

LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

ANXIETY AND PERFECTIONISM

For many lawyers and judges, anxiety is a constant companion as they are driven by fierce competitiveness and perfectionism. Depending on the individual, anxiety levels may rise dramatically during law school and then continue into the practice of law. Over time, if anxiety continues to build, the person may develop mental health disorders such as generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder or social anxiety disorder.¹ Biological factors, family background and particularly stressful life experiences play a role in the development of anxiety disorders.

Law is a noble profession and extremely rewarding on many levels but it is equally demanding and often visits high levels of stress and anxiety upon its practitioners, all due to the fact that it exists within an adversarial system that routinely pits practitioners against each other.

The challenge of law school, and practicing law thereafter, renders seasoned lawyers and judges who can, and do, withstand high pressure, but it is concurrently important to acknowledge that literally all of us are made of flesh and blood. That means, in the fullness of time, any of us may develop anxiety problems if exposed to unrelenting stress.

While stress levels vary from practice to practice, there is one common denominator that affects virtually all lawyers and judges — the expectation of perfection.

Our perfectionism began as a self-imposed mandate during law school competition. Thereafter, the legal profession doggedly demands precise attention to detail. Mistakes can be costly to our clients, our professional reputation and our malpractice insurers.

In general, there is nothing wrong with high standards in any endeavor; a healthy level of stress and anxiety is motivational and helps us to succeed. But, when anxiety becomes merciless and overwhelming, it

Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (JLAP)

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decreases productivity and significantly reduces one's quality of life. In the most extreme cases, anxiety can render a person unable to function and not fit to practice.

If we can't eliminate anxiety in the practice of law, what tools are available to *reduce* it to more manageable levels?

Some people seek relief through alcohol or drug use, but being dependent on substances places them at risk for developing issues with both anxiety *and* substance dependency. There are healthier strategies.

Expectations of perfection will always be a part of practicing law. But what we can do to consciously minimize pessimism in our thinking and reduce "ANT" thinking (automatic negative thoughts)?²

Is it your nature to view things optimistically and always hope for the best, or do you tend to predict that the worst will likely happen and then worry all the time about what terrible outcome may materialize in cases you are handling?

We are learning it is unhealthy to focus all thought on either the past or the future, while being generally *unfocused* to the present moment. It is also unhealthy to think too much and ruminate all the time. Lawyers' brains often run in a continuous loop of reviewing past evidence and planning future strategies to resolve their clients' cases. There is very little time spent "in the now."

To ensure mental health, however, our brains need sufficient downtime to actually think of *nothing*. This is an extremely challenging concept for lawyers who live in a fast-paced world of intense analytical

reasoning and thinking. But, some lawyers are successfully learning how to meditate and experiencing its benefits.

On JLAP's new website, www.louisianajlap.com, there are links to resources about anxiety and how to manage it. The mission is to always be proactive and take care of our personal mental health *before* pathologies have any chance to fully develop.

A new book, cited on JLAP's website under "Anxiety Resources," may help — *The Anxious Lawyer, An 8-Week Guide to a Joyful and Satisfying Law Practice Through Mindfulness and Meditation*.³ It is a useful tool in helping lawyers and judges utilize new and better strategies to reduce anxiety in their day-to-day professional lives. JLAP encourages everyone suffering from stress and anxiety to keep an open mind and give meditation a genuine try.

Today's comprehensive JLAP provides assistance with all mental health issues. JLAP has licensed professional clinical staff on hand. If you are suffering from anxiety and need immediate help, or help with any other mental health issue such as depression, make a totally confidential call to JLAP at (985)778-0571 or email jlap@louisianajlap.com. You do not have to give your name.

FOOTNOTES

1. www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml.
2. <http://anxietynetwork.com/content/perfectionism-and-pressure>.
3. www.theanxiouslawyer.com/.

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