



IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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REDUCING YOUR STRESS CAN ENHANCE YOUR PERFORMANCE

Practicing law is often stressful. Not that stress itself is necessarily a bad thing; some people thrive on it. In fact, our body's reaction to stress actually helps us meet the sudden demands and extra tasks we face as busy lawyers. But too much stress, too often (chronic stress) takes its toll on our physical, mental, and emotional well-being and affects both our personal lives and our ability to serve our clients. The trick is to eliminate some stressors and build resiliency for those we can't change.

Incorporating one or two of the following tips into your daily routine can help reduce your stress level.

1. **Don't work for free.** Make sure that you – not your clients – are the one to decide which cases you'll do pro bono. Working for clients who can't or won't pay their bills causes frustration and anger, which can tempt you to ignore the file and the client, which in turn can lead to a disciplinary complaint. Working for non-paying clients is worse than not working at all. Remember to follow all procedures for withdrawing from the attorney-client relationship.
2. **Take a vacation every afternoon.** Take a five-minute breather in the afternoon and practice "imagery," a popular relaxation technique. Imagery is sitting back and remembering a favorite event, such as a vacation or a round of golf. Try to use all your senses: hear the sound of the surf, smell the salt air,

feel the sun on your skin, see the colors of the setting sun. (Delete thoughts of the thunderstorm or the triple bogey.) Relive the happy moments. Then get back to work!

3. **Color-code forms and files.** Develop simple systems that everyone in your office can use. For example, use different colored file folders (not just colored labels) for different types of cases, such as bankruptcy, real estate, or personal injury. Color-coding makes it easier for everyone to quickly locate files in a busy office. Also, print different forms or documents, such as conference notes, checklists, and court appearance memos, on different colored paper so they stand out in a file folder.
4. **Use the "one touch" approach.** Finish as much of your paperwork as you can the first time you touch it. Respond to the letter (or e-mail), file the response, or delegate the task immediately. At this point, the entire matter can be completed in several minutes. For tasks that take longer, prioritize quickly, then handle later when you have more time.
5. **Develop and maintain a redundant calendar system.** Routinely record all important events and appointments in two calendars – one to carry with you and one that stays in the office. If your portable calendar is lost or stolen, or your computer-based calendar crashes, you'll have an accurate backup. Sit down with someone twice a month and compare your main calendar day by day with the backup calendar. This catches recording errors before they cause a problem.

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- 6. Prominently display your law degree, bar association admission, and court admission certificates.** It impresses clients when they see proof of your legal accomplishments, and it reminds you how hard you've worked to get where you are.
- 7. Evaluate the costs and benefits of potential clients.** Each client comes with financial and ethical risks. During the telephone screening and initial consultation, evaluate the costs and benefits of representing a new client. Initial screening helps identify problem clients before they become a problem. Do they balk at advanced fee arrangements? Did they forget their checkbooks and fail to pay for the initial consultation? Are you the latest in a string of lawyers? Do they show up late with an unorganized bag full of papers? Do they endlessly complain about their current lawyer? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, strongly consider saying no to these risky clients.
- 8. Impose a quitting time.** Staying late in the office night after night is counterproductive. After eight hours, productivity drops substantially. Impose a quitting time and try to stick to it. You'll find that when you have set a time to leave the office, you'll use your time more wisely. Remember, no one at death's door ever said, "I wish I'd spent more time at the office."
- 9. Set specific times to make phone calls.** Curtail the "phone tag" game. Studies show that the best times to reach people in the office are 9:15 to 11 a.m. and 3 to 5 p.m. If you have trouble reaching clients, set aside an hour or two per day for telephone calls during these times.
- 10. Just say no.** If you are overworked, you must learn to say no to colleagues, clients, and, yes, even your family. Too many commitments lead to burnout, and burnout is a leading cause of premature career death. Gauge the amount of work and commitments you can handle. When you've reached your limit, decline new clients or tasks until your workload lessens.

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