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A A R E B C

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# LOSS PREVENTION BULLETIN

ISSUE NO. 64

FALL 2015

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## ■ Bulletin # 228 Lawyer Stress 101

*By Doron Gold, BA, JD, MSW, RSW, CPCC,  
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### The Lawyer Personality and Stress

Law school turns highly intelligent, driven and capable individuals into lawyers. The professional training we receive changes us, rendering us as skilled legal practitioners capable of handling the needs of clients with complex and challenging matters. We learn ways of thinking and acting unique to the profession.

Lawyers generally possess certain personality traits that help in this formation and performance. While augmenting our abilities to master legal tasks, these factors can also be contributors to the stress we feel personally and professionally. These factors may include:

- **Perfectionism** – Clients want a lawyer that goes through their contract with a fine tooth comb; they want perfection and we endeavour to deliver. That perfectionism is what got many of us to law school. We didn't simply succeed in undergrad, we excelled. We don't merely participate in articles, we get hired back. In practice, we spend significant time doing paperwork – reviewing agreements, dictating affidavits, preparing facta, making file notes and docketing the time in our legal software. It seems impossible to delegate these tasks but we can get to the stage of believing that nothing, even simpler, more general tasks, can be assigned to others and that we have to do it all ourselves. We feel that only we can make sure that everything is done just right. It is an understatement to say that the stress of perfectionism adds to our daily pressure.
- **Conscientiousness** – Many of us have things that must be done according to our specific needs to make our lives work as we wish. We feel a need to return all telephone calls and emails from that day before going home or clean all files off our desks every night or follow up on three outstanding accounts every day, even if it means missing dinner with our family or skipping important events. When this happens, we can feel guilty and overwhelmed. And stressed.
- **Needing control** – We often believe that we can control when other people do things, what they do and how they do it. The reality is that others work on their own schedule, at their own pace and with their own personal priorities. Not recognizing this can add stress

to an already busy practice.

- **Delaying gratification** – In law school, we learned rapidly that there were not enough hours in the day to read all that was assigned, attend classes, study, write essays, eat, sleep and have leisure time. So, we cut out some of the “unnecessary” things like leisure time, eating and sleeping. We learned to “manage” but most of us had and have sleep deprivation and lived (and may still live) on a diet of fast food, junk food, soft drinks and coffee. Leisure time may be that smoke break whenever the stress gets to be too much. The deprivation sometimes goes deeper in that we defer relationships to when we “get around to it”. Even if we enter into a relationship, we may take our partner for granted believing that he or she will understand the late nights, weekend marathon sessions and missed social events. We may not spend any money for fear of not having any after our poor days in law school or the infancy of practice. This can lead to resentment of others around you and stress. In some cases, it can lead to rebound behavior in the form of overspending, social relationships without boundaries or neglect of daily obligations. The result either way is stress.
- **Need for approval** – Whether we want to admit it or not, all of us need approval. In our case, we need our clients to appreciate the hard work that went into their file and our partners to know that we are pulling our weight. We also need our families to appreciate how hard we work to support them. However, we are not always comfortable with praise and approval and we may dismiss or negate it when it is given. If a client complains or does not pay our account, we can get defensive, angry and even aggressive. If a partner asks for an explanation of something, we come armed with information and statistics to justify ourselves. Innocent questions or differences of opinion can become major sources of distress. The ambivalence of craving approval but rejecting it when it comes and being defensive when criticized can be a profound stressor.
- **Self-doubt** – Some lawyers feel like imposters. We may feel that we have fooled others into believing that we know what we are doing. We worry about getting found out about how little we really know. So we try harder, achieve more and do more in the belief that no matter what we accomplish, it will not be enough. The pressure we can put on ourselves and the self-judgment we can

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carry is huge and often debilitating.

### How Does Stress Manifest in a Lawyer's Life?

Unchecked stress and imbalance in a lawyer's life can cause significant distress and even impairment. This can include the onset of depression, anxiety and addiction. Lawyers have been shown to be considerably more susceptible to these conditions than members of the general population.

Instead of reviewing a comprehensive list of signs and symptoms for each condition, sometimes it's more practical to simply take stock of how you are right now as compared to how you are when things are going well, or even when you're in neutral. Are you functioning well or are you struggling to get work done? Is your mood lower than usual or do you even have thoughts of killing yourself, even fleeting ones? Do you find yourself isolating yourself from family, friends or colleagues? Has anyone compassionately voiced concern about you? Are you unhappy or discontented most of the time? Some would suggest that the latter is simply the life of a lawyer but it is not.

Being a lawyer should be fulfilling, not pathologizing. One should ideally feel fulfilled and satisfied by one's work, if periodically stressed. We need to find ways to translate a negative experience into a positive and rewarding one.

### Translating Lawyer Thinking into Constructive Behaviour

These personality and behavioural characteristics may have helped us to attain the role of lawyer. It may seem as though these traits are depicted as inherently negative but knowing how to temper the extremes can lead to less stress and more balance in our lives, personally and professionally. Here is the yin to the yang:

- **The Courage to be Imperfect** – Being perfect all the time is, frankly, impossible and is an emotional trap. Acknowledging that you can only do your best, albeit with a high standard, allows for those times when things do not go ideally. Learn to laugh at life's incongruities. Learn to laugh at yourself! Things, some good, some bad, just happen sometimes.
- **Learning to Have Boundaries** - It may be more reasonable to make as many quality phone calls as you can before your normal day-ending time of 6:00 p.m. or 7:00 p.m. without getting to all of them! Tidying up the files on your desk rather than putting them all away is an option. It does not all have to be done today. Prioritize those things that, in life and death, must be done first. The rest is optional and a bonus. Give yourself permission to have a more balanced approach.
- **Knowing Your Limits of Control** – One approach to control is to ask whomever you are delegating something to how they will do an assigned task, negotiate when it is to be done and set up a system for progress reports. This might alleviate the stress of worrying that your work will not get done properly without you micro-managing the situation. Making it manageable, though, means giving up some of the

belief that you can control all of it all of the time. Knowing how and when to delegate is a skill we need to learn if we want to reign in our stress.

- **Feeling Fulfilled** – When we delay gratification, we set up resentments for the things we have lost. Setting reasonable boundaries to include work, family, nutrition, exercise and leisure pursuits makes all these activities enjoyable and complete in themselves. The trick is to set priorities for what matters most that do not make one activity override the others. This requires tinkering, patience and constant reevaluation.
- **Self-Approval** - Whenever we rely on others for our self-esteem, we are bound to be disappointed. Recognizing our own strengths and weaknesses gives us a realistic sense of who we are, what we believe and what we stand for that makes other people's opinions just that – opinions and not determinative judgments.
- **Self-Trust** – It took a lot of study, self-sacrifice and intelligence to become a lawyer. There is no book called "Lawyering for Dummies" because no one can be taught what we know and how to do it in a few pages. Turning self-doubt into self-trust is a matter of perspective, realizing that we are our own toughest judges and that, in the grand scheme of things, we are capable and competent professionals.

### What Does It All Mean?

None of the traits listed above are inherently positive or negative. The trick is to find a balance that serves you and your quality of life. Balance is the key to being healthy and satisfied and to avoiding the pitfalls noted above. It is possible to be a lawyer and a "normal person" with awareness, self-love and boundaries. Be yourself, authentically and without reservation.

There exist a number of excellent resources to learn about and foster mental health. Each jurisdiction in Canada has a lawyer assistance program that is confidential, free and offers support in a way that only those who understand the profession can. There are also many online resources including the new Canadian Bar Association course *Mental Health and Wellness in the Legal Profession*. Most provincial law societies offer CPD credit for the course and reviews are overwhelmingly positive. It can be found at [www.cba.org/wellness](http://www.cba.org/wellness).

The greatest danger lawyers face is not the presence of personal distress or the stigma one feels about that distress. The greatest peril lies in the avoidance of help, in isolation and in self-judgment. Living a healthy and fulfilled life as a lawyer is not only doable, it is likely if you simply ensure that you live authentically and in balance, and ask for help when necessary. Don't only master the art of lawyering, master the art of self-care.

*Thanks to John Starzynski for his assistance with the content of this article.*