommy time." He could not have been more wrong. Whether you have children or not, we all need time off. Spending time with our family and friends gives you a mental break, a sense of joy and a personal reset. Time away from work affords you the ability to return refreshed and reenergized, making you a better lawyer.

On New Year's Day 2020, no one could have imagined what would happen this year. It would have been unimaginable to judges or attorneys that courthouses would need to close for two and a half months. As we continue to adjust to this new, ever-evolving normal and adapt our practices while getting through this difficult time, it is important to manage stress and avoid feeling overwhelmed.

Taking simple but significant steps each day to take care of yourself and better manage the demands on your time will result in well-served clients, a stronger practice, and a happier you.