

Stress Management

General Questions and Answers

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1. What is stress?
2. How can I recognize stress?
3. What causes stress?
4. What is the accumulation of stress?
5. How can we manage stress more effectively?

1. What is stress?

The term stress relates to a psycho-physiological response that is triggered by a reaction to a change, actual or anticipated, in the environment or within the person. Beginning law school creates a change in both the environment and in students' class and study routines. Until students become acclimated to the new law school environment and to the basic processes and methods required in law study, stress may interfere with their learning experiences.

The stress response is not inherently a negative process. It is part of the human safety system that aids humans when they are in dangerous situations by stimulating a protective response that involves either fighting the threat or fleeing from the source of distress. However, neither fight nor flight is an accepted response during classes, even though students' perceptions may include an assessment of danger and their bodies may respond with a classic stress response in reaction to this perception. There is no actual physical danger for a student, but the human organism responds to perceptions of threat to self esteem in the same way it responds to physical threats. Any new environment or new experience can stimulate this response. Usually, students have learned to push through these feelings by recognizing that they are linked to the novelty of the experience, but they may still experience heightened anxiety in approaching class or class preparation until they feel more comfortable here.

The term "stress" also is used to refer to the after effects of the physical response. This may build up over time and create strain on students' physical and psychological systems. Stress and the accumulation of stress can cause a reduced resistance to colds and stimulate feelings of depression. These responses to accumulated stress are uncomfortable and need to be monitored if they seem to be debilitating or extreme. Almost all students will experience some stress reactions to these changes. This is normal. However, a few students may have extreme responses that call for extra support.

Examples of debilitating or extreme stress reactions include:

- frequent and intense anxiety symptoms
- failure to sleep
- continuing upset stomach
- significant change in eating habits such as an inability to eat regularly or significantly and continually overeating
- inability to concentrate or focus on one subject for fear other subjects will not get covered

- an inability to read for class or study
- extreme fear of being called on in class resulting in the inability to articulate when called upon
- Common escapes from stressful situations like excessive drinking, drug use, and not attending classes.

As students adapt and feel at home in the law school throughout their first semester, even their normal stress responses tend to dissipate. Occasionally students continue to experience extreme stress, but these frequently involve collateral stressors that add to the general stress of the changes involved in law study.

Long term stress affects accumulate, particularly when the stress response is triggered frequently, intensely, and for a continuing duration. Over time stress accumulation can result in serious health problems. Since not only law school, but law practice can be stressful and have high levels of uncertainty, it is valuable to be able to recognize stress symptoms and to have an understanding of ways to reduce the negative influences of stress.

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2. How can I recognize stress?

There are two types of symptoms we associate with stress, the emergency stress response and the accumulation of stress.

The emergency response is generally easy to recognize. Remember, this is a normal response. Symptoms include:

- rapid heartbeat
- fast, shallow breathing
- rush of blood to the head, after which there may be some difficulty with short term memory
- queasy stomach
- cold hands
- muscle tension

To counter this response there are a number of Useful techniques:

- Focus on the present time frame. What can the student do right now.
- Work with self-judging thoughts. Students experiencing stress reactions may find that the content of their thoughts emphasizes self-judgment. These judging thoughts often begin with the words "if only" or "what if." "If only" thoughts belong to the past. "What if" thoughts belong in the future. Students cannot remake the past. To spend mental focus on what can not be changed, other than to learn a lesson and move on, results in lost time and attention for present needs and activities. Similarly, spending time anticipating negative possibilities in the future is not productive. These thoughts accentuate and extend a stress response. Let go of thoughts that focus on frightening or uncomfortable past or potential scenarios. Replace them with thoughts about past successes and accomplishments that support feelings of confidence. Positive thoughts encourage perspective and remind students of strategies they have used in other difficult times.

- A breathing exercise: Regulate breathing physically, slowing it and centering mentally on the present time frame. Exhale through the mouth, breathing out mental and physical tension. Breathe in through the nose, imagining that the air brings relaxation, feelings of safety, and positive images of yourself. Hold each breath 3-5 seconds while focusing on being safe. Exhale again and begin another cycle. Continue this process for 3-5 minutes or as long as you need.
- Get physical exercise. In the short term, try to stretch, breathe deeply, and move around. If it is nice outside, take a walk, if not, walk around the school. It is helpful to have extended exercise as part of a weekly routine at least three times a week.

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3. What causes stress?

For a stress response to occur there must be both a perception and an evaluation of change or threat. Remember the cartoon character Mr. Magoo? Mr. Magoo has impaired vision for which he needs very thick glasses. The humor in his character is built around adventures he has when he can not locate or loses his glasses. Because of his vision problems he does not perceive physical objects, animals, or people accurately. What most people would see and evaluate as sources of danger, his faulty perception misinterprets and sees as safe. Since he doesn't "see" the danger he does not accurately evaluate his circumstances. He does not know he is in precarious situations and, thus, feels no stress. The person who is watching the cartoon sees Mr. Magoo's constant flirtation with disaster. It is this tension between his experience of the situation and the viewer's perceptions that creates the engagement and humor people experience in watching him careen through his show. In a sense, it is the viewer who has the stress response! Stress requires a cognitive process, the recognition of potential or actual danger, to elicit a stress response. Once there is a cognitive awareness of danger, the physiology of the person changes. What actually causes stress varies from person to person because the evaluations of potential or actual danger vary among people. For example, speaking up in class may be stressful to some and, yet, stimulating to others. However, across all people once a person evaluates a situation as threatening, the body responds synchronously with an emergency response. The effect of the accumulation of stress is also individual. Systems or organs that are weak from hereditary challenges or from individual life experiences are most susceptible to the wear and tear of accumulated stress. The stress response diminishes the full functioning of the immune system reducing the ability to resist disease. When the adaptation energy is depleted, there are fewer resources for fighting illness or maintaining a coping stance. The body has less flexibility to recuperate. Rest, vacations, or other opportunities for replenishing the physical systems allow the person to physically restore adaptation energy and create a distance from stressors that encourages re-evaluation, often shifting the perception and/or evaluation of the situation to reduce threat or fear. An example is the difference in energy between the first exam and the last exam. There is usually less energy available for preparing for the last exam.

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4. What is the accumulation of stress?

Symptoms of the accumulation of stress are less dramatic than symptoms of the emergency response, but they are no less real. They also reflect a protective response. These symptoms provide warning that stress has reached a detrimental level within the body. A common term associated with the accumulation of stress is burnout. The physical response to long term stressors is literally a using up or burning up of physical energy. Most of the time people have a store of extra energy called adaptation energy that helps the psycho-emotional system adapt to change and that provides extra strength and endurance through emergencies. When people use up this adaptation energy the some of the following symptoms may emerge:

- "on edge" feeling
- explosive reactions
- unusually reclusive
- apathetic exhaustion
- frequent colds or illness
- short tempered or hostile toward others
- pessimistic attitude
- depression

There are a number of ways to counter this accumulation of stress, but all require an awareness of the symptoms and of the problem of accumulated stress. Once a person is aware of the problem and motivated by either the symptoms or the knowledge of the negative consequences of stress, it is possible to address patterns that cause stress and to introduce intervention techniques.

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5. How can we manage stress more effectively?

Four general intervention areas:

Psychological: Psychological intervention focuses on the evaluation process at the core of the stress response.

- **Preparation & Accurate Expectations:** Being prepared helps reduce stress
- **Control:** Be aware of what you can control and what you can't. Let go of that which you can not control.
- **Challenge:** Take on each task as a challenge
- **Progress:** Measure your progress in positive ways. Look to what you learn from the process.
- **Humor:** Humor gives perspective.

Try not to take yourself too seriously, whether you are finding matches easily or not, it is all just a process of finding where you can learn next.

Physical: The stress response prepares the body for a physical process, fighting or fleeing. Most daily stressors can not be fought physically or escaped by running away.

and physical systems, it is necessary to rid the body of the physical adaptations to stress through physical exercise and deep rest in order to return the physical system to a normal state. Nourishing food is also important for rebuilding the physical body after a stress response or when there is a continuing stressor. Warning: caffeine can create a similar response in the body to the stress response.

Social: People withstand stress better when they have good social support systems. Maintaining contact with family and friends helps reduce stress. Study groups and law school organizations can provide peer support. Support each other through this process. Stay in contact with family and friends. Part of what makes a place a "match" is that it is a place that supports you. Lawyering is stressful. How does this firm or group stand up to the supportive test?

Environmental: Systems can create or reduce stress. Examine your environment to create less stressful systems. Examine potential jobs for the ways that their systems create or reduce stress.

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