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Oregon Attorney  
Assistance Program

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**Thrive in Law, Thrive in Life** • ISSUE NO. 126 • SPRING 2025



## Lawyer Well-Being: The How-To of Managing Distress

By Douglas Querin

Distress defies easy definition.<sup>1</sup> When asked, some lawyers might say, “I can’t define it, but I know it when I feel it.” Others know the term but are oblivious to its presence in their own lives. Still others suffer significant distress, know they are distressed, but have no idea how to cope. For some, it is the simple irritation of a commute in heavy traffic. For others, it is the crushing weight of anxiety, overwhelming pressure, or the anguish of painful memories.

In the context of well-being, particularly within the legal profession, significant distress is no small matter. Studies<sup>2</sup> show it is a major contributor to problematic alcohol use, depression, anxiety, and other physical and mental health conditions, all occurring within the legal profession at rates much higher than in the general population. The good news is that distress can be identified, avoided, managed, or even removed from one’s life.

Rather than using a strict definition, “distress” will be described here by examining how it often manifests within the legal profession. Distress avoidance techniques, prevention, and coping strategies will also be discussed. As with most well-being recommendations, their value comes not because they are necessarily new information, but because they are important reminders that each of us has the power to significantly affect how we feel and

Traumatic content in cases  
Unpredictable/long work hours  
Perfectionism and fear of  
Conflicts with opposing counsel



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- The duties of office administration;
- Court appearances/litigation responsibilities;
- Fear of malpractice/professional mistakes;
- Performance concerns/competition; and
- Work-life balance.

You will rarely find unanimous agreement in the profession about which activities cause significant distress and which do not. Of any two lawyers, one may find the pressure of billable hours to be overwhelming, while another may view it as simply an unpleasant, though tolerable, aspect of law practice. The lawyer distressed by billable hours, however, may enjoy trial work, while the other finds litigation highly distressing. In short, perceptions and opinions vary.

## Distress: Signs and Effects

Peoples' physical and emotional reactions to distress likewise differ significantly. Below are common symptoms and behavioral responses that often accompany acute and chronic distress.

- **Emotional Overwhelm:** Intense emotions, such as anxiety, depression, sadness, anger, or fear
- **Physical Symptoms:** Physical manifestations, including increased heart rate, sweating, nausea, insomnia, or fatigue
- **Cognitive Disruption:** Difficulty concentrating, making decisions, or thinking clearly
- **Behavioral Changes:** Procrastination, irritability, substance misuse, or social isolation
- **Loss of Control:** Feeling helpless or unable to manage required tasks effectively
- **Short-Term Focus:** A tendency to focus on immediate relief of symptoms rather than long-term solutions

These symptoms of chronic, untreated distress are red flags, reminders that distress must be appropriately recognized and alleviated.

## Developing Distress Tolerance

“Distress tolerance” is the ability to endure and manage emotional, physical, and psychological discomfort without resorting to unhealthy coping mechanisms or experiencing emotional dysregulation. Although you may not be able to completely eliminate distress, it can often be substantially reduced.

Distress tolerance is a multifaceted skillset. It includes knowing potential causes and triggers, recognizing its presence, building resilience, and implementing effective coping strategies. Listed below are research-based recommendations considered most effective in preventing and reducing unhealthy levels of distress. These are the essentials of an effective distress management program.

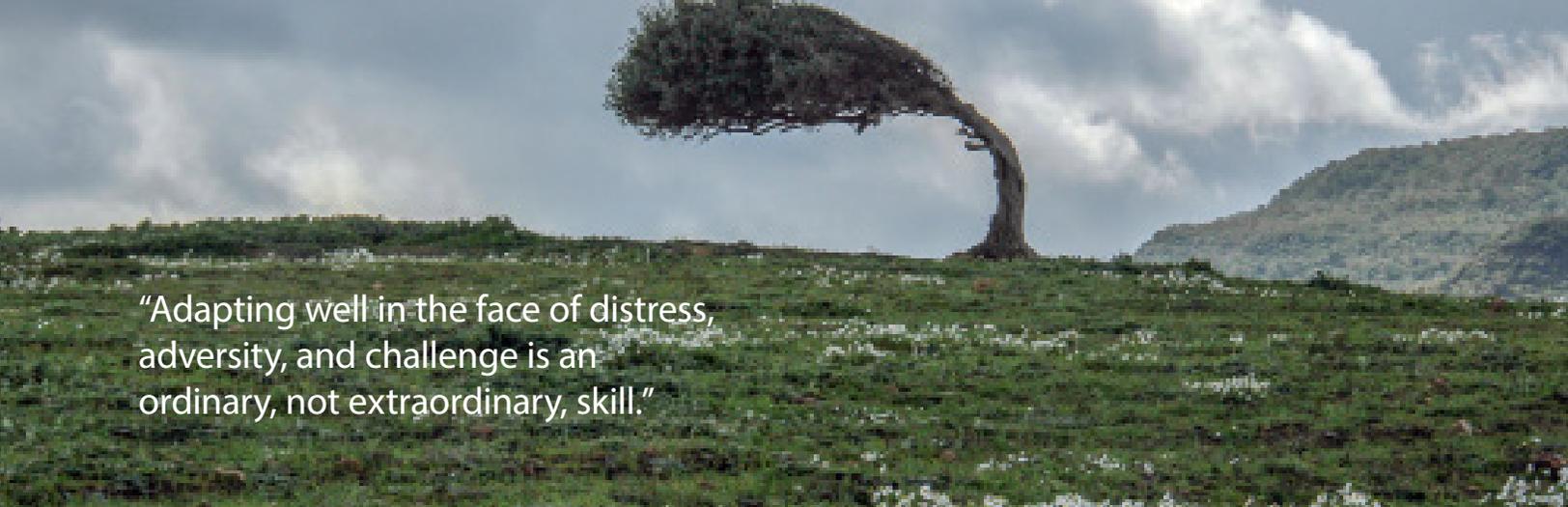
## Recognizing Distress

Awareness is the first step. Some distress may be avoidable, like unhealthy relationships, overcommitting, perfectionism, or procrastination of an important project. For unavoidable distress, however, it is important to be mindful of the emotional and physiological signs, such as anxiety, fear, anger, increased heart rate, restlessness, or feelings of overwhelm.

## Managing Distress

Once you are aware of distress, there are multiple ways to manage it.

- **Build Resilience.**<sup>4</sup> Adapting well in the face of distress, adversity, and challenge is an ordinary, not extraordinary, skill. It involves maintaining perspective, staying flexible, and bouncing back from frustrations and disappointments.
- **Cultivate Positive Relationships.**<sup>5</sup> Social connections create buffers against distress by providing emotional support, encouragement, and a healthy perspective. Friends, family, colleagues, and mentors can serve as valuable allies in navigating difficult times.
- **Prioritize Self-Care.** Regularly attending to one's well-being combats the negative effects of distress. An elaborate regimen is not necessary—only consistency and focus.<sup>6</sup> Effective self-care may include physical



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activity,<sup>7</sup> balanced nutrition, journaling,<sup>8</sup> listening to music, having a pet,<sup>9</sup> and connecting with others.<sup>10</sup>

- **Establish Healthy Boundaries.**<sup>11</sup> Overcommitment is a common source of distress. Learn to say “no” and prioritize to avoid overwhelm. Creating and enforcing clear boundaries is invaluable in preventing distress.
- **Use Relaxation Techniques.**<sup>12</sup> Techniques like deep breathing,<sup>13</sup> progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, and mindfulness have been scientifically demonstrated to calm the nervous system and lower distress levels. Acupuncture, massage, tai chi, qi gong, and yoga have also been shown to be helpful. These and other body calming activities<sup>14</sup> reduce one’s physical and/or emotional arousal.
- **Focus on Problem-Solving.**<sup>15</sup> Breaking large, overwhelming tasks into smaller, manageable chunks can reduce distress and restore a sense of control.
- **Develop a Routine.** Structured routines reduce uncertainty and create predictability, which helps manage daily demands more effectively.
- **Use Positive Self-Talk.**<sup>16</sup> Positive thinking decreases distress. Negative thinking promotes it. Current research<sup>17</sup> demonstrates that replacing negative thoughts with positive affirmations helps reframe distressing situations.
- **Practice Gratitude.**<sup>18</sup> Research<sup>19</sup> demonstrates that focusing on thoughts, feelings, and expressions of gratitude and affirming goodness outside ourselves are useful tools to manage distress and replace it with feelings of well-being.
- **Practice Self-Compassion.**<sup>20</sup> Developing self-compassion (treating oneself as one would a friend) may not come naturally for most lawyers. Many view this practice as antithetical to successful

lawyering. Like a gratitude practice, however, self-compassion is well-researched,<sup>21</sup> with many studies confirming its value in distress management and promoting well-being.

- **Limit Stimulant and Alcohol<sup>22</sup> Use.** The survey of attorneys<sup>23</sup> referred to at the beginning of this article clearly demonstrates that alcohol use by lawyers is problematic and needs to be addressed.
- **Emotional Regulation.**<sup>24</sup> Learning to effectively control one’s behaviors, thoughts, and emotions is crucial for successful distress management. When confronted with distressing situations, emotionally regulated people are better able to maintain a measured outlook and respond appropriately. Those without such skills often experience elevated levels of distress.
- **Seek Assistance.** Distress often results in social isolation and reluctance to reach out to professionals,<sup>25</sup> close friends, or family members—the people most willing and able to provide support and encouragement. Successful distress management requires seeking assistance when appropriate.

## Distress Management: The Bottom Line

Distress is an inevitable part of life, but it need not derail one’s well-being.

Integrating the strategies discussed here into daily routines can create a protective buffer against the unique pressures of the legal profession. By prioritizing distress management, lawyers can

achieve a healthier work-life balance, improve their performance, and cultivate a deeper sense of fulfillment, both personally and professionally.

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## ENDNOTES

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