



Dr. Rebecca Nerison

Lawyers: Find Freedom from Anger, Anxiety and Stress

The life of a lawyer isn't a cakewalk. Constantly judged in terms of winning and losing, and existing in a culture of attack and counterattack, lawyers face countless pressures. The emphasis on perfection that starts in law school seldom lets up once a lawyer is in practice, and the resulting stress only multiplies with impatient clients and exacting bosses.

Dr. Rebecca Nerison, a psychologist and author of the ABA Web Store bestseller [*Lawyers, Anger and Anxiety: Dealing with the Stresses of the Legal Profession*](#), says that the accumulated pressures have damaging effects, if left unchecked. She shares with *YourABA* some practical tips for managing stress and developing the resilience to bounce back from stressful events.

You say that a key to dealing with stress is addressing anger and anxiety. Tell me more about the connection and the long-term costs of unchecked stress.

Lawyers' lives are rife with stressful situations such as tight deadlines, angry clients and financial pressures. You may enjoy some challenges but lie awake at night worrying about others. If you are constantly faced with situations you find frustrating or worrisome, you will eventually feel stressed.

Anger and anxiety are both associated with strong physiological responses in our bodies. Chemicals such as cortisol and epinephrine are released to allow our bodies to respond to a perceived threat. This system works really well in circumstances where a physical response is needed, such as jumping out of a crosswalk when a bus is barreling down on you. You escape the threat and your heart rate and breathing return to normal in a matter of minutes. But when the stressor is chronic, like a difficult boss or billable hours you can't quite meet, that's a different story. Your body keeps producing stress hormones because it *thinks* you're in danger. So you spend months or years in this state of heightened physiological arousal that, over time, causes a lot of wear and tear on your arteries, immune system and even your bones.

People who live with a lot of stress are more susceptible to serious health problems than those who don't. In addition to physical problems, chronic stress makes you more vulnerable to behavioral health problems such as depression and substance abuse. We just weren't built to withstand unremitting stress.

What are some techniques for effectively coping with anger and anxiety?

My first suggestion is to step back now and then and reflect. You can't cope with stress effectively if you don't recognize what's going on. This may seem obvious, but it's surprising how many lawyers run their lives on autopilot, oblivious as to what's going on in their minds and bodies. They may not "wake up" until an illness forces them to slow down or they lose someone important to them. If you're not tuned in to yourself, it's almost impossible to be tuned in to others, so you're missing a lot of important information. So every now and then take a break and ask yourself, Where am I going? How's my body feeling? Do I feel tense or relaxed? How do I want to feel? Am I content with my life, or do I need a course correction? You may be reluctant to ask the questions for fear of getting an answer you don't want to hear. Ask anyway.

Second, do work that's a good fit for you, preferably work that takes advantage of your strengths rather than weaknesses. Some lawyers love what they do and have the ordinary stresses of the profession to deal with. But if you're doing work that's not a good fit for you—for whatever reason—you're doubling your stress load. I saw this over and over again in my work with lawyers. Because of huge investments they'd made, it was very difficult to

acknowledge that they were square pegs trying to fit into round holes. Sometimes a change of practice area or setting was enough to remedy this problem; others decided to leave the practice altogether.

Third, keep your focus on what you can do and not on what you can't do. We have control over a lot of stuff—the quality of our work, what we feed ourselves, how much we exercise—but there's a lot more stuff we can't control directly. You can't make the traffic jam go away, the judge rule differently, or your client change her personality. You create a lot of your own stress by thinking things *should* be different. You will soon become angry, depressed or anxious if you keep banging your head against this wall. The good news is, you don't have to. Accepting the reality of things is fabulously liberating and gives you more energy to work on the stuff you *can* change.

How do I know when a colleague needs help? What are the red flags?

You know a colleague needs help when your observations or gut tell you something isn't quite right or that something seems different—and not in a good way. The red flags below are examples of signals that your colleague is experiencing some type of life or professional difficulty:

- Misses deadlines
- Frequent absences
- Financial problems
- Irritable, quick-tempered or highly defensive
- Verbally abuses staff
- Smells of alcohol or gets drunk frequently
- Withdraws socially
- Loses interest in work
- Comments like “My family might be better off without me”

When it comes to a colleague's “off” behavior, lawyers are often reluctant to call it like they see it for fear of meddling. This is a mistake. Too many lawyers wait until the wheels have fallen off before they address a problem; the delay is often costly to the person's career or health. Lawyers who kill themselves usually give clues ahead of time; those left behind regret not speaking up because they were too shy or scared.

What's the appropriate way to deal with that colleague who needs help?

The best way to address “off” behavior is to convey your observations in a direct, non-judgmental manner and to invite the person into conversation about it.

For example, you might say, “Joe, I've noticed that you've missed the last two partners' meetings and that your assistant is fielding calls from upset clients. I'm concerned about you and wondering what's going on, because this isn't like you.”

Joe's response will lie somewhere on a continuum between anger and gratitude and is not your responsibility; it's not your job to fix him. The point is you've done what you can; you've let him know that 1) you care, and 2) his behavior matters and does not go unnoticed. This is a gift even if the recipient refuses to accept it.

How does negative thinking relate to stress?

Negative thinking is the key component to stress and contributes more to depression, anger and worry than anything else. How you interpret an event determines how you feel about it. If your habit is to interpret events in a negative way, you're going to feel miserable and/or be a misery to be around.

Start noticing the tone of your thoughts. If you were the recipient of these thoughts and words, would you feel encouraged? Uplifted? Criticized? Worthless? As all lawyers know, words have tremendous power to influence. What you don't always recognize is the influence they have over your own psyche. It might help to think of your thoughts as instructions to your subconscious. If you think, “I'm never going to get out of debt,” for example, you've just instructed yourself to stay in debt forever, and your actions will follow accordingly.

How can a person start changing negative thought habits to more neutral ones?

Notice a negative thought as it comes up, and replace it with a thought that is true but not malignant. Using our example above, you might say to yourself, “I will manage my debt as best I can.” Using this statement, you’re not denying the reality or difficulty of your debt; neither are you being groundlessly optimistic. Instead, you’re clarifying the do-able task at hand—to manage your debt effectively—and instructing your mind to get to work on it. This will give you a sense of agency, which is far better than wringing your hands and feeling like a victim of your circumstances.

Lawyers often encounter angry clients. What are some good practical tips for dealing with heated situations?

The number one reason clients get angry is because their lawyer doesn’t communicate sufficiently with them.

Clients hire you because they need you to do something important for them. If you a) don’t do what needs to be done or b) don’t tell them that you’re doing it, they’re going to become even more scared than they already are. Fear turns into anger in a heartbeat. So the best thing you can do is to do what you said you’d do on the timeline you gave them, and then tell them what you’ve done. Repeat at frequent intervals throughout the duration of their matter.

Some clients are impossible to satisfy and will be mad even if your work is brilliant. Learn to spot these folks before you take them on, or fire them quickly after this becomes apparent. If you’re stuck with them, set good boundaries by clearly telling them what you can and cannot do for them. Set limits on the amount of time you spend hand-holding.

Many lawyers feel like hostages to their clients’ real or potential anger, fearing malpractice suits or bar complaints. Take responsibility for your end of the contract and allow them to have whatever feelings they have about it. If you’ve made a mistake, admit it despite possible consequences and correct it if possible. You’ll get into far more trouble than having an angry client if you engage in cover-ups or deceit.

Working under the billable hour comes with a lot of pressure. What are some ways to manage the stress?

1. Accept the reality of your situation if you can’t change it. Feeling resentful about your billable requirements siphons off your energy to complete them.
2. Pace yourself. Figure out how many hours you must bill each day and week, create a schedule to allow this to happen, and stick to it relentlessly.
3. Make time-keeping your first priority. Too many lawyers fail to capture time by keeping sloppy contemporaneous records or estimating after the fact. Lost time is lost money, so you’re short-changing yourself and your firm every time you guess low or write off hours you should have billed.
4. Avoid padding or exaggerating your hours. Even if you’re never caught (which may cost you your license), you compromise your integrity and are forced to live with a dishonest person—yourself.
5. Avoid treating yourself like a billing machine. Take good care of your needs for rest, nutrition and other people. Doing so will help you enjoy the present and feel satisfied at the end of your career.

Tell me about lawyers’ assistance programs and how they can help.

The cost of lawyer dysfunction is high for individual lawyers, their firms, and the profession, not to mention clients. Lawyers’ assistance programs—or LAPs—help lawyers be as functional as possible. All LAPs provide information and referral designed to connect lawyers with helpful resources, and some LAPs employ mental health professionals who offer counseling services for individuals or groups.

Many lawyers who seek services are depressed and/or anxious; others have a substance abuse issue, career difficulty, relationship/family problem or health crisis, to name a few. You’ll find a LAP in almost every state and some large cities. Levels of confidentiality vary, so call your local LAP to learn what services are available and the degree of confidentiality you can expect.