

“Nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so”

William Shakespeare

Developing resilience to stress for legal practitioners

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Stress is normal, even unusually high levels of stress; what is not normal is prolonged stress, particularly when it embodies uncertainty or feelings of loss of control. Normal, brief, stress helps us focus and perform at our best; long lasting stress gives rise to chronic anxiety, impaired performance and physical ill-health.

The legal practitioner’s workplace is unusually stressful: intrinsically adversarial, it may be threatening to those with an anxious pre-disposition; often uncertain, many experience restricted control over the nature, pace and scope of their work. The consequences of this chronic stress are seen in high rates of alcohol abuse





and increased incidence of depression and anxiety.

Groups particularly vulnerable to stress are:

- New practitioners, uncertain of their roles and capabilities.
- Older practitioners less able to meet pressures of urgency, perhaps with declining cognitive function, or with 'burnout'.
- Practitioners not progressing in their career, uncertain of their future, vulnerable to self-doubt and aware of their eroding professional status.
- Practitioners in difficulties—through lack of supervision or venturing into areas of uncertain skills, or through ill-health, social stress (often in relationships) or substance abuse.

Our response to stress, that leads to mental or physical ill-health, is shaped by our genetics, our environment and lifestyle, and by our habits of thinking.

Resilience, the ability to cope with stress, similarly has genetic, environmental and learnt components. As a profession, perfectionist traits are common and these are an example of genetic traits increasing vulnerability to stress. We cannot do much about our genetics, but making choices about

our environment, lifestyle and ways of thinking can maximise our resilience.

Remember: there is no one 'magic bullet' in managing stress and our response to it, and maintaining resilience comes from a holistic approach to health.

Physical resilience

Descartes got it wrong: maintaining a healthy body **is essential** to maintaining a healthy mind.

Diet

Eat the rainbow: Fruit and vegetables that are naturally brightly coloured are rich in antioxidants, especially the red, purple and green ones:

- Capsicum, carrots, sweetcorn, broccoli, bok choy
- Blueberries, redcurrants, blackberries, dark grapes.

Fibre rich foods: Healthy insides contribute directly to a healthy mind (*mens sana in viscera sano*). A vegetable-based diet with whole fruit, yoghurt (full fat, in moderation and preferably unsweetened) and aged cheese (not cooked cheese), help maintain healthy gut

microbes. Probiotic supplements with lactobacillus and bifidus can be helpful (but not every day).

Meat is a condiment: Beans are better!

Oh! And some **Omega 3** anyway you can.

Exercise

Even modest levels of aerobic exercise (... "heavy breathing" ...) reduce depression as well as maintain cardiovascular fitness. Including some muscle building activities delays or prevents onset of diabetes, even with central obesity.

Forty minutes, three times per week of aerobic cycling, swimming, walking/running, or gym workout has significant benefits—start low and increase slowly and have a GP check-up if over fifty, have health problems or a couch potato.

Sleep

Adequate sleep is necessary for both physical and mental health, but is quickly disturbed by anxiety or depression which break the 'habit of sleep'. Medications are useful in re-establishing the habit, but creating

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a ‘sleep friendly environment’ may be sufficient.

- Clock-set your body clock by getting outside in the afternoon sunshine every day for ten minutes.
- Consistent bedtime, to establish the habit of sleep, and consistent waking time (use an alarm if necessary).
- Comfortable bed and pillow, and comfortable physically—neither hungry nor overfull.
- Curtains to maintain darkness to let the body know it’s sleep time.
- Cool and comfortable room to trigger sleep onset.
- Calm mind, so no excitement/ exercise within two hours of bedtime. Write out a list of things to worry about tomorrow, not tonight. Try to keep the room quiet. If mindless TV or reading slows down your thoughts, do that.

- Caffeine free for at least four hours before bedtime, and avoid alcohol near bedtime as well. Remember chocolate can act like caffeine.
- Cigarettes—avoid near bedtime or if you wake up in the night.

Alcohol: ‘Less is more’ but a modest amount now and then is relaxing and improves social interaction. A bottle over dinner... each... is too much... if a regular event.

Cigarettes: Kill you... slowly. The choice is yours...

Ice, speed, MDMA, cannabis etc.: are expensive, addictive (and extremely hard to cease)... and likely to send you mad if you are genetically vulnerable... or you use too much.

Mental resilience

Never take life too seriously. No one ever gets out alive anyway.

Web and text-based treatment is very effective, but if it doesn’t seem to work or you like the personal touch, get a Mental Health Care Plan from your GP and see a clinical psychologist.

Particularly relevant to lawyers are:

- Mindhealthconnect: Government site providing links to many other sites¹

Anxiety and depression

Self-assessment

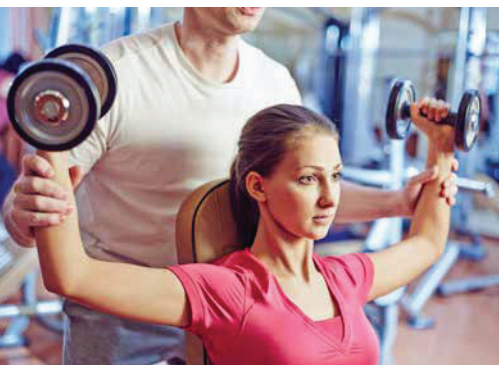
- Psychology Today: Existential anxiety (worries about life)²
- beyondblue: General risk for anxiety and depression³

Treatment

- NHS: Stress, anxiety and depression⁴
- MindSpot: Free online service for adults suffering from anxiety and depression⁵
- beyondblue: Education and support for anxiety and depression⁶
- Black Dog Institute: Education and self-assessment for depression⁷
- CRUFAD: Online self-assessment, education and treatment for anxiety and depression⁸
- MoodGYM: Self-assessment and treatment for depression (and stress)⁹

Perfectionism

- Centre for Clinical Interventions: Broad range of treatments, not just perfectionism¹⁰



- AnxietyBC: How to overcome perfectionism¹¹

Time management

- The University of New South Wales: Support with time management¹²
- Psychology Today: Time management¹³

Relaxation

- Western Sydney University: Relaxation recordings¹⁴
- University of Maryland Medical Centre: Relaxation techniques¹⁵

Mindfulness

Mindfulness tends to get dismissed as 'hippy meditation' but underpins the successes of many Olympic athletes, as well as evidence-based treatments for severe mental disorders. Mindfulness is a mental skill and can be learnt from a book but, like learning a sporting skill, reinforcing this self-learning with some expert teaching is quicker and more effective.

Books

- Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Golf*, 1979, Pan Book
- Russ Harris, *The Happiness Trap*, 2007, Exisle Publishing Australia
- Tobler & Herrmann, *The Rough Guide to Mindfulness*, 2013, Rough Guides

Courses and web resources

- Russ Harris: www.actmindfully.com.au/
- EASA: www.easa.org.au/pages/Training.html

Last words

Stigma

Times are long past when the mentally ill were thought to be possessed but stigma lingers on and is often the driver for career fear.



It is hard to educate the ignorant or argue with the prejudiced but remembering that mental illness, like asthma, cancer, diabetes, and most other chronic disorders, has the same genetic vulnerability and environmental factors can help us look others in the eye and “show ‘em”.

Career fear

Many of us stay in jobs we hate, or fail to speak out when we see bullying or bad decisions, or hold back putting our (good) ideas forward, or not asking for advancement, because we fear losing our job. We rationalise this by pointing at our mortgage, our children (and their schools), our car loan (the second Beamer), expectations we have of being a good breadwinner, a great single mum, a credit to our parents. We seek to be not only ‘in the group’ but also to have status, and the certainty of control over our lives that a steady income brings. This can create damaging stress that is perhaps the hardest of all to relieve. Overcoming career fear probably requires the expert assistance of a clinical psychologist—a directory of psychology services can be found on the Northern Territory PHN website.¹⁶

- 1 www.mindhealthconnect.org.au
- 2 http://psychologytoday.tests.psychtests.com/take_test.php?idRegTest=1597
- 3 www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/depression/signs-and-symptoms/anxiety-and-depression-checklist-k10
- 4 www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/low-mood-stress-anxiety.aspx
- 5 www.mindspot.org.au
- 6 www.beyondblue.org.au
- 7 www.blackdoginstitute.org.au
- 8 www.crufad.org/
- 9 <https://moodgym.anu.edu.au>
- 10 www.cci.health.wa.gov.au
- 11 www.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/Perfectionism.pdf (see also: www.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/)
- 12 <https://student.unsw.edu.au/support-time-management>
- 13 www.psychologytoday.com/basics/time-management
- 14 www.uws.edu.au/currentstudents/current_students/services_and_facilities/counselling_services/stress_and_your_wellbeing/relaxation_recordings
- 15 <http://umm.edu/programs/sleep/patients/relaxation>
- 16 www.ntphn.org.au/sites/default/files/Top%20End%20Specialist%20Referral%20Directory/Darwin%20Directory%20of%20Psychological%20Services_Updated%20Feb%202015.pdf