

Wisconsin Lawyer

Vol. 70, No. 5, May 1997

Lawyers and Stress: An Anti-Quick Fix View

There is no quick way to avoid stress. But here are some ideas to stimulate real change in your life.

By Gregory J. Van Rybroek

Lawyers routinely seek ways to improve how they practice law and enhance their careers. The committee overseeing the Bar's Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP) undertakes this column to address issues that affect lawyers as people. Future columns, to be written by Gregory J. Van Rybroek and Dennis W. Kozich, may focus on lawyers and stress, procrastination, anxiety and depression. (See Kozich Sidebar)

The Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program's primary purpose is to provide confidential counseling service on WisLAP's two toll-free helplines. WisLAP operates the Substance Abuse Helpline at (800) 254-9154 and the Stress Helpline at (800) 543-2625.

When it comes to solving stress, there is no drive-up window for quick-fix answers. There is no elixir to eliminate stress. In fact, we should stop searching for a magic snake oil and realize that if anything quick actually worked, stress already would follow smallpox in the history books.

What is stress? Stress is a mental and/or physical reaction to life pressures. Symptoms of stress can become so severe that our behaviors become maladaptive or dysfunctional. We might experience anxiety, depression, anger, irritability, sexual dysfunction, sleeplessness, overuse of alcohol or drugs and difficulty concentrating. We all have experienced the unpleasant internal and external unravelings that happen when our daily lives start to overload. If our stress symptoms become regular occurrences, generally we become unhappy and difficult to be around. Often, it is difficult to reduce stress, and there is a natural human tendency to look for an easy way out.

It may not be particularly helpful to read stress-reduction solutions, like "build in time to relax" or "exercise regularly." Pithy recommendations may give off a certain exuberance, but they lack the substance to create behavior change - because sound-byte truisms cannot cut to the bone of what drives and exacerbates stress.

Instead of hunting for simple answers, try approaching stress from a deeper perspective. The anti-quick fix view offers challenging decisions that can lead to true stress reduction and a happier life.

Anti-quick fix considerations about stress

Simple solutions. Give up on simple solutions; they do not solve complex problems. Solutions, if they are to be had at all, are somewhere inside each person. There is a strong tendency to look outside oneself for solutions, but brutal honesty says the opposite is more effective - an inside look offers more possibilities for solutions to complex issues.

Choices. We all make choices about the directions in our lives, and there are many reasons to choose one direction over another. But if the outcome seems to be negative despite the best intention, it may be time to examine the reason for the choice. We have some control over our choices in life, but often not as much as we would like. When choices are made, losses on one level may produce more important gains on another. For instance, if making money is your choice, then be honest about it and accept what money brings and what making it takes away.

Explore other ways of achieving deep satisfaction in life. Clinical research shows that people become happier when they feel in control, develop positive self-esteem, have realistic goals and expectations, have fit and healthy bodies and have supportive friends. However, the easy part about good choices is deciding to make them. The hard part is figuring out what has to change to actualize those choices.

Suffering. Making serious choices often is accompanied by an internal struggle that involves some degree of personal suffering and pain. While we tend to avoid suffering if we can, the painful suffering process can help bring clarity of direction to our lives. Psychological suffering often is the result of an unwillingness to change something in our lives.

A common scenario for change is that an external stressor is demanding change; we are not personally choosing change. When we behave as if there are no problems, the problems do not evaporate. Rather they tend to fester, and we suffer more later as a result of the crisis that festering created.

For example, we all have been in situations where we know we should say something about how we really feel, but we avoid it because it is awkward or seems silly and so on, and act as though things are fine. These situations usually break apart and we have to deal with the fallout anyway. We discover that we might as well have spoken up in the first place.

Change. We do not like to change - it is too hard. Usually we do whatever it takes to maintain the status quo. When change is forced, such as a result of an accident, an unexpected illness or a spouse wanting a divorce, then we have to deal with it. While we cannot foresee random problems forcing change, there are many areas in our lives where, if we look closely, we can see problems developing. Usually we know at some level when things are not going well, but we are choosing not to go through the suffering it takes to change the situation. The question becomes one of deciding to choose the pain of change or the painful consequences of maintaining the status quo.

Self-examination. Consider psychotherapy. Entering into serious psychotherapy takes intense personal courage. If psychotherapy is productive, it means entering into a confidential relationship with someone to touch the bone of your issues in order to resolve them. The psychotherapy relationship is deeply personal and distinctly different than other relationships. It means pressing into the idea of change and choice in one's life, and while it could be painful and unattractive, it has a productive purpose.

Unlike the legal arena, effective psychotherapy does not operate using the Rules of Evidence as a means of leveling the playing field. Rather, the Rules of Life come into play, and they can be much more difficult to master.

Conclusion

The way to really get at stress and its multitude of variants is to admit that life is full of problems and always will be, and that people are capable of change, but they have to have the courage to make very difficult choices. Such choices usually involve personal pain and suffering, and one place to seriously reflect on choices and change is in the process called psychotherapy.

At first concepts like choice, suffering and change do not seem concrete and specific, and therefore appear unhelpful. Instead of rejecting the concepts as too mushy, reflect on their practical utility. That is, you can decide to concretely and specifically examine your personal choices and how much you are willing to suffer in order to change. That is not mush - it is as hard as concrete gets.

References

WisLAP Helplines

Stress and the practice of law, depression, anxiety, career matters: (800) 543-2625.

Chemical dependency, alcohol and drug abuse: (800) 254-9154

Books

Seligman, Martin E.P., *What You Can Change ... And What You Can't (Learning to Accept Who You Are)*, Ballantine Books-Random House, 1993.

Myers, David G., *The Pursuit of Happiness*, Avon Books, 1993.

Periodicals

"The Talking Cure for Stress," *Health*, Nov./Dec. 1996, pp. 69-74.

Internet Sites

Mental Health Net: Professional Resources Index

The Arc of the United States: Disability-related Site Index

WisLAP Homepage

Gregory J. Van Rybroek, U.W. 1990, also holds a Ph.D. and is a licensed psychologist. He is the deputy director at Mendota Mental Health Institute and teaches in the U.W.-Madison departments of psychology and psychiatry and at the U.W. Law School.

Wisconsin Lawyer