Ways to Cope with Stress in a Legal Career

Asked whether or not they consider family law practice to be stressful, an overwhelming number (96%) of the lawyers surveyed for this article respond that they do.

"The stakes in family law are extremely high," writes a new lawyer who has practiced for only 18 months. "If I screw up, my clients could lose custody of their children or their children could be allowed to be around a child molester. I find that extremely stressful."

While this comment reflects the stress being caused by lawyer’s inexperience, many of those surveyed explain that staying current on legal issues is an important part managing the stress of having a family law practice.

"Generally, family law does not have to be too stressful providing you are thoroughly knowledgeable of the area of the law and the court procedures," says Alan Rubinstein of Ft. Myers, FL. "Once you are familiar with those, you should be able to deal with the various problems that come up."

Rubinstein, who has practiced family law for over 30 years, adds that he deals with stress by trying "to be fully informed as to current case law."

Several survey respondents say that running their practice as organized and professionally as possible helps them minimize stress.

"The practice is extremely stressful," admits William Piedimonte of Independence, MO, who recommends that newer lawyers handle a variety of cases, rather than practice family law exclusively "To deal with stress, stay organized," he also advises. "Preparing cases as you go along, having a good support staff, and requiring your client to set up appointments in advance seem to reduce the stress."

Many other practitioners surveyed agree that having knowledgeable and skilled colleagues helps them manage stress. Several strongly advise against practicing solo in this field, adding that having another lawyer to bounce ideas off of or to handle cases during their vacation time is extremely important.

"The biggest source of stress-relief is camaraderie in the office," says Rebecca Burton, a practitioner in Las Vegas. "It also helps to work in an office that is successful enough not to have to take in the obvious problem clients."

To reduce stress, Burton suggests, "Work in an office that is well-run with competent staff, be prepared, and avoid working where court appearances or meetings are dumped on you with little time to prepare." She also recommends that you "listen to your receptionist who is the first person to learn clues about the possible difficulty of working with a potential client."

Being Selective about Cases

"I try to limit my family law practice to no more than 50% of my total practice," says a Pennsylvania lawyer. Pointing out that most issues in family law cases are emotional, not legal, she encourages her family law clients "to work with my support staff and work things out on their own to the extent possible instead of calling me every time they have an issue."

Several of the practitioners point out that "the stressful part of family law" is handling contested child custody cases and domestic violence cases. They will refer these types of cases to other lawyers or limit the number they will take. One lawyer explains that she tries "not to take too many at one time because these are ‘needy’ type clients who can drain the lawyer’s emotions."

Another lawyer says that over the few years, he has decided to limit his practice to mediation instead of litigation. If a prospective client wants to litigate an issue, he refers them to another attorney rather than accept the case. But not all family lawyers have the luxury of picking and choosing the type of cases they will handle.

"I do consider family law to be stressful," responds Anthony Sakalarios of Hattiesburg, MS, who has been practicing law since 1978. "The easiest coping technique is to keep in mind that 'there is always another case, another day.'"
Sakalarios, who estimates that family law makes up about 40% of his firm’s practice, adds that everyone has their own opinion of how things should be done and "just because they do not agree with you does not mean you have to compromise by agreeing with them." It can be very stressful when the client insists upon a certain course of action that the lawyer has advised against.

"As a family law practitioner, you give your clients the best advice for the situation at hand, based upon your education and experiences in the law, the particular judge involved, and the individual circumstances of the case," Sakalarios explains. "If the client disagrees, rather than put yourself in a stressful situation, counsel with the client, explain the possible outcome and proceed in the manner that the client directs, if possible, do your best and leave it at that."

Internal vs. External Stress

Sakalarios also points out that there are always varying factors over which the family lawyer has no control that determine the outcome of a particular situation, but if "you know you have done everything possible for your client, then there should not be any stress associated with what you have done."

His comment sums up the difference between what mental health experts term externally-generated and internally-generated stress. It would be impossible to eliminate externally-generated stresses in a family law practice, such as the personalities or circumstances of the people involved in a case. But stress can also be self-produced, and reacting to a situation in a stressful way creates internal stress which adds to the stress caused by the situation itself.

Successful family lawyers find a number of ways to minimize external stresses, such as staying current, limiting the number of difficult cases, and running a well-organized practice. They also develop coping techniques which help them control their internal response to stress.

"Don’t make your clients’ problems your problems," says Lori Shemtob, a partner in a firm in West Conshohocken, PA. Being able to separate herself from her clients’ issues helps her deal with stressful situations. She keeps in mind that "These are not my problems. I didn’t make them happen. I can only be an advocate."

Separating Work Life from Private Life

Many practitioners keep their professional lives and personal lives separate by developing work habits that set boundaries.

"Get work done before leaving the office" recommends Vicki Johnson Snelgrove of Aiken, SC. "It’s better to stay late than come home early and worry all night." She also suggests having an unlisted phone number because "you must have your own life at some point."

"Try to leave your work and worries at the office" says George Bearup of Traverse City, MI. "Consider an unlisted phone number or a fee structure that alerts clients that evening/weekend calls are a flat $100." Of course giving advice is easier than following it some times, adds Bearup who admits his own coping techniques are "presently unsuccessful."

While long hours can be expected for any professional, many of the family lawyers surveyed say once they establish a schedule that works for their practice, they stick to it. For some, that may mean keeping weekends or evenings sacrosanct or making time for vacations. Or if weekend work cannot be avoided, it might be balanced in other ways. One practitioner, who generally has to put in some evening and weekend hours, takes off one afternoon a week.

"Go home at 5:00," says Lucille Espey-Francis of Tavares, FL. "Don’t give out your home phone number or address unless you are prepared to be intruded upon. Always be gracious with people, but ruthless in time management."

Virginia Beach, VA attorney Carrollyn Cox says she does give out her home phone number, but reminds clients that "I only have an opportunity to interact with my family as a wife and mother during my after office hours time." As a result, she rarely gets a call at home. "You must learn to leave work at the office in whatever way works for you," advises Valerie Barnes of Charlevoix, MI. "I am fortunate to live in an area where it is not expected that young attorneys work grueling hours regularly so it is not difficult to balance my personal and professional lives."

"Vacations are important, but they must be long enough," points out Caroline Gardiner who practices in Portland, ME. "One week and all clients hold their breath until you return and your return is harried. Two-
Gerald Nissenbaum, a Boston lawyer who has practiced for over 30 years, suggests "a minimum of three to four weeks vacation each year where you cannot be reached by phone or fax."

Networking for Support

Ellen Schell of Keeseville, NY, believes that setting boundaries and keeping things in perspective, while difficult, is critical to managing stress in her solo practice.

"I also use other solo practitioners for sounding boards and to get advice when I need it," she says. "Having a good network helps a lot, especially when you work alone."

Lucille Espey-Francis, who has been practicing since 1982, suggests "maintaining good supportive friends and colleagues" to reduce stress levels. A South Dakota lawyer warns that family law can be "extremely stressful and emotionally draining" and it is "good to have a fellow lawyer you can vent frustrations with so you can move on."

"My personal life is focused on my community service organization, Optimist International, my church, and my family," says Carrollyn Cox, "however, I try to maintain cordial relationships with fellow lawyers." She explains that her volunteer activities for a family law organization "fosters that relationship and the meetings give us a chance to commiserate with each other."

In Body, Mind, and Spirit

"Take care of yourself first," recommends one attorney, who lists physical exercise including rollerblading, hiking and ballroom dancing among coping techniques. "Your physical and mental health is mandatory prerequisites for being able to practice family law." An attorney who considers family law "excessively stressful" says she tries to get away weekends to hike in a nearby state park with her family and bikes ten miles with her husband three to five days a week. "It does not solve problems," she explains, "but it works wonders on my attitude and just clears my head."

"Exercise is a great stress reducer," points out another lawyer. Dozens of those surveyed agree, listing their own favorite forms, such as bicycling, walking or jogging, doing cardiovascular workouts or weight training, and playing golf or tennis. Many find opportunities to incorporate physical activities into their professional schedule, by doing breathing exercises at their desk or walking to and from the office.

"Just taking the stairs at the courthouse as I move between court rooms on a particularly hectic day seems to calm me," says Carrollyn Cox.

Maintaining a good diet is also important, several lawyers point out. Choosing healthy foods and snacks not only makes them look and feel better, but helps the body cope with stress. Others schedule a weekly massage or recommend "a hot tub that bubbles."

Therapy can also be valuable, both for personal growth and to help understand clients' issues more clearly. Many family law practitioners admit that therapy helped them change their behavior and set priorities so that they could keep their own marriage intact.

Several of those surveyed describe how they make time for the spiritual aspect of their lives as well. In addition to swimming and other physical activities, Carol Rogers Hilliard of Rocky River, OH, meditates and prays daily. To cope with stress, she suggests "increasing attention to your spirituality" and "doing 'good' work," such as participating in a walk for AIDS or Habitat for Humanity.

"I often tell God that I am putting such-and-such a problem in His/Her lap for awhile," says Judith Haller Stanton of Hobart, IN. Asked if she considers family law practice to be stressful, Clare Hornsby, who has practiced for over 40 years, responds, "Not really.

It's just living every day being grateful that you have clients that want you and need you." She also adds that she tries to bring God into the lives of those who are overwhelmed and need to get back to the church.

Find a Passion—or at Least a Hobby

The surveys of practitioners reveal that for many, their hobby is their favorite coping technique. Yes, family
law practice is stressful, admits Loren Howley of Grantsville, WV, but life is stressful, too.

"To cope with stress, I make sure I make time for activities and relaxation that I find rejuvenating," she explains. "In my case, that includes baking and reading and gardening and dance classes and long walks."

Several lawyers find that doing "something totally different" from their professional life helps them relieve the stress associated with practicing family law. They list activities ranging from raising show dogs professionally to riding motorcycles and driving race cars.

"I cook and give dinner parties," writes one attorney. Another prefers doing manual labor on the weekends, like chopping wood. "Have a life outside the office," recommends Beth Mason of Beaverton, OR, "one you really enjoy."

Alan Rubinstein adds some philosophical thoughts about family lawyers and hobbies.

"I was taught some years ago that in family law practice, since when a case is done with, you put the file down and pick up another file which deals with another person’s problems, you need to have a hobby which is very specific and where you can clearly see the results," says Rubinstein. "I was told that the best stress reliever for a divorce attorney would probably be building a brick wall because every brick that is placed in place will allow you to see the success you have then accomplished. I am not interested in building brick walls, but I do wax my car regularly."

**Time Out for Family Activities**

"Family should always come first," voices one lawyer, echoing the thoughts of many of those surveyed. "Work is always there and clients generally are excessively needy and rarely appreciative."

The practitioners surveyed appreciate the role their family members play in their own lives and many list family activities among their coping techniques. "Be thankful every day for having your own intact family," one lawyer says.

Family time for some means the chance to get some physical exercise, such as biking or rollerblading, or to simply relax together, watching a movie or making pizza. Weekend activities revolve around the children’s schedules despite the many demands of having a law practice.

Most family lawyers, perhaps more than other attorneys, recognize the importance of making time for their own family and time together is strictly guarded. "I coach my daughter’s soccer team," writes one lawyer. "I cope by playing with my own children," reports another. These are simple statements, but not simple things for any busy professional to do when faced with conflicting priorities.

**Adopting the Right Attitude**

Family law can be stressful, says another attorney, "but like everything else, if one accepts the inevitable-that every case cannot end up the way that the attorney believes it should-the stress can be minimized."

The ability to keep a positive attitude and put things in perspective is critical to minimizing internally-generated stress.

"Don’t take cases personally," writes Lawrence Diehl, a practitioner in Hopewell, VA. "By knowing that you’ve done the best you can for a client-being professional, realistic, and thorough in your work-you can walk away from the case without stress or guilt."

Having a sense of humor helps, according to many of those surveyed.

"Family law is very stressful and the coping techniques are regular exercise and the ability to laugh at oneself," Franklin Miroff of Indianapolis responds.

"Never take yourself too seriously" advises another family lawyer. "Make keeping a good sense of humor a high priority," suggests Lucille Espy-Francis. "I measure my success some days by when and whether I’ve read my Far Side calendar."

**Conclusion**

"Every case is different, but there are many more crises (real or imagined) in family law than any other field," says Paul Watts of Spencer, IN.
In 23 years of practicing law, Watts says he has learned that it is important to "leave it at the office as much as possible" and to not talk about "all those problems or let them 'bum' you out." He also believes "Your family owns you on weekends with rare exceptions."

Watts uses a combination of coping techniques to combat stress: working out, taking walks in the park, house-boating on weekends, scheduling massages, and having "an occasional temper tantrum."

"To cope, I take time out to take a walk, plan something fun to look forward to, or clean my desk," responds Gail Nunn of Everett, WA. "I also have a network of about ten women attorneys and social workers who get together one Friday night a month to laugh and de-stress."

Family law can be "very stressful if you care about your clients," says Eliot Landau of Downers Grove, IL. "If you don’t, you don’t belong in this field."

A lawyer with over 30 years of experience, Landau suggests that new family lawyers release the stress in an activity or hobby. "I find a 30-minute walk before starting the day a good way to clear my mind," he adds.

"Make rules and stick to them, such as no business calls at home," advises Pamela Simon of Statesville, NC, "and leave at least one weekend day completely free." Her recommended methods to cope with stress are to "take deep breaths, play lots of music, take frequent short trips, and maintain a sense of humor." She says it also helps to "remember that you didn’t create your client’s problem. The client did."

Lee Tinney, Gail Nunn’s law partner who has experience in commercial and probate law as well as family law, points out that she’s not aware of any type of law practice that is not stressful.

"Stress is not necessarily a bad thing, as a certain amount of excitement can be enjoyable and part of the attraction of practicing law," Tinney says. "It’s overstimulation and too much stress that’s bad." She recommends learning to "recognize your own cues that mean you are being overstressed, such as having no sense of humor or whatever it is for you, and make adjustments when you see that you are overstressed."