

# **Effective Stress Management Solutions For The Seriously Curious Attorney**

By: Dr. Maynard Brusman

**In the demanding world attorneys face, effective stress management is an essential skill.** Managing stress allows you to excel in the workplace while maintaining a well-balanced, healthy lifestyle.

**Unmanaged stress increases anxiety, depression, anger, substance abuse, and feelings of hopelessness- all of which decrease quality of life and workplace productivity.** In fact, a study done at John Hopkins University found that out of 104 occupational groups, lawyers were the most likely to suffer from depression- more than three times more likely than average. And according to a Campbell University study, 11% of attorneys in the state of North Carolina contemplate suicide at least once a month. San Francisco's Hindi Greenberg, President of Lawyers in Transition, has seen hundreds of unhappy attorneys contemplating leaving the practice of law.

**Depression can be understood as basically a change phenomenon.** That is, depression is part of or a reaction to change. There are three major factors as main contributors to depression.

- 1). lack of emotional resilience. Inflexibility, lack of insight and rigidity can cause panic and depression.
  - 2.) lack of physiological resilience. As stress accumulates in a vulnerable individual, mediating brain chemicals are depleted. Antidepressant medication can bring these chemicals into more balance. Non-pharmacological activities such as appropriate exercise and humor can also enhance physiologic functions.
  - (3. lack of an adequate social support system. Isolation perpetuates depression, while resilience is promoted through a network of friends and confidants.
- Attention to all these factors produces greater self-esteem and a more flexible person able to manage the external depleting factors that often support depression.

**An ever-increasing number of attorneys are complaining of persistent and excessive anxiety.** "Persistent anxiety" can be described as a condition that results from prolonged periods of anxiety. "Anxiety" is a state of uneasiness, fear, or worry, brought on by real or perceived threats to our safety or well being. The immediate physical responses set off by anxiety include increased heart and breathing rates, dilated blood vessels, and tensed muscles. The emotional responses include uneasiness, apprehension, and dread. One lawyer described her anxiety as "I used to love my work, but lately I feel so drained and irritable, I dread going to the office. And, these headaches... Of course, I haven't had a vacation in years..."

**Another lawyer expressed her emotional state as follows: " I always thought I was a worrier. I'd feel keyed up and unable to relax.** At time it would come and go, and at times it would be constant. It could go on for days. I'd have terrible sleeping problems. There were times I'd wake up wired in the middle of the night. I had trouble concentrating, even reading the newspaper or a novel. Sometimes I'd feel a little lightheaded. My heart would race or pound. And that would make me worry more."

**Excessive stress and anxiety can frequently lead to lawyers experiencing panic attacks.** Fear...heart palpitations...terror, a sense of impending doom... dizziness...fear of fear. The words used to describe panic disorder are often frightening. In panic disorder, brief episodes of intense fear are accompanied by multiple physical symptoms that occur repeatedly and unexpectedly in the absence of any external threat. These "panic attacks," which are the hallmark of panic disorder, are believed to occur when the brain's normal mechanism for reacting to a threat-the so-called "fight or flight" response- becomes inappropriately aroused. Most people with panic disorder also feel anxious about the possibility of having another panic attack and avoid situations in which they believe these attacks are likely to occur. Initial panic attacks may occur when attorneys are under considerable stress, from an overload of work and pressure to bill client hours, for example, or difficulty with dictatorial superiors.

### **Golden Rules for Coping With Panic**

1. Remember that although your feelings and symptoms are very frightening, they are not dangerous or harmful.

2. Understand that what you are experiencing is just an exaggeration of your bodily reactions to stress.
3. Do not fight your feelings or try to wish them away. The more you are willing to face them, the less intense they will become.
4. Do not add to your panic by thinking about what "might" happen. If you find yourself asking, "What if?" tell yourself "So what!"
5. STAY IN THE PRESENT. Notice what is really happening to you as opposed to what you think "might" happen.
6. Label your fear level from zero to ten and watch it go up and down. Notice that it does not stay at a very high level for more than a few seconds.
7. When you find yourself thinking about the fear, CHANGE YOUR "WHAT IF" THINKING. Focus on and carry out a simple and manageable task.
8. Notice that when you stop adding frightening thoughts to your fear, it begins to fade.
9. When the fear comes, expect and accept it. Wait and give it time to pass without running away from it.
10. Be proud of yourself for your progress thus far, and think about how good you will feel when you succeed this time.

\* Anxiety Disorders Association of America

**Fortunately, anxiety disorders are among the most treatable psychiatric disorders.** Effective treatment modes vary widely. The most common treatments involve therapies and medication. Behavior therapy employs a variety of techniques that can help attorneys gain better control of their actions and reactions. For example, one technique trains clients in *diaphragmatic breathing*, a special breathing exercise involving slow deep breaths to reduce anxiety. This is necessary because people who are anxious often hyperventilate; taking rapid

shallow breaths that can trigger rapid heartbeat, lightheadedness, and other symptoms. Another technique - *exposure therapy* - gradually exposes clients to what frightens them and helps them cope with their fears. Like behavior therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy teaches clients to react differently to the situations and bodily sensations that trigger panic attacks and other anxiety symptoms. However, clients also learn to understand how their thinking patterns contribute to their symptoms and how to change their thoughts so that symptoms are less likely to occur. This awareness of thinking patterns is combined with exposure and other behavioral techniques to help people confront their feared situations. For example, someone who becomes light headed during a panic attack and fears he is going to die can be helped with the following approach used in cognitive-behavioral therapy. The therapist asks him to spin in a circle until he becomes dizzy. When he becomes alarmed and starts thinking, "I am going to die," he learns to replace that thought with a more appropriate one, such as, "It's just a little dizziness- I can handle it." Medication often plays a positive role in the treatment of anxiety disorders. It is most effective when used in conjunction with other treatment modes.

**An effective approach to managing stress and anxiety for attorneys has as its foundational and well-established premise, that stress results from the interaction between the experiences we face and our evaluation of those experiences.** Effective stress management requires an understanding of these evaluations and interpretations, our responses and behavioral styles, and how the application of proven and effective cognitive and behavioral strategies can help attorneys transform workplace stress into high performance.

**What is stress?** Stress consists of an event, called a stressor, plus ...

- how we feel about it,
- how we interpret it, and
- what we do to cope with it.

**How much stress we feel depends on the *amount of change* required to cope with the situation.** Three major sources of stress are: changes in the environment, conflicted relationships, and internal emotional pressures and conflicts. The greatest source of stress is the tremendous internal pressure and anxiety that we create for ourselves through...

- *worrying* about situations we can't control

- *perfectionism* - expecting too much of ourselves or others
- *competition* - turning every encounter into a win-lose situation
- *self-criticism* - focusing on faults, rather than strengths
- *insecurity* - looking to others to provide emotional security rather than ourselves
- *powerlessness* - failing to see the choices that are available
- *hurrying* - constantly pushing ourselves to perform better and faster
- *comparison* of our achievements, or lack of them, to those of others
- *pessimism* - expecting the worst from life
- the *unrealistic expectation* that life can be problem-free

### **Eustress or Distress?**

*If I just didn't have all these problems and pressure, life would be great. Maybe making a transition into another career is the solution.* This may or may not be true. Another word for *problem* is *challenge*; challenges invigorate us and make our lives more interesting.

When we meet a challenge successfully, we feel proud and exhilarated. The happy feeling of *I did it!* that comes from effectively coping with stress is called eustress. Many researchers believe it actually promotes health as well as enhancing life.

**Eustress occurs when we correctly identify the source of our stress and take constructive action to deal with it.** The secret of positive stress is a sense of control. When we can make choices and influence the outcome of a situation, we meet the challenge successfully and return to a normal level of functioning relatively quickly.

### **Distress occurs when...**

- We believe we have no control over what happens in our lives;
- we see few or no options;
- the source of stress is ambiguous
- stress is prolonged over time; or
- several sources of stress exist simultaneously.

Distress is accompanied by tension, pressure and anxiety. Rather than the concerted energy of eustress, we feel drained. While some stress is necessary to give life variety and challenge, too much stress or the wrong kind, or at the wrong time, becomes debilitating.

**Signs of stress overload include:**

- hurrying everywhere; walking, talking, driving faster
- feeling depressed, apathetic or bored most of the time
- changes in sleeping or eating patterns
- difficulty enjoying social activities
- emphasis on how much you get done rather than how well you do it
- inability to accept praise or affection, even when you want it
- more frequent accidents than usual

**When stress overload causes health problems, it affects our budgets as well as our minds.** Stress impairs immune system functioning, lowering the body's resistance to disease. Many medical texts estimate that as much as 50-80% of all disease is stress-related.

**Statistics indicate that it costs the U.S. at least \$200 billion a year in stress-related absenteeism, lowered productivity, increased compensation claims, health insurance and direct medical expenses.** Job stress sabotages physical and psychological well-being and contributes to dozens of health problems, from headaches to hypertension.

Now perhaps you would like to take a simple stress quiz to find out how well you are currently managing the stress in your life

**STRESS MANAGEMENT LIFESTYLE INVENTORY**

Score each item according to how much of the time each statement applies to you.

**1(always), 2(often), 3(sometimes), 4(rarely), 5(never)**

- \_\_\_ 1. I eat well-balanced, nutritious meals each day.
- \_\_\_ 2. I enjoy my work.
- \_\_\_ 3. I organize and manage my time effectively.
- \_\_\_ 4. I like myself.
- \_\_\_ 5. I exercise on a regular basis.
- \_\_\_ 6. I am the appropriate weight for my height and body-type.

- \_\_\_ 7. I have two or less alcoholic drinks per day.
- \_\_\_ 8. I abstain from smoking cigarettes.
- \_\_\_ 9. I drink fewer than three cups of coffee (or tea or cola drinks) a day.
- \_\_\_ 10. I get sufficient sleep and wake up each morning feeling refreshed and relaxed.
- \_\_\_ 11. I am flexible and am able to maintain a healthy balance between work and family.
- \_\_\_ 12. I have an adequate income.
- \_\_\_ 13. I have a support system of friends, family, and/or other love interests.
- \_\_\_ 14. I feel in control, take on new challenges and seek solutions to problems.
- \_\_\_ 15. I am able to speak openly about my feelings when angry or worried.
- \_\_\_ 16. I am able to say " No " without feeling guilty.
- \_\_\_ 17 I am free of physical symptoms such as headaches, back pain, or teeth grinding.
- \_\_\_ 18 I am free of emotional symptoms such as depression, anxiety, fatigue, or fear.
- \_\_\_ 19 I feel that my life has meaning and purpose.
- \_\_\_ 20. I am compassionate, able to relax, and see the humorous side of life.

**TOTAL SCORE**\_\_\_\_\_

## **SCORING GUIDE**

**1-30 STRESS MASTER**

**31-50 TAKE A STRESS MANAGEMENT COURSE**

**51-100 RED ALERT! CONSIDER COUNSELING AND**

# COACHING IN LEARNING STRESS MANAGEMENT SKILLS

## Action Planning

**It is important to manage change and become more stress resilient.**

Take action to make things better. How? Experiment with these ideas. Begin with one specific behavior change item. Then, commit over 21 consecutive days to record, measure and implement successful change.

## How to Master Stress

### Guidelines

#### **Get Organized**

**Put important things first.** This is the habit of self-management. It involves organizing and managing time and events around personal priorities. Develop clear values and a sense of purpose.

#### **Rehearse**

**Being prepared reduces stress.** When you're facing a situation that you know will be stressful to you, rehearse it mentally or with a friend. Anticipate what might occur and plan your response.

#### **Do It Now**

**Procrastination breeds stress!** Do your most difficult task at the beginning of the day when you're fresh; avoid the stress of dreading it all day.

#### **Put Perfectionism in its Proper Place**

**Perfectionism is often a poor use of time.** Not everything requires perfection. High priority items require more perfection than low priority items. By demanding perfection of yourself and others, you may be wasting time in unnecessary effort.



***Change Attitudes*** Think of stressful situations as a ***challenge*** to your creative thinking, rather than looking at them as insurmountable problems. Generate solutions.

***Learn to Say "No"*** Say "no" when your schedule is full: to responsibilities that aren't yours; to emotional demands that leave you feeling exhausted; to other people's problems that you don't have the power to solve.

***Take Care of your Body*** You will have more energy and become stress hardy when you eat a balanced diet, get sufficient sleep and exercise regularly.

***Optimistic Self-Talk*** Use positive self-reinforcement: "I can handle this one step at a time", instead of frightening or depressing yourself by coming up with reasons why you can't cope.

***Support*** Actively seek support from friends, colleagues, and family. Don't be a Lone Ranger.

***Take Charge*** Take responsibility for making your life what you want it to be. It is more empowering to feel a sense of control and to make decisions. Commit to what you want and take action.

**Need some quick relief?** Put a copy of this brief exercise on your desk or tape it to the inside of your briefcase. It only takes a minute to renew your energy.

## **Brief Relax/Refresher for Attorneys**

1. Find yourself a comfortable position with as few distractions as possible.

2. Gently close your eyes and focus your attention inward.
3. Imagine a radiant light releasing your stress.
4. Take a few slow easy breaths, taking air in through your nose and exhaling through your mouth
5. Say to yourself, "Alert mind, calm body."
6. Now take a deep, soothing breath all the way down to your abdomen.
7. As you exhale, let your facial muscles, neck and shoulders relax.
8. Feel a wave of warmth and heaviness sweep down to your toes.
9. Allow the relaxation to re-energize your body and mind.
10. Slowly open your eyes, stretch, and ease back into normal activities.

**Stress is a natural response within all of us and it can serve as a valuable source of increased energy and creativity.** When coupled with an optimistic attitude, positive or eustress can help you accomplish the things in life that are most important. However, knowing how to manage unwanted stress and relax is essential to your enjoyment of life.

**Remember that you are in charge of your own physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.** You can choose to be happy, healthy, and relaxed.

**Dr. Maynard Brusman is a consulting psychologist and executive coach.** He has an executive coaching practice in the San Francisco Financial District specializing in working with attorneys.

Dr. Maynard Brusman  
Consulting Psychologist and Executive Coach  
Tel: 415-546-1252  
E-mail: [mbrusman@workingresources.com](mailto:mbrusman@workingresources.com)

Web Site: <http://www.workingresources.com>

Subscribe to Working Resources Newsletter: <http://www.workingresources.com>

Visit Maynard's Blog: <http://www.workingresourcesblog.com>

The Society for Advancement of Consulting (SAC) awarded "Board Approved" designations in the specialties of Executive Coaching and Leadership Development.

**Working Resources** is a Strategic Talent Management and Leadership Consulting Firm Helping Inventive Companies and Law Firms Assess, Select, Coach, and Retain Emotionally Intelligent Leaders; Executive Coaching; Performance-Based Interviewing and Selection; Competency Modeling; Succession Management; Career Coaching; Corporate Culture Surveys and Leadership Retreats

**Dr. Maynard Brusman**

Consulting Psychologist and Executive Coach

Trusted Advisor to Senior Leadership Teams

Subscribe to Working Resources **FREE** E-mail Newsletter.

<http://www.workingresources.com>

Visit Maynard's Blog: <http://www.workingresourcesblog.com>

E-mail: [mbrusman@workingresources.com](mailto:mbrusman@workingresources.com).

Voice: 415-546-1252

Connect with me on these Social Media sites.

<http://twitter.com/drbrusman>

<http://www.facebook.com/maynardbrusman>

<http://www.linkedin.com/in/maynardbrusman>

<http://www.youtube.com/user/maynardbrusman>