



## RESILIENCY TO STRESS

### *Content Outline, Tips & Takeaways*

#### I. THE BASICS OF STRESS & RESILIENCY

- a. **What is Stress?:** Stress is the nervous system's response to a real or perceived threat. You can tell when your nervous system is activated by the way that you feel (see below for signs & symptoms). Whether the stimulus is an email, a headline, a comment made by opposing counsel, or an actual life-threatening situation, your brain will employ fight, flight, freeze, or faint strategies in an effort to cope.
- b. **Stressors & Stress:** Stress is the body's response to a perceived danger, stressor, or stimulus, is the event, situation, or thought that causes the nervous system to react. While we cannot control the "stressors," we can control our stress response through resiliency, grit, and stress hardiness techniques.
- c. **Eustress & Distress:** Research suggests that our interpretation of the stressor determines what kind of stress response our brain and body deploy.
  - i. **Eustress:** If we are excited about the challenge or situation, we perceive the stimulus and the stress as helpful, and therefore experience eustress. Physiologically the eustress response releases healing chemicals throughout the body.
  - ii. **Distress:** If the stimulus scares us, worries us, or we dread it and the stimulus is perceived as debilitating, our bodies deploy a distress reaction. The distress response was designed to be implemented on a short term basis, in response to life threatening situations. However, when stress is deployed on a long term basis, this response compromises our intelligence, problem solving abilities, physical health, and emotional intelligence.
  - iii. **Changing distress to eustress:** Practicing gratitude, appreciation, incorporating a sense of humor, and finding the silver lining in situations, are evidence-backed practices that help us turn our distress to eustress.
- d. **Predicting Distress:** Situations that create distress include chronic stressors we have no control over, situations where there is uncertainty and where there is an expectation of a negative outcome, the belief that we don't have the resources to cope, or feeling helpless, isolated and alone.
  - i. When we are in a state of chronic stress, all systems considered "non-essential for survival" will begin to conserve energy. Our digestive, reproductive, and immune systems are not considered crucial in a life-threatening emergency, so it is likely that the body will experience difficulties with digestion, reproduction (including sex drive), and immune response when stress is chronic.



- e. **Stress Becomes Trauma:** When we feel helpless or hopeless and find that we aren't "bouncing back" from difficulties, our stress creates neurological, physiological, and psychological changes we call trauma. Trauma is not an event; it is how the nervous system alters our thoughts, perceptions, personality, habits, and memories in an attempt to help us survive stressful events in the future. When our survival instincts kick-in, different parts of the brain can "hijack" one another and monopolize our energy and focus. For example, we might go into an "analysis paralysis" state of overthinking or worrying and exhibit an overreactive emotional state where we can't think logically or with compassion for others. Trauma impacts our relationships with others, influences our world view and behaviors, and increases the chance we will develop problematic substance use or mental issues, such as anxiety or depression.

## II. SIGNS & SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

- a. **Cognitive:** memory problems, poor judgement, seeing only the negative, anxious or racing thoughts, constant worrying
- b. **Emotional:** moodiness, irritability, agitation, feeling overwhelmed, sense of loneliness, depression/general unhappiness
- c. **Physical:** aches and pains, digestive issues, chest pain, frequent colds
- d. **Behavioral:** changes in eating or sleeping patterns, procrastination, use of drugs or alcohol, development of nervous habits such as pacing and nail biting
  - i. *Fight or flight* strategies: catastrophizing, feelings of abandonment, anger, resentment, leaving, or running away
  - ii. *Freeze or faint* strategies: apathy, depression, avoidance, overthinking, and dissociation or "zoning out"

## III. CONSIDERATIONS IN STRESS MITIGATION

- a. What symptoms do you experience when you are stressed? Assess your symptoms and recognize what you are feeling.
- b. Create a proactive plan for "how to take care of yourself when stressed," and make sure loved ones or trusted colleagues can provide help.
- c. Stress and emotions are contagious. Track your own emotional reactions and be aware of what you are responsible for (yourself), and recognize what may belong to someone else in terms of stress or emotional reaction. Increase awareness of how you are responding to stressors.
- d. What we see and hear become part of our own experience, so have discretion with what you expose yourself to when you can.
- e. Stress and emotions can be addictive; the more frequently you practice certain types of thoughts or emotional reactions to circumstance, the more the cells of your body crave those particular emotional states.

## IV. BUILDING RESILIENCY IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

- a. **The Role of Relationships:** We are relational beings, and from Viktor Frankl's logotherapy to modern mindfulness and wellbeing experts such as Dan Siegel, it holds true that the strength of our relationships can enhance or detract from our ability



to “bounce back” in the face of stress and vicarious trauma. Watch Dr. Brené Brown’s “The Power of Empathy” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jz1g1SpD9Zo> and “Blame” at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL1JgIj3\\_fA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL1JgIj3_fA)

- b. **Routines, Rituals and Schedules:** During times of vast, unpredictable and sudden change our routines and schedules can either work for us or against us. Tune into how things such as movement, food, music, social media and the news may be impacting our moods, emotions and energy levels. If we are intentional, about managing our routines and schedules we can leverage these changes to our benefit. If left to run wild, change can also unintentionally derail us.
- c. **The Many Buckets of Wellness:** Wellness has many buckets including physical, spiritual, emotional, mental, communal, professional and familial. When we are in-tune with ourselves and understand how to fill each of our buckets for wellness, we grow more resilient and are more likely to bounce back should one of our buckets or “accounts” become unexpectedly drained, as described by Michael Hyatt in the book (Living Forward.)
- d. **Supporting Resiliency in the Workplace:** Workplaces which embrace a culture of trauma stewardship are better equipped to support a resilient team of attorneys, clients and legal staff for the long haul. World renowned Vicarious Trauma expert, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky coined the term, “Trauma Stewardship” to approach wellbeing and resiliency from a systemic and cultural level. TEDTalk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOzDGrcvmus>
- e. **“Low Impact Debriefing:”** Maintain positive relationships at work. International Vicarious Trauma expert Françoise Mathieu coined this term for a research-backed strategy to vent, in a way that doesn’t “slime” your colleagues: <https://www.tendacademy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Low-Impact-Debriefing-2019.pdf>
- f. **Mindfulness, Scent & Taste:** Taking a walk in nature, deep breathing, meditating, or simply breathing in the scent of citrus are excellent ways to ground yourself and renew your energy level. The scent of citrus reduces stress and anxiety, renews focus, enhances digestion, and helps brings us back from a state of “fight or flight,” and you can even eat an orange!
- g. **New to mindfulness or meditation?**
  - i. Watch this 3-minute Guide to Mindfulness from Happify: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6T02g5hnT4>
  - ii. Watch this 3-minute Guide to Meditation from Happify: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-kMJBWk9E0>
  - iii. Watch this 2-minute video on Negative Thinking: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXVwOOPu2n4>
  - iv. Try Deepak Chopra’s One Minute Meditation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdG4z5kpD2s>

## V. QUICK SELF-CARE TIPS

- a. Time and attention management: Track your thoughts and focus throughout the day. Try to reduce negative, perseverating, obsessive, blaming, or angry thoughts



and focus on being more humorous, positive, and creative.

- b. Create a ritual or routine to assist your mind and body in transitioning to and from work. This can include music, journaling, changing clothes, showering when you get home, exercise, etc.
- c. Stand up and move more throughout the day.
- d. When possible, do one task at a time rather than multitasking.
- e. Listen to music that is uplifting or calming.
- f. Repeat a calming mantra, prayer, or positive saying to yourself when distressed.
- g. When you are upset and your stress is escalating, assess the situation to determine if the stressor is truly an immediate threat, or if it is your mind and body perceiving it as such. If it is the latter, remind yourself that you are safe and have the capability to choose a different response.
- h. Identify what you cannot control and then choose to let it go.
- i. Take breaks throughout the day, even if they are just momentary breaks to mindfully breathe, look around, and activate your senses.
- j. Relax your jaw and release your tongue from the roof of your mouth.
- k. Breathe deeply into your lower belly. Inhale for 5-10 seconds, pause, and exhale for 5-10 seconds.
- l. Get at least 7-8 hours of sleep a night. Research shows lawyers are sleep deprived, and this negatively impacts our physical and mental health.
- m. Garden, play with your pets or children, and engage in hobbies.

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