

Lawyers ASSISTANCE

By Dr. Angela White-Bazile, Esq.

ADDRESSING STRESS? DON'T GO IT ALONE

Back at work? Still working from home? Vaccinated? Not yet or not at all? Mask or no mask?

Before you assess whether things seem different around you, take a moment to identify what may or may not be going on within you.

Have you noticed:

- ▶ A decrease in your energy and activity levels?
- ▶ An increase in your alcohol, tobacco use, or use of illegal drugs?
- ▶ An increase in irritability, with outbursts of anger and frequent arguing?
- ▶ Trouble relaxing or sleeping?
- ▶ Crying frequently?
- ▶ Worrying excessively?
- ▶ Blaming other people for everything?
- ▶ Difficulty communicating or listening?
- ▶ Difficulty giving or accepting help?
- ▶ Loss of appetite or overeating?
- ▶ Not caring about anything?
- ▶ Trouble remembering things?
- ▶ Difficulty making decisions?¹

If you have experienced, or are experiencing, any of the above, you may be stressed. It has only been a little over a year since COVID-19 violated every corner, plan and system of the world. The pandemic mandated a worldwide pause, which did not discriminate based on race, age, gender, socioeconomic status, profession or geographic location. The pandemic forced everyone to spend time with families, significant others, and, more importantly, ourselves. We were driven to self-reflect and notice some qualities that may or may not be healthy.

Unquestionably, living in a world of uncertainty and unknown has caused many to encounter stress. The American Bar Association (ABA) defines stress



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as a “physical, mental, and emotional response to life’s changes and demands.”² There has been much change and uncertainty over the last year for everyone. Not only were we faced with COVID-19, social isolation and the loss of many lives, but 2020 also saw an increase in racial and social unrest. It was also a huge election and transitional year. Then, days into 2021, there was a riot at the U.S. Capitol. There have been mass shootings, winter storms, flooding, high-profile divorces, and numerous civil rights trials.

Stress cannot be avoided entirely as it is a natural part of everyday life and can be healthy in small doses. It is constant and intense stress that can negatively affect all aspects of a person’s life and lead to physical, mental and emotional issues. Stress can cause elevated blood pressure, increased heart rate, muscle tension and mood changes. Stress also can develop into depression or anxiety.³

Stress and its effects have become a growing interest as more individuals and professions are concerned with mental health. The American Psychological Association has commissioned an annual nationwide survey — the Stress in America survey — since 2007 to examine the state of stress across the country.⁴

The most recent Stress in America survey of 3,000 adults was conducted in February 2021 by The Harris Poll. The

survey found that:

▶ 61% of adults reported experiencing undesired weight changes since the start of the pandemic.

▶ 53% of adults said they have been less physically active.

▶ 67% said they are sleeping more or less than they want to.

▶ Nearly one in four adults (23%) reported drinking more alcohol to cope with their stress. This proportion jumps to more than half of adults (52%) who are parents with children 5-7 years old.

▶ 48% of parents said the level of stress in their life has increased compared with before the pandemic. More than three in five parents with children who are still home for remote learning (62%) said the same.

▶ 57% of Black Americans were most likely to report feelings of concern about the future compared to 51% of Asians, 50% of Hispanics, and 47% of Whites.

▶ Generation Z adults (46%) were the most likely generation to say that their mental health has worsened compared with before the pandemic, followed by Xers (33%), Millennials (31%), Boomers (28%), and older adults (9%).⁵

Overall, “survey responses reveal that physical health may be declining due to an inability to cope in healthy ways with the stresses of the pandemic.”⁶ The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention confirms that increased stress levels can cause health problems, including nightmares, headaches, body pains, stomach problems, skin rashes, and an increased use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs.⁷ Various studies suggest that attorneys battle substance abuse, anxiety and depression at higher rates than the general population. Thus, it is even more important for us to address how we deal with stress.

According to Rebecca Simon, a wellness consultant and former law school professor, “the coronavirus crisis has a particular impact on the types of people lawyers tend to be — people who like data, control and predictability.”⁸ She also stated that the default mind of lawyers is to push through the emotions and do the work.⁹

In a survey of more than 1,000 judges across the United States before COVID-19, “about one-third or more reported fatigue and low energy, sleep disturbance or disturbed attention and concentration.”¹⁰ The ABA released these results of the National Judicial Stress and Resiliency Survey in December 2020.

Between September and October 2020, the ABA surveyed more than 4,200 of its members, finding, “Roughly 40% feared that they were going to get laid off or furloughed, and 52% said that generating business from new clients was more difficult.”¹¹ Results also appear to show that women have had a more difficult time coping with employment and caregiver duties and maintaining the household, with “roughly 22% of women responding that they are ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ concerned that if they continue to work remotely that they would be considered uncommitted to their firm.”¹²

Law students and recent graduates also have experienced stress transitioning to virtual classes and remote bar exams on top of concerns about their own health and the health of their loved ones. Some students also had internship and job offers rescinded and are likely worried about their futures.

So, what do you do when you are unable to push through the emotions and do the work? How do you handle stress?

Some great tips to reduce or manage stress include breathing exercises; meditate; regular physical exercise and healthy eating; recite affirmations; make a list of things you are thankful for; guide your thoughts into a positive environment; take control over your schedule by setting healthy boundaries; surround yourself with optimistic and encouraging people; disconnect from electronic devices; rest; laugh; and



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avoid drugs and alcohol.¹³

The current circumstances are challenging for everyone, and unprecedented change is a part of life. But know that you are not alone, as everyone experiences stress. You are only one person, and you cannot do everything all the time. Gradually, implement one or more of these tips to create balance in your life. Prioritizing your well-being will improve the culture of the legal profession and also enhance the experience of every individual you come into contact with.

Intentionally make time for yourself as we slowly return to our pre-pandemic routines and be encouraged to seek professional help when necessary. There is no shame in seeking help. We must take care of ourselves to be able to provide the best services.

Even though things may look very different than we planned, we made it through last year, another school year, and another fiscal year. If you need help managing your stress, JLAP is here to serve and support you. You do not have to address it alone.

To learn more or to seek confidential help with stress or any type of mental

health or addiction issue, contact the professional clinical staff at JLAP at (985)778-0571, email jlap@louisianajlap.com, or visit the website at: www.louisianajlap.com. Remember, we are a Safe Haven of Healing.

FOOTNOTES

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, “Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks,” www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/lawyer_assistance/sma14-4885.pdf.

2. “Stress,” American Bar Association, Jan. 13, 2021, www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/resources/stress/.

3. “Stress Effects on the Body,” American Psychological Association, www.apa.org/topics/stress/body.

4. “Stress in America Press Room, Stress in America 2021: Pandemic Stress One Year On,” American Psychological Association, www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress.

5. “One Year Later, A New Wave of Pandemic Health Concerns,” American Psychological Association, March 11, 2021, www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2021/one-year-pandemic-stress.

6. *Id.*

7. “Coping with Stress,” Jan. 22, 2021, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html.

8. Lizzy McLellan, “Lawyer Mental Health is Facing Its Greatest Challenge, But Increased Empathy May Be the Byproduct,” Oct. 2, 2020, www.law.com/americanlawyer/2020/10/02/lawyer-mental-health-is-facing-its-greatest-challenge-but-increased-empathy-may-be-the-byproduct/?slr-tum=20210405141408.

9. *Id.*

10. “ABA Releases Comprehensive Survey Report Revealing Key Drivers of Judicial Stress,” American Bar Association, Dec. 23, 2020, www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/aba-news-archives/2020/12/aba-releases-comprehensive-survey-report-revealing-key-drivers-of/.

11. Dylan Jackson, “Women and Minority Lawyers Worry ‘The Pandemic Will Define Their Career,’” *The American Lawyer*, April 26, 2021, accessed via LexisNexis.com.

12. *Id.*

13. “Healthy Ways to Handle Life’s Stressors,” American Psychological Association, Nov. 1, 2019, www.apa.org/topics/stress/tips.

Dr. Angela White-Bazile, Esq., is the executive director of the Louisiana Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (JLAP) and can be reached at (985)778-0571, toll-free (866)354-9334 or by email at jlap@louisianajlap.com.

