



Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program

Mitigating Compassion Fatigue **General Outline**

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Disclaimer: This is a general outline of the presentation and is meant to be an introduction to the material with some quick and easy tips for participants & attendees. A full content outline will be available upon request after the presentation. Additional resources can be found on our website at: www.coloradolap.org.

I. Understanding Stress

- **Stress vs. Stressor:** Stress is the body's response to (real or imagined) danger, and a stressor is the event, situation, or perspective that causes stress. It's important to understand that while we cannot usually control the "stressors," we can control how our body and our mind responds to them, which means we can control stress with the right tools.
- **Good vs. Bad Stress:** There is "good" stress, called eustress, and "bad" stress, called distress. Eustress motivates us and saves our lives in life threatening situations. Distress, on the other hand, feels stressful and compromises our health. The trigger for distress is uncertainty, chronic stressors that you have no control over, and believing that you don't have the resources to cope with a situation.
- **Health vs. Distress:** When the body and the mind are perpetually stressed, systems in the body that are not essential to survival go "off line," causing physical, mental, and emotional illness.
- **Perception vs. Reality:** Changing how we perceive stress (ie. turning distress into eustress) can improve how our body responds to a stressor. For example, believing that something is challenging and will help us grow (but not impossible or upsetting) helps us turn distress that compromises our health into eustress that can improve our health.

II. Signs & Symptoms of Stress

- Signs and symptoms of stress are cognitive, emotional, physical, and behavioral.
- Stress responses include:
 - Fight or flight strategies such as catastrophizing/anxiety and anger/resentment.
 - Freeze or faint strategies such as apathy/depression and dissociation or “zoning out.”
- What are the symptoms you experience when you are stressed? How do you cope with stress? Assessing your symptoms and how you take care of yourself when you are stressed is crucial to making positive changes.
- Stress and emotions are contagious & addictive
 - Track what is “yours” and what is someone else’s stress or emotional reaction.
 - Track how you respond to stressors. What types of reactions, thoughts and emotional reactions do you tend to repeat on a daily basis?

III. Stress in the Legal Profession – Cause & Effect

- **Super Hero Complex:** Lawyers are problem solvers, so it’s difficult for us to know (or admit) when we need to improve our self-care or ask for help. Remember that vulnerability is a strength, not a weakness, and that self-care is a necessity, not a luxury, in the work that we do.
- **Magic Wand Myth:** Lawyers help solve problems, but we cannot control how someone feels. Sometimes clients will be unhappy regardless of the outcome of a case, and we can’t control that. Co-dependency is an occupational hazard because we are trying to control outcomes that involve other people’s lives, expectations can be high, and we don’t have magic wands.
- **Competition in an Adversarial System:** Perfectionism & aggression are major contributing factors to stress, anxiety, and depression, and can be imbedded in the practice of law.

- **Dealing with Difficult Personalities:** Coping with difficult people can be a daily stressor for attorneys that can lead to anger, resentment, anxiety, “defeatist” attitudes, exhaustion, depression, compassion fatigue, and burnout.
- **Too Many Hats:** You might wear many hats in a day: lawyer, manager, writer, disciplinarian, director, shopper/consumer, communicator, spouse/partner, parent, friend, etc. Switching tasks quickly or often makes the brain “stop and go,” requires tremendous energy, and depletes chemicals in the brain needed to concentrate and process information, leaving you exhausted and cloudy-headed.
- **Exposure to Traumatic & Dramatic Content:** Consistent exposure to traumatized clients and sensitive material in cases can lead to difficulty sleeping, emotional or mental numbness, compassion fatigue and secondary trauma.

IV. 20 Quick & Simple Tips to Mitigate Stress

- Take off your “lawyer” hat when you aren’t at work: refrain from perpetually problem solving, arguing, etc. when you are with your friends and loved ones.
- Time and attention management: track your thoughts and your focus throughout the day. Try to reduce negative, perseverating, obsessive, blaming, or angry thoughts and focus on being more humorous, positive, creative, and productive.
- Stand up and move more throughout the day.
- Activate your senses and perception: take a moment to register what you are thinking, feeling, seeing, smelling, hearing, etc.
- When possible, do one task at a time rather than multitasking. As tasks you need to take care of come to mind, write them down on a to-do list and then get back to the task at hand.
- Listen to music that uplifts you or calms you down.
- Repeat a calming mantra, prayer, or saying to yourself when you become distressed.

- Track your nervous system's reactions: when you become upset, ask yourself if you are under real or imagined threat; if it is imagined, choose a different response.
- Lighten up and smile more!
- We often self-sabotage when we are stressed and overwhelmed, so practice moderation in your behaviors and choices.
- Identify what you cannot control and let it go.
- Organize your life in a way that makes things easier on you: plan time for travel so you aren't rushed if traffic gets bad, etc.
- Play more; do more of the things that bring you happiness and joy.
- Take breaks throughout the day, even if they are just momentary breaks to mindfully breath, look around, and orient yourself.
- Relax your jaw and release your tongue from the roof of your mouth.
- Breathe deeply into your lower belly. Inhale for 5-10 seconds, pause, and exhale for 5-10 seconds.
- Get at least 7-8 hours of sleep a night. Research shows that lawyers are sleep deprived, and the deprivation negatively impacts our cognitive, physical, and mental health.
- Garden, play with your pets or children, and engage in hobbies.
- Create and nurture healthy interpersonal relationships!

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Do you need help coping with your stressors and letting them go? Your Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program provides free and confidential services for judges, lawyers, and law students. If you need resources for ANY issue that is compromising your ability to be a productive member of the legal community, or if there is someone you are concerned about, contact COLAP at (303) 986-3345. For more information about COLAP, please visit www.coloradolap.org.