Self-Care, Stress, and Trauma Exposure Response
for Legal Professionals

Jon Ebert, PsyD
Assistant Professor
Vanderbilt Medical Center
Department of Psychiatry
Jon.S.Ebert@vanderbilt.edu

Objective:
1. Understand how our stress response works.
2. Identify warning signs of Trauma Exposure Response.
3. Identify healthy coping strategies to maintain and self-care.

Goal:
Promote an understanding of self-care as it relates to the legal profession and identify strategies to promote health and well-being.
Of 103 Occupations
Lawyers had Highest Incidence of DEPRESSION


Death rate by suicide 6x the rate of general population
North Carolina Lawyer Assistance Program

Between 15% and 24%, Roughly 1 in 5 lawyers is addicted to alcohol.

105 judges in criminal Family & Juvenile courts. 65% experienced symptoms of vicarious trauma.

re-experiencing images of the traumas of the person receiving aid, avoidance of reminders of this material, numbing in affect and function, and persistent arousal.

individuals come to doubt deeply held beliefs about safety, the inherent kindness of others, and intimacy.

HOMEOSTASIS
A state of equilibrium, or a tendency to reach equilibrium.

BALANCE

Temp set at 68° (set point)
Air Conditioning On (correctional system or stress response)
Open Window or Door Warm outside (stress)
Thermostat (detector)

Negative Feedback “turn on to restore temp”
Increase in Temp
HOMEOSTATIS

Detect threat (stress)

Brain Limbic System (detector)

Stress Response: correctional system or stress response

STRESS

“Anything in the world that knocks you out of homeostasis.”

ROBERT M. SAPOLSKY

(Applied V.O.

September 2005 issue of Africa Geographic

Administrative Office of the Court

Administrative Office of the Court

Administrative Office of the Court

Administrative Office of the Court
THE STRESS RESPONSE

Figure 1: The Yerkes-Dodson Human Performance and Stress Curve

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human Performance Curve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Optimal performance</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatigue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhaustion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ill Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakdown &amp; Burnout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeming improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Office of the District Attorney General

Administrative Office of the Court

THE STRESS RESPONSE
THE STRESS RESPONSE

Mobilization of Energy
Increased Cardiovascular Tone (heart rate)
Suppression of digestion
Suppression of growth
Suppression of reproduction
Suppression of immune system
Sharpening of cognition, alertness, and pleasure.

• Fat cells & liver to “empty the bank”
• This places sugar in the bloodstream

• Accelerate movement of sugars through blood
• Increase intake of oxygen for bloodstream


Administrative Office of the Court
Mobilization of Energy
- Increased Cardiovascular Tone (heart rate)

Suppression of digestion

Suppression of growth

Suppression of reproduction

Suppression of immune system

Sharpening of cognition, alertness, and pleasure.

• Digestion is "slow and expensive" – shut down
• Mouth dry – shut down secretion of saliva

Fighting infection is not priority – all resources to mobilized to deal with stressor.
**THE STRESS RESPONSE**

- Mobilization of Energy
- Increased Cardiovascular Tone (heart rate)
- Suppression of digestion
- Suppression of growth
- Suppression of reproduction
- Suppression of immune system
- Sharpening of cognition, alertness, and pleasure.


Office of the District Attorney General

**CHRONIC STRESS**

The stress response continues to be active — uses all resources to stay in stay alert (at the expense of using resources for other systems).

The neurohormones released are good for short stress periods — but can become harmful when in the system for long periods of time.

Each recurring stress event causes subsequent sensitivity to the sympathetic response so that the individual becomes more vulnerable to depression and anxiety (Post, Rubinow, & Ballenger 1986)

When stress is prolonged or chronic, changes occur in the baseline production, availability, and homeostasis regulation of these neurochemicals. (Cozzolino 2002)

The more a neural system is ‘activated’ the more the system changes to reflect the pattern or activation. (Perry 2001)

**TRAUMA EXPOSURE RESPONSE**

defined as the transformation that takes place within us as a result of exposure to the suffering of other living beings or the planet.

Administrative Office of the Court

Office of the District Attorney General
16 WARNING SIGNS of TRAUMA EXPOSURE RESPONSE

1. **Feeling Helpless and Hopeless** - Are we making an impact? What’s the point?
3. **Hypervigilance** - “A dynamic of being wholly focused on our job, to the extent that being present for anything else in our lives can seem impossible.” Do you feel like you are always “on”?
4. **Diminished Creativity** - Do you get bored with what you’re doing in your work? Do you feel stagnant in your ability to be innovative?
5. **Inability to Embrace Complexity** - Taking sides? Cliques, gossip, rigid expectations of workers?
6. **Minimizing** - Does it take a more intense level of suffering to get your attention? Comparing cases, and trivializing importance? Loss of compassion and inability to empathize.
7. **Chronic Exhaustion/Physical Ailments** - Belief that we have no choice about the work that we do. Accepted aspect of one’s work? Fatigue is an accepted aspect of the seasoned worker’s demeanor. Workplace culture?
8. Inability to Listen/Deliberate Avoidance - Is the highlight of your workday when you don’t have to do your job? Has avoidance begun to show up in your personal life? Going out with friends less or only go out with people who specifically “get it”? Avoiding answering phone calls? Losing interest in things that once brought you joy?

9. Dissociative Moments - Have you lost track of moments in your work because something someone said has unhinged you? Difficulty staying present? Remembering the last difficult story that you heard while talking with another client/colleague/friend/family member?


11. Guilt - Do you ever feel guilty about finding things in life pleasurable when clients you work with are suffering? Guilt distracts us from being present in our lives as well as hinders our ability to absorb what is well/good/precious/fulfilling in our own lives.

12. Fear - Bearing witness to the suffering of others brings to light the dangers in the world. There is an opportunity to deepen compassion if fear is acknowledged. More like our clients than we anticipated?

13. Anger and Cynicism - Do you know how your anger looks to others/your support system/your partner? Is your humor in the workplace responsible or cynical?

14. Inability to Empathize/Numbing - Often happens after one’s system becomes overwhelmed. Difficulty experiencing any type of emotion? Or difficulty regulating emotion? Crying at a TV commercial? Yelling at the dog/colleague/family member? Not experiencing emotion that is congruent with the situation at hand?

15. Addictions - Do you use alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, other distractions to check out? Addicted to the rush of adrenaline; desire to stay wired so you don’t have to slow down and really feel what is going on within and around you? Overworking can be an addiction.

16. Grandiosity: Inflated Sense of Importance Related to One’s Work - If our work is breathtakingly important, so are we. Who else would/could do this job if I’m not here?
We cannot see our reflection in running water...

It is only in still water that we can see.
—Taoist proverb
BOUNDARIES

RESPONSE FLEXIBILITY

RIGID RESPONSE FLEXIBILITY FLUID

Can Emerge Out of Anxiety (tendency to protect) & Defensiveness
Can Generate Shame & Avoidance in others.

Can Emerge Out of Fear (tendency to please) & Protection
Can Generate Fear & Anxiety in others (unpredictable)

Mindful, Reflective Behavior, that is consistent, safe, and predictable. It emerges from a place of reflection, thoughtfulness and intentionality.
Open enough for changes AND consistent enough for stability & safety.
ASSESS BOUNDARIES
BUILD RITUALS
MINDFULNESS
DIET & EXERCISE
GRATITUDE
PLAY
Daily Practice of Caring for Self
PUT YOUR MASK ON FIRST

DO YOU HAVE RITUALS FOR YOU?
DO YOU HAVE RITUALS IN YOUR WORKPLACE?

WE HAVE ALL SURVIVED SOMETHING.
Build Routines & Rituals to Leave Work
– AT WORK

Office of the District Attorney General
MINDFULNESS

a mental state achieved by focusing one’s awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one’s feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique.

Mind Full, or Mindful?
Pause: Stop, take a breath, drop in, notice this moment

Pause @ work: This is an opportunity for you to recognize the clutter that accumulates in the mind’s thoughts during a busy day and then drop beneath it to focus on the client you are about to see in that moment.
Presence: Drop in, being aware of what is happening in the moment, experiencing body sensations, noticing thoughts, feeling emotions. Staying present with and accepting whatever arises just as it is moment by moment without reactivity.

Presence @ work: This is your opportunity to be fully present in the moment, non-judgmentally with the individuals you are serving. This allows more authentic understanding of their needs.

Proceed: Using mindful speech and action to respond skilfully, compassionately, and with positive intention to whatever needs attention in this moment.

Proceed @ work: After obtaining insight into your client's needs during "presence," it is now time to use this information to create a plan towards advocating for your client's legal rights.

“Our minds drift to and fro, buffeted by sensation like a boat upon stormy seas. The breath serves as an anchor, something to which we can tether our minds so that we can be present for the real.”

—Rolf Gates and Katrina Kenison, Mediations from the Mat

What About You?
A Workbook for Those Who Work with Others
What About You?
A Workbook for Those Who Work with Others

Administrative Office of the Court

ASSIST BOUNDARIES
BUILD RITUALS
MINDFULNESS
DIET & EXERCISE
GRATITUDE
PLAY

NEXT EXIT
TAKE ACTION

Today's Task:
Self-care does not have to be time-consuming. An nice act would be to take a three-week vacation to a tropical island, many of us do not have the time or resources for this. Below are some tips for using the time that you do have efficiently.

If you have...
2 minutes:
• Drink water
• Snack
• Stretch
• Take your stress temperature
• Laugh
• Doodle
• Acknowledge one of your accomplishments
• Say no to a new responsibility
• Compliment yourself
• Look out the window
• Spend time with your pet
• Share a favorite joke

5 minutes:
• Listen to music
• Have a relaxing day
• Chat with a co-worker
• Dog your kid
• Go down the stairs
• Go outside for fresh air
• Drink some water or make a cup of coffee

10 minutes:
• Outline your day
• Write in a journal
• Go for a walk
• Meditate
• Take your lunch alone
• Stretch your self-care
• Drink a protein drink
• Dance
• Listen to something romantic
• Self-fish
• Read a magazine

30 minutes:
• Get a massage
• Exercise
• Eat lunch with a co-worker
• Take a bubble bath
• Read non-work related literature
• Spend time in nature
• Go shopping
• Practice yoga
• Watch your favorite television show

What About You?
A Workbook for Those Who Work with Others
ASSESS BOUNDARIES
BUILD RITUALS
MINDFULNESS
DIET & EXERCISE
GRATITUDE
PLAY

grateful
unlocks the fullness of life

NEXT EXIT
TAKE ACTION
CULTIVATE GRATITUDE

Write a thank-you note. You can make yourself happier and nurture your relationship with another person by writing a thank-you letter expressing your enjoyment and appreciation of that person's impact on your life. Send it, or better yet, deliver and read it in person if possible. Make a habit of sending at least one gratitude letter a month. Once in a while, write one to yourself.

Thank someone mentally. No time to write? It may help just to think about someone who has done something nice for you, and mentally thank the individual.

Keep a gratitude journal. Make it a habit to write down or share with a loved one thoughts about the gifts you've received each day.

Count your blessings. Pick a time every week to sit down and write about your blessings — reflecting on what went right or what you are grateful for. Sometimes it helps to pick a number — such as three to five things — that you will identify each week. As you write, be specific and think about the sensations you felt when something good happened to you.

Pray. People who are religious can use prayer to cultivate gratitude.

Meditate. Mindfulness meditation involves focusing on the present moment without judgment. Although people often focus on a word or phrase (such as “peace”), it is also possible to focus on what you’re grateful for (the warmth of the sun, a pleasant sound, etc.).

Harvard Health Publications

“I have found that among it’s other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver.”
ASSESS BOUNDARIES
BUILD RITUALS
MINDFULNESS
DIET & EXERCISE
GRATITUDE
PLAY

WHEN WE
ISOLATE
vs.
CONNECT

WE BECOME
“CANNIBALS OF OUR OWN HEARTS”
~Francis Bacon Essay on Friendship

WE BECOME
“CANNIBALS OF OUR OWN HEARTS”
~Francis Bacon Essay on Friendship