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STATE BAR OF WISCONSIN
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WSSFC 2026

Quality of Life/Ethics Track – Session 6

Creating a Culture of Wellness

Presented By:
Patricia McKinney-Lins
Neider & Boucher, S.C. and Lawyer Wellness Coach at Vivardu Stress Solutions LLC, Madison

About the Presenter...

Patricia McKinney-Lins practices elder law and estate planning at Neider & Boucher, S.C. She is dedicated to serving families as well as small business owners, including family farm owners. She is a certified health and wellness coach helping lawyers reduce stress, prevent burnout and build habits that bring more energy, clarity, and ease.

Creating a Culture of Wellness: *How to reduce chronic stress, prevent burnout, and design a practice that supports attorneys and staff.*

Presentation Outline

Wisconsin State Bar Solo & Small Firm Conference — October 23, 2026 Presented by Patricia McKinney-Lins, Attorney/Lawyer Wellness Coach — Neider & Boucher, S.C. / Vivardu Stress Solutions, LLC

Contact Speaker: VivarduStressSolutions.com or text/call (608) 212-9918

Presenter

Patricia McKinney-Lins helps lawyers reduce stress and anxiety to prevent burnout, so they can bring more energy, ease, and enjoyment to their personal and professional lives.

You Will Learn…

- Why Lawyer Wellness?
- The Current Condition
- Firm culture and work design practices to support wellness
- Recognize the signs of stress
- 3 steps to less stress and more ease

I. Why Lawyer Wellness?

The practice of law is inherently stressful:

- Sometimes adversarial, often involves high stakes; we are responsible for helping solve our clients' problems; client trauma; we sometimes take on our clients' problems as if they are our own
- Billable-hour culture discourages rest — time itself is the product

The problem isn't you. It's a profession that seems to treat chronic stress as a requirement.

A useful distinction: acute stress can be adaptive and temporary; chronic stress is repeated or prolonged stress without adequate recovery.
Burnout is an occupational phenomenon, not a medical diagnosis. WHO describes it through exhaustion, increased mental distance/cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy.

II. The Data

2016 Landmark Study

- 28% of lawyers report depression, 19% report anxiety, and 23% report stress
- 20.6% screen positive for hazardous, harmful, and potentially alcohol-dependent drinking — a higher rate than other professionals and almost twice the rate of American adults *(2016 ABA/Krill, Johnson & Albert Study of 12,825 lawyers)*
- 11.5% have had suicidal thoughts at some point in their career
- 79% cite stress and workload as the top cause of substance abuse and mental health issues at their firm

The Current Condition: 2026: The Stress, Anxiety and Burnout is Increasing

- 47.4% of lawyers screened positive for high burnout, including 15.6% for severe burnout
- 32.7% reported at least mild depression symptoms; 21.7% reported moderate-to-extremely severe symptoms
- 26.9% reported at least mild anxiety symptoms; 20.4% reported moderate-to-extremely severe symptoms
- 30.2% reported at least mild stress symptoms; 18.9% reported moderate-to-extremely severe symptoms (2026 ABA CoLAP–Krill Strategies study of approximately 37,000 lawyers)

Because both the 2016 and 2026 studies used the DASS-21 for these symptom measures, the most useful descriptive comparison is at the same threshold: at-least-mild depression increased from 28.0% to 32.7%, anxiety from 19.0% to 26.9%, and stress from 23.0% to 30.2%. This comparison describes the two samples; it does not by itself establish why the differences occurred.

ABA President: "A mentally healthy lawyer is a better lawyer."

III. Solo Practitioners & Small Firms: Benefits and Burdens

The good news: you are your own boss. The bad news: you are your own boss.

Challenges of Solo/Small Firms:

- Backup — who will cover a court date, a filing, or a client crisis when you're sick or on vacation?
- The revenue-hours trap — every hour off can feel like income lost
- Isolation: few or no colleagues in the office to discuss your case with

Autonomy can also be a strength: solo and small-firm lawyers often have more ability to redesign schedules, client expectations, fees, staffing, and workflows.
Continuity planning is wellness planning: identify who can cover urgent matters, access essential information, and communicate with clients if you are unexpectedly unavailable.

- Solo practitioners: 72% of Wisconsin law firms; 92% of Wisconsin firms have five or fewer lawyers.
- Solo attorneys report the highest rates of poor work-life balance (47%) and lack of support/resources (41%) of any legal role *(2025 Rev/Centiment survey)*

IV. Why Lawyers Silently Struggle

Why lawyers are struggling/not healing:

- Life is stressful
- The practice of law is stressful
- Lawyers are not aware of the negative impact of stress
- Lawyers are not consciously addressing their stress
- Lawyers think this is just how it is
- Lawyers think the only way out is to quit, but they have to pay the bills
- Lawyers think they will not get sick
- Lawyers think there is nothing they can do to improve their health

V. What's the Problem With a Little Stress?

Repeated or chronic stress can affect multiple body systems and stress-hormone regulation:

- Cortisol and other stress-response hormones
- Sleep, appetite, energy, concentration, and mood can also be affected

- The concern is not an occasional stressful day; it is repeated activation without adequate recovery
- Stress can lead to chronic health conditions
- 60-80% of doctor visits involve stress-related symptoms *(Harvard Medical School)*
- Chronic stress can worsen mental-health symptoms and deserves attention when symptoms are persistent or impairing
- Stress can lead to procrastination, avoidance, malpractice, and disciplinary proceedings
- Stress can lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms: excessive alcohol and drug use, withdrawal from family and friends, excessive escape online/TV/gambling

VI. When an Unmanaged Stress Response May Result in Disciplinary Action

- **Disciplinary Proceedings against J. Loew:** solo attorney's unmanageable workload triggered major depression — 60-day suspension for neglect and follow-up treatment
- **Disciplinary Proceedings against Nunnery:** sole practitioner who "took on more work than he could handle" — 3-year suspension for neglect
- **Disciplinary Proceedings against S. Hansen:** depression argued as mitigation — 9-month suspension for misconduct
- **Disciplinary Proceedings against Raftery:** chronic depression argued as mitigation for neglect — 6-month suspension

Source: WisLAP, "Understanding & Mitigating Compassion Fatigue for Legal Professionals," 2015

VII. Common Law Firm Culture vs. Is This Possible?

Common Law Firm Culture /	Instead: Is This Possible?
Stressed and Anxious	Calm
Overscheduled	Energized
Exhausted	Living with Ease and Joy

VIII. The 2021 Wisconsin Lawyer Well-Being Task Force

The State Bar of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Supreme Court

> "Change is crucial to the legal profession achieving its maximum potential: enhanced quality of service to clients as a result of the improved well-being of all lawyers and judges."

Recommends firm-level and regulatory changes.

IX. Structuring the Firm to Reduce Stress

- Block scheduling — separate blocks for deep work, calls, court/filings, and admin — cuts constant context-switching
- Protected, calendared focus time — treated as seriously as a court date or client appointment
- Written client intake/screening protocol — filters for fit, protects quality over sheer volume
- Standardized or flat fees where possible — reduces billable-hour anxiety without sacrificing profitability
- Referrals to other solo/small firm attorneys — for extra coverage
- Cross-train staff so no single person is the only one who knows a file or an area of practice

Create a simple written coverage plan for illness, vacation, family emergencies, and technology outages — including who has access to calendars, deadlines, client contacts, and essential procedures.
Review recurring tasks for what can be delegated, automated, standardized, simplified, or eliminated.

X. Boundaries, Team Culture & Self-Management

- Written communication policies (e.g., "we respond within 24 business hours") set at intake — manages expectations, ends the always-on-call feeling. **"You are not a 24-hour gas station."**
- Regular case-conference or debrief time with staff — reduces isolation, distributes the load
- Track caseload against real capacity, not just against revenue targets — build realistic caps into growth goals
- If you are the firm owner: your own visible habits set the real culture, regardless of what the handbook says

Use a brief weekly workload check: What is truly time-sensitive? What can wait? What can be delegated? Where is backup needed before overload becomes a crisis?
Model the boundary you want others to believe: use delayed-send for routine late-night emails, take vacations with coverage, and avoid praising chronic overwork as commitment.

XI. First Step to Self-Care: Recognize the Common Symptoms of Stress

- Digestive Issues
- Poor Sleep
- Anxious Feelings
- Difficulty Concentrating
- Chronic Fatigue
- Feeling Nervous
- Headaches

Professional warning signs can matter too: procrastination, missed deadlines, avoidance of clients, unusual irritability, repeated errors, or difficulty making routine decisions.
Ask: What is my earliest reliable warning sign — and what will I do when I notice it?

Without realizing it, your day revolves around your stress and anxiety rather than your contribution to the world.

XII. Challenges to Healing

- Conventional approaches don't address root causes
- Trial and error is expensive and time-consuming
- One size does not fit all; lasting change requires consistency, not a single fix

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XIII. The 3 Pillars to Improved Health: Reclaim Your Focus and Energy

Nourish · Restore · Regulate

Nourish: Hydration & Nutrition

- Water and food are your body's raw materials — you can't out-manage stress on an empty tank
- At least 25% of attorneys experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, or stress

- Most lawyers run on caffeine and skipped meals, then experience afternoon focus collapse

Nourish: Hydration

- Chronic dehydration mimics stress symptoms — fatigue, headaches, poor concentration
- A simple habit: water before coffee, refill on a schedule
- Adequate hydration supports normal functioning. Research on mild dehydration and cognition is mixed, while more significant dehydration can impair attention, mood, and physical performance.

Nourish: Whole Foods

- Skipping meals results in a sudden energy deficit
- Choose protein-rich, pre-planned whole food snacks over vending-machine manufactured "food"
- 79% of lawyers cite stress and high workload as the top causes of mental health issues at their firm — nutrition is one choice you control

Restore: Sleep & Movement

- Sleep and movement allow the body to repair what the day injures
- 28% of lawyers report depression, 23% report stress: sleep debt and inactivity make the situation measurably worse
- Billable-hour culture treats sleep and exercise as optional — biology disagrees
- This is the pillar most lawyers sacrifice first and pay for most

Regulate: Stress Response

- Autonomic Nervous System
- Chronic stress without adequate recovery
- Ways to soothe
- 60-80% of doctor visits involve stress-related symptoms, yet only 3% address stress reduction *(Harvard Medical School)*

Regulate: Sympathetic & Parasympathetic

- Autonomic Nervous System: Sympathetic and Parasympathetic
- Sympathetic: fight or flight — the mode adversarial legal work keeps you in for hours

- Parasympathetic: supports rest, digestion, and recovery
- Create regular conditions that support recovery and parasympathetic activity
- Categories of soothing: Physical, Chemical, Emotional

What Chronic Stress Disrupts

Chronic Stress = Disruption to the natural balance of health

- Weight gain
- Anxiety — 23% of women lawyers and 15% of men report moderate or severe anxiety
- Brain fog, reduced concentration, and impaired decision-making can affect professional performance
- Immune system suppression
- Sleep disruption

Regulate: Finding Balance

Finding Balance and Regulating the Nervous System:

- Mindfulness/spiritual practice
- A 90-second breathing reset between calls or meetings
- Light exercise (yoga, walking)
- Gratitude journal
- Wind down and turn off electronics before bedtime

XIV. Your Body Is Designed to Heal

When you Nourish, Restore, and Regulate, your body's baseline capacity to handle stress improves — not because the caseload got lighter, but because you did.

XV. Transform Your Health

- Essential Nutrition, Hydration & Digestive Health *(addresses: Nutritional Deficiencies)*
- Restore through sleep and movement *(addresses: Sleep deficiency and sedentary lifestyle)*
- Regulate the Stress Response and improve your Mindset *(addresses: Poor stress response and high anxiety)*

XVI. Real Results After Simple Steps

This is an example of the changes one health coaching client experienced after improving health habits; however, individual results vary. Medical outcomes such as blood pressure, blood sugar, or medication needs should be evaluated with an appropriate health professional.

- High stress and anxiety → to a healthy stress response and quick recovery
- "Brain fog" → to energy and focus
- High blood pressure → to normal
- Weight loss after adding whole foods
- Pre-diabetic → to normal
- Sleepless nights → to easily falling back to sleep after waking
- Sedentary lifestyle → to short walks to boost energy
- Anxiousness → to breathing breaks to calm the nerves

XVII. Know When Self-Care Is Not Enough

Wellness education and coaching can support habits, boundaries, stress awareness, workload practices, priorities, goals, and accountability.
They are not substitutes for medical or mental-health assessment or treatment when symptoms are persistent, severe, frightening or impairing.
Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP) offers confidential well-being support, consultation, initial evaluation, referrals, and peer assistance to the Wisconsin legal community. WisLAP: (800) 543-2625 • wisbar.org/wislap. A lawyer does not have to decide alone what kind of help is appropriate before making the call.

XVIII. A 30-Day Wellness Experiment

Choose one small, observable change rather than trying to overhaul everything at once:

Boundary — choose a time when routine work stops or define what actually qualifies as an after-hours emergency.
Body — choose one repeatable sleep, movement, hydration, or meal-planning habit.
Calm — practice one to five minutes of breathing, meditation, quiet, or a phone-free walk.
Connection — schedule one enjoyable connection or activity each week.
Practice — delegate, automate, simplify, or eliminate one recurring stressor.
Small and repeatable beats impressive and abandoned. Ask after 30 days: What helped enough that I want to keep it?

Resources & References

1. State Bar of Wisconsin. Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP), wisbar.org/wislap, (800) 543-2625.
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14. Recommended Reading: *The Stress of Life* by Hans Selye, M.D. (Originally published 1956; revised edition 1976/1978)
15. Recommended Reading: *Love, Medicine and Miracles: Lessons Learned about Self-Healing from a Surgeon's Exceptional Patients* by Bernie S. Siegel, M.D. (1986)
16. Recommended Reading: *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* by Oliver Burkeman (2021)
17. Recommended Reading: *The Untethered Soul: The Journey Beyond Yourself* by Michael A. Singer (2007)
18. Recommended Reading**:** *I Need More Time: And I Probably Always Will (Brilliant Thoughts)* by Ashleigh Brilliant (2019)

Thank you!

Patricia McKinney-Lins
VivarduStressSolutions.com. (608) 212-9918 text

CREATING A CULTURE OF WELLNESS

WISCONSIN STATE BAR
SOLO & SMALL FIRM CONFERENCE
OCTOBER 23, 2026

How to reduce chronic stress,
prevent burnout
and
design a practice
that supports attorneys and staff

1

PRESENTER

Patricia McKinney-Lins, Attorney/
Lawyer Wellness Coach
Neider & Boucher, S.C.
Vivardu Stress Solutions, LLC

I help lawyers reduce stress and anxiety
to prevent burnout
so they can bring more energy, ease and
enjoyment to their personal and professional
lives.

2

YOU WILL LEARN...

- Why Lawyer Wellness?
- The Current Condition
- Firm culture and work design to support wellness
- Recognize the signs of stress
- 3 steps to less stress and more ease

3

WH Y LAWYER WELLNESS?

The practice of law is inherently stressful:

Adversarial

High stakes

Client problems

Client trauma

Billable-hour model

Culture of chronic stress

4

2016 LANDMARK STUDY

28% report depression,

19% report anxiety, and

23% report stress

20.6% Alcohol-dependent drinking

11.5% have had suicidal thoughts

2016 ABA/Krill, Johnson & Albert Study of **12,825 lawyers**

5

THE CURRENT CONDITION: 2026

It is getting worse
(Comparable DASS-21 thresholds **2016 → 2026**)

Depression 28.0% → 32.7%;
Anxiety 19.0% → 26.9%;
Stress 23.0% → 30.2%.

47.4% high or very high burnout

2026 ABA/CoLAP -Krill Strategies study of approximately **37,000** lawyers

ABA President: "A mentally healthy lawyer is a better lawyer."

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Solo Practioners & Small Firms: Benefits and Burdens

The good news: you are your own boss. The bad news: you are your own boss.

Independence but no Backup

Revenue possibilities but billing by the-hour

Autonomy but Isolation

Solo practitioners: 72% of Wisconsin law firms
92% of Wisconsin firms have five or fewer lawyers

Solo attorneys report the highest rates of poor work-life balance (47%) and lack of support/resources (41%) of any legal role (2025 Rev/Centiment survey)

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WHY LAWYERS SILENTLY STRUGGLE

- Why lawyers are struggling/not healing:
  - Life is stressful
  - The practice of law is stressful
  - Awareness of the negative impact of stress
  - Denial
  - Lawyers think -this is just how it is
  - Lawyers think -the only way out is to quit
  - Lawyers think -they will not get sick
  - Lawyers think -there is nothing they can do to improve their health

8

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH A LITTLE STRESS?

- Hormonal imbalance
- Sleep, appetite and energy
- Concentration and mood
- Chronic health conditions
- Serious illness
- Mental-health conditions
- Procrastination, avoidance, malpractice and disciplinary proceedings
- Unhealthy coping mechanisms:
- Excessive alcohol and drug use
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Excessive escape online/TV/gambling

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UNMANAGED STRESS RESPONSE RESULTED IN DISCIPLINARY ACTION

Solo attorney's unmanageable workload=major depression — 60-day suspension for neglect

Sole practitioner who "took on more work than he could handle" —3-year suspension for neglect

Depression argued as mitigation for misconduct — 9-month suspension

Chronic depression argued as mitigation for neglect — 6-month suspension

Source: WisLAP, "Understanding & Mitigating Compassion Fatigue for Legal Professionals" 2015

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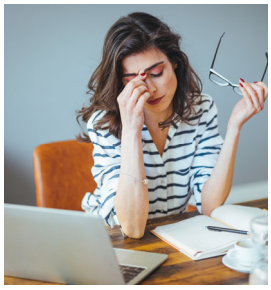
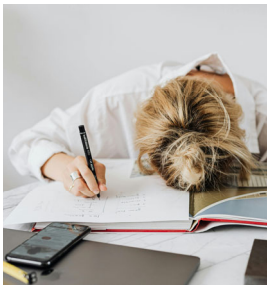
COMMON LAWFIRM CULTURE

Stressed and Anxious



Overscheduled



Exhausted

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IS THIS POSSIBLE?

Calm

Energized

Living with Ease and Joy

12

THE 2021 WISCONSIN LAWYER WELL-BEING TASK FORCE

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Recommends firm-level and regulatory changes

The State Bar of Wisconsin/ the Wisconsin Supreme Court

STRUCTURING THE FIRM TO REDUCE STRESS

Block scheduling —

deep work, calls, court/filings, and admin -focus time

Client screening -protects quality over volume

Standardized or flat fees— reduces billable-hour anxiety

Referrals to other solo/small firm attorneys

Cross-train staff to cover for illness, vacation, family emergencies and technology outages

BOUNDARIES, TEAM CULTURE & SELF-MANAGEMENT

Written communication policies with clients

Regular case-conference or debrief time with staff

Track caseload against real capacity

The firm owner's habits set the culture:
Boundaries,
Vacations,
Avoid praising chronic overwork

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FIRST STEP TO SELF-CARE: RECOGNIZE THE COMMON SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Anxious Feelings

Headaches

Poor Sleep

Difficulty Concentrating

Digestive Issues

Feeling Nervous

Chronic Fatigue

Without realizing it, your day revolves around your **stress and anxiety** rather than your contribution to the world.

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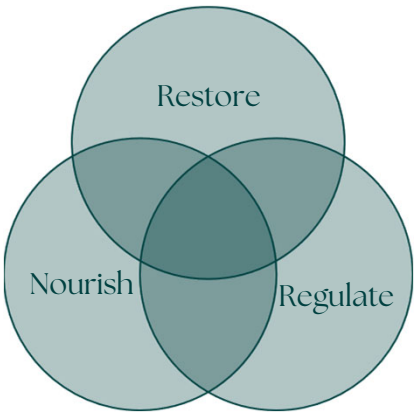
CHALLENGES TO HEALING

- Conventional approaches don't address root causes
- Trial and error is expensive and time-consuming
- One size does not fit all; lasting change requires consistency, not a single fix

3 PILLARS TO IMPROVED HEALTH: RECLAIM YOUR FOCUS AND ENERGY



NOURISH: HYDRATION & NUTRITION

- Water and food are your body's raw materials - you can't out-manage stress on an empty tank
- At least 25% of attorneys experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, or stress
- Most lawyers run on caffeine and skipped meals, then experience afternoon focus collapse

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NOURISH:HYDRATION

- Chronic dehydration mimics stress symptoms — fatigue, headaches, poor concentration
- A simple habit: water before coffee, refill on a schedule
- Adequate hydration supports normal functioning; more significant dehydration can affect attention, mood and physical performance

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NOURISH: WHOLE FOODS

Skipping meals results in a sudden energy deficit

Choose protein-rich/ pre-planned whole food snacks over vending-machine manufactured "food"

79% of lawyers cite stress and high workload as the top causes of mental health issues at their firm — nutrition is one choice you control

RESTORE: SLEEP & MOVEMENT

- Sleep and movement allow the body to repair what the day injures
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REGULATE: STRESS RESPONSE

- Autonomic Nervous System
- Chronic stress without adequate recovery
- Ways to soothe
- 60-80% of doctor visits involve stress-related symptoms, yet only 3% address stress reduction (Harvard Medical School)

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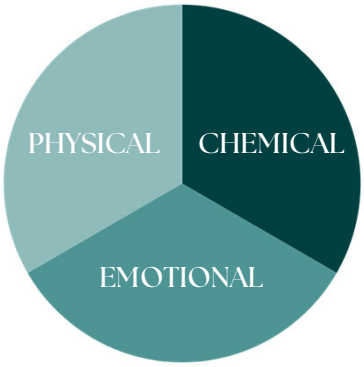
REGULATE: SYMPATHETIC & PARASYMPATHETIC AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

- Sympathetic: fight or flight — adversarial legal work
- Parasympathetic: rest, digestion and recovery
- Create support and recovery



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WHAT CHRONIC STRESS DISRUPTS

Chronic Stress = Disruption to the natural balance of health

- Weight gain
- Anxiety
- Brain fog, reduced concentration and impaired decision-making
- Immune system suppression
- Sleep disruption

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REGULATE: FINDING BALANCE

- Mindfulness/Spiritual practice
- A 90-second breathing reset between calls or meetings
- Light exercise (yoga, walking)
- Gratitude journal
- Wind down and turn off electronics before bedtime

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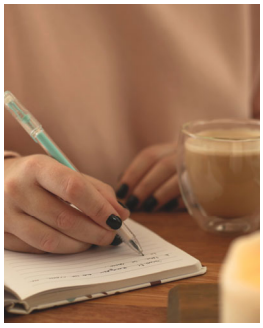
YOUR BODY IS DESIGNED TO HEAL



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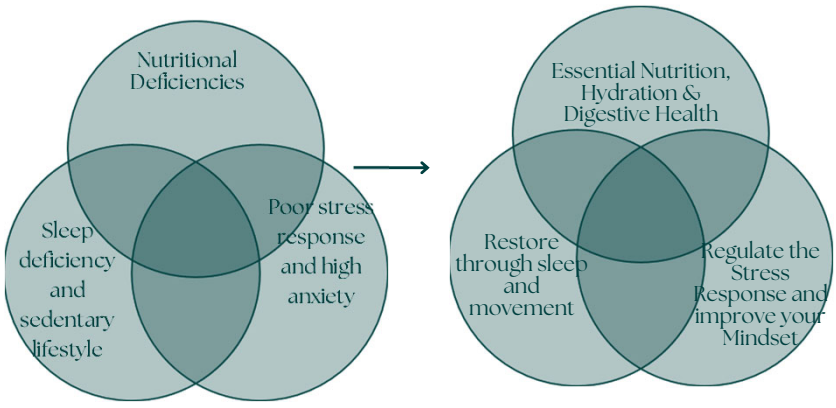
TRANSFORM YOUR HEALTH



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REAL RESULTS AFTER SIMPLE STEPS

INDIVIDUAL RESULTS VARY

- High Stress and anxiety- to a healthy stress response and quick recovery
- "Brain Fog"-to Energy and Focus
- High Blood pressure-to normal
- Weight loss after adding whole foods
- Pre-diabetic to normal
- Sleepless nights -to easily falling back to sleep after waking
- Sedentary lifestyle-to short walks to boost energy
- Anxiousness -to breathing breaks to calm the nerves

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KNOW WHEN SELF CARE IS NOT ENOUGH

FIND A MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

- Wellness education and coaching supports habit change and improved health and accountability
- Seek medical or mental health assessment and treatment if symptoms are persistent, severe, frightening or impairing

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2. Krill, P.R., Johnson, R., & Albert, L. (2016). *The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys.* J Addict Med. 2016 Jan-Feb;10(1):46-52. doi: 10.1097/ADM.0000000000000182. PMID: 26825268; PMCID: PMC4736291.
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5. National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being. (2017). *The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change.*

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RESOURCES & REFERENCES 3 of 3

14. Recommended Reading: *The Stress of Life by Hans Selye, M.D. (Originally published 1956; revised edition 1976/1978)*
15. Recommended Reading: *Love, Medicine and Miracles: Lessons Learned about Self-Healing from a Surgeon's Exceptional Patients by Bernie S. Siegel, M.D. (1986)*
16. Recommended Reading: *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals by Oliver Burkeman (2021)*
17. Recommended Reading: *The Untethered Soul: The Journey Beyond Yourself by Michael A. Singer (2007)*
18. Recommended Reading**:** *I Need More Time: And I Probably Always Will (Brilliant Thoughts) by Ashleigh Brilliant (2019)*

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THANK YOU!

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