

# How much stress can lawyers take?

Lawyers are among the most stressed professions, but there are some simple steps they can take to mitigate the damage and restore some life-saving equilibrium, says **Dr Bob Murray**



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**L**awyers are not the most depressed profession – they only rank number 15 on the depression scale of major occupations (firemen, farmers, and forestry workers top the list). But they are among the most stressed, and that is increasing. Eighty per cent of lawyers say that their job is too stressful and one in three contemplate suicide at least once a year, according to the American Institute of Stress's 2016 survey.

How much stress can we take? The answer is that it varies from person to person, stage of life to stage of life, context to context. Any living system needs a certain amount of stress to function optimally and for each there is a limit. A tree will bend in the stress of the wind, but if the wind is too strong it will snap. Just like a human being when the

pressure is too great, when, like the tree in a fierce storm, we exceed our design specs.

There are a lot of fairly simple and inexpensive things that firms could do to reduce the amount of stress among their partners and other legal staff, but they won't: they don't, at present, see it as part of their survival strategy. So what can you as an individual do?

Well, you could take up yoga, meditation, mindfulness, long walks, or sex. They're all good de-stressors, and they all work, at least temporarily. But the stress will return because they're not getting at the core problem.

Stress is caused by the genes controlling the stress hormone cortisol being signaled by the fear centre of the brain, the amygdala (by a slightly roundabout route). Cortisol gets the sympathetic nervous system (the flight, fright, and freeze response) going. It makes the heart beat faster, it clears the mind to concentrate on nothing but the stressor. Good for confronting cheetahs, snakes, rogue elephants, and client deadlines – but only over the short term.

But the human system has a number of genetic stress busters which can be called upon to mitigate the damage and bring back some sort of life-saving equilibrium. The main ones are:

- A nexus of supportive relationships. We are essentially relationship-

driven creatures, largely because in our hunter-gatherer state we were defenseless without them. In many ways stress is, like depression, a cry for help. If that cry is answered, if our support network is able and willing to rally around us, we can endure far higher levels of stress. Working as a mutually supportive team, for example, is far less stressful than working alone;

- A sense of purpose. Recent research has shown that having a strong sense of purpose, especially social as opposed to familial or personal purpose, strengthens the working of the ventral striatum in reducing stress and 'turning down' the activity of the amygdala. Pursuing familial purpose alone (as many of us do when we 'put family first') can actually elevate stress. Individual purpose – creating the best stamp collection in the world, for example – does little to reduce overall stress except for the time you're actually pursuing it;
- Time in nature. We have a genetic need to be connected to nature. Even being in a park for 20 minutes a day, for example, can reduce the symptoms of PTSD in children, while having potted plants in the office can reduce depression.

- A loving pet. The curative power of domestic pets has been long known. Dog owners live up to five years longer and research has shown that this is because of the stress-busting power of just being with the dog. And stroking a cat has been shown to reduce heart rate and blood pressure – signs that cortisol is losing control of the system; and
- Creative endeavour. Recent studies have shown that engaging in art, creative writing, or other similar pursuits can enormously reduce stress in the short and long term. One study said that the happiest people are those that indulge in one creative activity daily.

Recent studies also recommend:

- Living and working in a low-rise building, away from a busy road;
- Taking public transport (especially a train) to work;
- Eating six small meals a day, not three big ones (even better: do without meals per se and just snack when you're hungry);
- Avoiding flying (I wish!);
- Eating oily fish such as tuna and salmon; and
- Avoiding sugar and more than two glasses of alcohol.

Even lawyers are not powerless over their stress. **SJ**