

Antidotes to Anxiety in Tumultuous Times

Anxiety is a natural response to challenging periods, but it does not have to define one's experience. Learning more about anxiety and then engaging in practices to manage it are first steps toward attaining well-being, regaining control, and finding strength amid adversity.

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American adults experience anxiety disorders at noteworthy rates. In tumultuous times – whether caused by global events, personal crises, or sudden changes – anxiety can distract, disempower, and even disable. Lawyers, like others, need ways to manage anxiety that offer relief and allow them to regain a sense of control, perhaps even transforming anxiety into a positive resource. Identifying the effects of anxiety and developing strategies for mitigating its effects can allow us all to navigate turbulent times with greater resilience, equanimity, and hope.

Understanding Anxiety: Causes and Effects in Challenging Periods

More than the occasional worry or fear, anxiety constitutes a persistent feeling of unease,

tension, or dread, often accompanied by physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat, sweating, and difficulty concentrating. Less frequently recognized expressions of anxiety can include irritability and anger, efforts to control others, and a pervasive negative outlook. During challenging periods, anxiety can be triggered by uncertainty, loss, or the pressure to adapt quickly, making the internal experience and its less attractive outward manifestations more prominent. External factors – such as economic instability, health concerns, or social unrest – can intensify these feelings. While anxiety is a natural response to stress, it can interfere with daily life, relationships, and decision-making, undermining both the personal lives and the professional practices of lawyers and other legal professionals, who may feel even greater pressure to “keep it together” than people working in other fields. Recognizing anxiety’s causes and impacts, as well as its potential as a positive resource, is the first step toward effective management.

By adulthood, any individual’s unique combination of natural temperament and life experiences will have established their baseline propensity toward responding to situations in more anxious or less anxious ways. Traumatizing or intensely, chronically stressful situations may aggravate the sensitivities of people who are already anxious and shift people with generally secure orientations in the direction of anxious responding. When law students and lawyers channel their anxiety into over-work and a drive to exceed expectations in demanding environments, their anxiety – and their approach to channeling it – may, paradoxically, become both reinforced and masked:



The over-performer, the micromanaging partner or supervisor, the exhausted workaholic, and the professional “self-medicating” with alcohol, cannabis, or other substances are all likely living with troubling anxiety.

Over time, people living with anxiety can become habituated to it, and, as a result, feel most things as anxiety provoking. As a result, they often lose the ability to differentiate between anxiety and its more positive alter, excitement. Living in a state of exhausted overwhelm beneath an overlay of worry, dread, and negative expectation, a chronically anxious person may “code” potentially positive events as “anxiety provoking,” missing out on the opportunity to counter-balance negative anxiety with positive excitement. For example, potentially positive life events, such as a vacation, a graduation, a wedding, or a celebration of an achievement, might be seen in the same light as potentially uncomfortable events, such as a high-stakes exam, a course of medical treatment, or worry about the academic difficulties of a relative.

This phenomenon makes it more difficult for the anxious person to enjoy life and work and to explore ways to gain the potential positives of “negative” experiences or to experience the benefits of recognizing gratitude across these experiences. Working more effectively with anxious states allows us to begin to discern the difference again between excitement and negative anxiety and to explore the possibilities for gratitude in situations that are objectively adverse. It can also make us more capable of discerning between harmful anxiety and the productive situational awareness that serves as an intuitive alarm telling us “something is off” here. Free-floating anxiety often serves as “noise” whereas grounded intuition often provides a signal that offers us essential information about risk and danger and allows us to “read the room” and respond to it with greater clarity, insight, and skill. Being able to discern the difference between

anxiety that will pass and risk that must be acknowledged can be lifesaving. For all these reasons, it’s important to understand anxiety and ways of alleviating it. This is especially true when circumstances are less secure, more stressful, accelerating, and driven by political and economic upheaval.

Breathing, Thinking, and Networking Your Way Out of Anxiety

Fundamentally, anxiety constitutes a cognitive state of forecasting a negative experience in the future. “I’m going to fail this test.” “I am going to lose this case.” “My spouse will leave me.” All are anxious statements focused on negative future outcomes that *are not happening right now*. Your worry about these issues may need to be addressed, but living in a state of anxious dread about them reduces your ability to prevent them coming to pass. The antidote to “anxious spin” is to return to the immediate present, the current moment, in which usually nothing particularly adverse is happening. Practical strategies for retreating from the imagined abysmal future provide immediate relief and empower individuals to regain control in stressful situations.

Breathing. Breathing exercises provide the easiest, cheapest, and most effective short-term antidote. Deep, slow breaths activate the body’s relaxation response, countering the effects of anxiety. Techniques like diaphragmatic breathing, square breathing, or the 4-7-8 method can help regulate emotions and restore balance. For example, inhaling deeply for four counts, holding for seven, and exhaling for eight calms the nervous system and encourages relaxation.

Additional mindful grounding techniques anchor individuals in the present and provide a sense of safety. One popular method is the 5-4-3-2-1 exercise, which involves naming five things you can see, four you can touch, three you can hear, two you can smell, and one you can taste. These techniques interrupt anxious thoughts and reconnect

Resources

- Alison Wood Brooks, *Get Excited: Reappraising Pre-performance Anxiety as Excitement*, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, Vol. 143(3), at 1144-1158 (2014).
- Patrick R. Krill, Ryan Johnson & Linda Albert, *The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys*, *Journal of Addiction Medicine* 10(1) at 46-52, January/February (2016).
- S. Stack & B.A. Bowman, *Suicide Among Lawyers: Role of Job Problems, Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 53 (2023), at 312-19, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12945>. **WL**

individuals with their environment, making them valuable tools during moments of distress because they build situation awareness and allow us to notice the current environment. In tumultuous times, this offers the additional benefit of reducing the distraction that anxiety creates; when we are busy imagining the negative events that could happen, we might reduce attention to any current risks in our immediate environments.

Cognitive-Behavioral Methods, Therapy, and Self-Reflection.

Psychological approaches address the underlying patterns that contribute to anxiety. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a well-established method that helps individuals identify and challenge negative thoughts, based on available evidence. By reframing unhelpful beliefs, people can reduce anxiety and develop healthier coping mechanisms. For example, instead of assuming the worst outcome, CBT encourages individuals to consider alternative perspectives based on patterns of facts – something with which lawyers are already familiar.

Therapy, whether in person or virtual,

offers opportunities to explore emotions and develop strategies for managing anxiety. Professional guidance helps individuals understand triggers, build resilience, and learn effective techniques tailored to their needs. Self-reflection is another valuable approach. Journaling, for instance, enables individuals to express worries, recognize patterns, and track progress. By becoming more aware of thoughts and feelings, people can take proactive steps toward managing anxiety.

In addition, learning about the nature of anxiety and its common triggers can foster self-compassion. Education empowers individuals to separate themselves from their symptoms, reducing shame and promoting acceptance. When combined with other psychological approaches, self-reflection and self-education form a robust foundation for enduring change. If, during therapy, a lawyer or other legal professional recognizes that trauma, whether from work or other life experiences, is driving their anxiety – as is often the case – this can be addressed with trauma-focused interventions, such as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR).

Lifestyle Changes: Nutrition, Exercise, Sleep Hygiene, and Social Support. For many, “lifestyle changes” play a crucial role in anxiety management. Avoiding the excess caffeine, sugar, and processed foods too common in the diets of overstressed professionals can prevent spikes in anxiety and promote overall well-being.

Exercise is another powerful antidote. Physical activity releases endorphins, natural chemicals that enhance mood and reduce stress. Whether walking, swimming, or practicing yoga, regular movement helps regulate emotions and improve sleep quality. It is important to choose activities that are enjoyable and accessible, making exercise a sustainable part of daily life. Lawyers suffering anxiety often find it overwhelming to commit to exercise classes or make an hour to get to the gym, but until those practices become possible, integrating

“quick hits” of exercise can be greatly beneficial. This might mean taking the stairs at the courthouse, spending five minutes doing isometric exercises in your office three times a day, or parking further away from the buildings you enter so that you’re required to add a few extra steps to your count every day. It all matters and can all contribute to reducing anxiety.

Connected to both emotional calming and physical exercise, sleep also offers benefits in anxiety reduction. Legal professionals can underestimate its importance, thinking that sacrificing sleep is worth the work that they do in a sleep-deprived state. Sleep hygiene refers to habits that promote restful, restorative sleep. Anxiety often disrupts them, creating a cycle of fatigue and increased worry. Establishing a consistent bedtime routine, limiting screen time before bed, and creating a comfortable sleep environment can improve sleep quality and reduce anxiety. Simple, ritualistic habits such as reading, listening to calming music, or taking a warm bath signal to the body that it is time to relax.

Finally, social support is essential. Connecting with friends, family, or support groups provides reassurance and validation. Sharing experiences and feelings helps individuals realize they are not alone, fostering a sense of belonging and hope. Even brief conversations or regular check-ins can buffer against the effects of anxiety and build resilience. Although building and maintaining connections requires effort, it yields significant benefits. Listening to others, expressing gratitude, and offering help strengthen bonds and create a sense of purpose. For those who struggle with social interactions, starting small – such as sending a message or attending a virtual event – can ease anxiety and foster positive relationships. Community involvement also reminds individuals that they are part of something larger, reducing feelings of isolation and helplessness. Helping others often restores your confidence and hope.

Conclusion

Managing anxiety during tumultuous times requires a multifaceted approach. Practical strategies such as mindfulness, breathing exercises, and grounding techniques offer immediate relief. Psychological approaches – including cognitive-behavioral methods, therapy, and self-reflection – address underlying patterns and promote lasting change. Lifestyle modifications such as balanced nutrition, regular exercise, improved sleep hygiene, and strong social support strengthen mental resilience. Community and connection provide encouragement and hope and expand your access to support.

While anxiety may be a natural response to challenging periods, it does not have to define one’s experience. By embracing these antidotes, we can take proactive steps toward well-being, regain control, and find strength amid adversity. For lawyers and other legal professionals, upon whose shoulders so much rests, mitigating anxiety is an important professional skill set, one that allows you to maintain balance and perspective so you can continue to do excellent legal work in the context of broader social instabilities. **WL**

WisLAP Can Help

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The Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP) offers confidential support to lawyers, judges, law students, and other legal professionals as a benefit of State Bar membership. WisLAP staff can answer questions about mental health and substance use, provide guidance on well-being practices, and match members with attorneys trained in peer support.

To contact WisLAP staff:

Call (800) 543-2625 or email callwislap@wisbar.org.

Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: 988.

Call or text 988 if you or someone you know may be going through a crisis or contemplating suicide. For more information, visit the 988 website at <https://988lifeline.org>. **WL**