

*The NCBA Professional Vitality Committee creates sourced articles centered on reducing inherent stress and enhancing vitality in the lives of legal professionals and offers those resources as a benefit for members of the North Carolina Bar Association.*

## **A Lawyer's Stress-Relief Smorgasbord – From Mainstream to Metaphysical**

There are a myriad of scenarios in which we lawyers practice law. But whether we are working for-profit or not-for-profit, most lawyers would agree that the practice of law is, at times, rather stressful. Granted, some of us seem to be pre-wired for the pressure cooker and thrive on the excitement. On one end of the scale, we are the thrill-seeker lawyers who get a rush from deadlines, snap-strategizing on demand and intense pressure to have laser-sharp intellectual precision when it counts most. At the opposite end of the spectrum lie those of us who regretted becoming a lawyer while we were still in law school but cannot figure out a way to escape the profession without disappointing our families, partners, employers or even ourselves.

Thankfully, most of us lie somewhere between these two extremes. We can usually manage the stress created by our jobs and our lives reasonably well, but occasionally, we may need tools to help boost our sense of well-being and reduce the buildup of toxic stress in our minds and bodies. This article is meant as a survey of stress management methods for lawyers who experience discomfort caused by pressing or complex demands on their minds, time, bodies and spirits (collectively referred to herein as “stress”). If the information provided in this article finds widespread appeal, in subsequent issues we can provide more in-depth looks within each category mentioned below.

Here we are going to identify some well-regarded materials and ideas from *very* diverse sources. Our hope is that everyone finds something that intrigues them that they want to explore further. And while a certain resource or concept may not speak to us initially, perhaps after some relaxed reflection, we might consider trying something totally outside of our comfort zone. We may be surprised at what methods and practices bring us relief and in what ways. Some resources we mention here are very conventional and conservative, some are science-based, some are tied to spirituality or faith, some make us laugh and some may just seem a little weird, flaky, or even ridiculous. While lawyers are accustomed to being rational, logical thinkers who stick with known realities, we are encouraged as we read to open our minds and hearts and listen for what path speaks to us. Our bodies and minds will thank us for it.

### **A. Conventional Mainstream Stress Management Resources**

Mainstream ideas and resources covered here are often tailored specifically to the legal profession. Many have been proven over time to have a broad appeal and are quoted often within professional journals and continuing legal education programs year after year. These types of resources are easy to keep top of mind because they represent common themes which have been shown to improve the lives of many lawyers over the decades. While we will have heard of most of these ideas and many of the resources, they are worth reiterating.

Conventional materials typically encourage us to “get away” more in order to rest and recharge, to exercise and sleep more, to develop effective time management techniques, to carefully

choose our clients and the types of cases we accept and to focus on the positive aspects of our practices, clients and lives rather than the challenging aspects.

### ***Reading List Ideas:***

1. Elwork, Ph.D Amiram, *Stress Management for Lawyers* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2007)
2. Harvard Business Review, *Guide to Work-Life Balance* (2019)
3. Bergman, Nora Riva, *50 Lessons for Lawyers: Earn more. Stress less. Be awesome* (2016)
4. Davidek, Beverly and Dirk, *Happy Lawyer: The Art of Having it All Without Losing Your Mind* (2018)
5. Robbins, Tony, *This 90-second Exercise will Help you Eliminate Stress and Anxiety*, [www.cnbc.com](http://www.cnbc.com) (2017)
6. Brafford, Anne, *Well-Being Toolkit for Lawyers and Legal Employers* (ABA 2018)

### **B. Science-Based Resources**

For those of us out here who are fascinated by science and the physiology of stress in our minds and bodies and its manifestations, there are lots of resources which attempt to explain the science behind stress. Often, they will also give us ideas for how to employ that knowledge to reverse the stress reactions and promote healing within our own minds and bodies.

We have long been told that an excellent way to achieve relief from stress is to remove ourselves from the environments causing our stress as often as possible. If law practice generates the bulk of our stress, then perhaps spending more time in the company of people we love or participating in our favorite hobbies (e.g., travel, sports, volunteer service, gardening, art, music, reading, writing and other hobbies) may well improve the chemistry within our brains, lowering our levels of stress-induced adrenalin and cortisol, among others.

Whether we are talking about how (a) to (literally) re-wire the neuropathways within our brains; (b) to cleanse toxins from and nourish our bodies with food; (c) to alleviate anxiety and stress through massage, better sleep habits and physical activity; or (d) to de-contaminate our environments, both literally and figuratively, there is a wide array of information available to us. This information can generate keen interest (or fear, at times) while scratching that science-loving itch we so often have as a primarily curious, intelligent population of professionals. Of course, before we embark on any new diet, exercise, vitamin/mineral/herbal/hormone supplement plan, we need to first check with our physicians, and perhaps ask them about the possibility of testing our bodies for toxin levels or allergies which may be contributing to our bodies' stress reactions.

No discussion of science-based stress management techniques would be complete, of course, without mentioning psychotherapy and its various modalities for managing and reducing stress in patients. The development of new and exciting methods for assisting those with trauma histories or psychological disorders, (e.g., abuse survivors, combat veterans, borderline personality disorder, etc.) has yielded techniques that have been found to benefit almost anyone who is suffering from stress and anxiety, whether mild or severe. From Dialectical Behavior Therapy

(DBT), Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) to Equine-Assisted Therapy and other experiential therapies, progress in modalities targeting stress reduction has been rapid and the results have been nothing short of miraculous for some individuals.

### ***Reading List Ideas:***

1. Pittman, Ph.D., Catherine, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain: How to Use Neuroscience of Fear to End Anxiety, Panic & Worry* (2015)
2. Greenberg, Ph.D., Melanie, *The Stress-Proof Brain: Master Your Emotional Response to Stress Using Mindfulness and Neuroplasticity* (2017)
3. Miller, RD, LD, CDE, Ali, *The Anti-Anxiety Diet Cookbook: Stress-Free Recipes to Mellow Your Mood* (2019)
4. Welsh, Ph.D., Elena, *5-Minute Stress Relief: 75 Exercises to Quiet Your Mind and Calm Your Body* (2020)
5. Martin, MSW, LCSW, *The CBT Workbook for Perfectionism* (2019)
6. Lusk, Julie, *Yoga Nidra for Complete Relaxation & Stress Relief* (2015)
  
7. van der Kolk, M.D., Bessel, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2015)
8. Hayes, Tim, *Riding Home: The Power of Horses to Heal* (2016)
9. Murphy, Joseph, *The Power of Your Subconscious Mind* (1963)
10. Dave, Ninabahen, *Stress and Allergic Diseases*, National Institutes of Health, Immunol Allergy Clin North Am. 2011 Feb; 31(1): 55–68
11. Adler, Tina, *A Complex Relationship: Psychosocial Stress, Pollution and Health*, National Institutes of Health (Environ Health Perspect. 2009 Sep; 117(9); A407)
12. Rauch, Gregory, *The Truth About Toxins* (<https://www.rush.edu/health-wellness/discover-health/truth-about-toxins>)

### **C. Faith or Spirituality-Based Resources**

Whether or not we were reared in any particular faith tradition, the benefits of participation in a community of faith or spiritual kinship are well known. Bringing a spiritual practice or perspective into our lives may be worth a try in order to test whether we experience a reduction in stress and anxiety as a result.

Religion is a more formal expression of spirituality. Many of us find respite in the mosque, the synagogue, the cathedral or other place of formal community worship and the accompanying religious tenets which often promise us a healthier, stress-alleviating way to approach life and its challenges. However, we don't have to participate in a formal religion's practices in order to benefit from spiritual connection to what many call a "higher power" or "universal life-force energy." Even staunch atheists may find comfort in the belief in a power greater than us, whether they call it a collective conscience, the Universe, the Source, Mother Earth, Higher Power, the Unmanifested or something else. There is no requisite set of beliefs or practices which are mandatory in order for us to believe that a force more powerful than us as individuals can have an impact on our lives.

We may hear people talk about the “Program” and wonder to what they are referring. Is the Program a religion? No, the Program is the nickname for the structure of the various free, spiritual-based (but not religion-based) twelve-step programs which initially began with William Griffith Wilson’s (also known as Bill Wilson or Bill W.) co-founding of the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) program in the early twentieth century. The Program was successful for millions, restoring many alcoholics to sanity and a new life. Groups other than alcoholics wanted that same spiritual awakening and serenity, so they formed their own twelve-step fellowships to aid people in addressing other addictions and traumas. Today we see the Program helping millions of people who are (a) food, shopping, sex, love, caretaking and narcotics addicts; as well as (b) individuals who care about these addicts or who are entangled in dysfunction of any nature (e.g., Al-Anon, Ala-Teen, Codependents Anonymous or Adult Children of Alcoholics or Other Family Dysfunction (ACA)). When we hear people say they are “in recovery,” it doesn’t necessarily mean they are recovering from a substance or other addiction, but perhaps may mean they are simply recovering from an old way of thinking and surviving in the world and are developing new skills through a spiritual practice using the tools of the Program in order to manage their lives more effectively with less stress and anxiety. While not a religion, the Program is followed by many in recovery alongside their own faith tradition, with many finding that not only is there is no real conflict between them, but instead there exists a strong synergy.

One of the most popular cultural phenomena of the last decade has been the mindfulness movement. We have included it in the spirituality section of this article, but just as well could have discussed mindfulness in the science-based category because scientists have proven the physiological benefits to brain and body chemistry as the result of mindfulness practices. What is more, mindfulness practice is easily integrated with any other stress-relief technique.

While we often equate mindfulness with meditation, it typically encompasses more than what we think of as meditation. While quiet meditation is often a component, mindfulness can also be expressed in words and action (e.g., singing chants or mantras, eating, walking and exercising mindfully). The research on mindfulness is yielding exciting results. As we begin to understand how much control we have over our bodies’ stress levels and learn how easy and inexpensive it can be to find relief from stress and anxiety with mindfulness, we are encouraged to go further with it. Whether we eat mindfully in silence, meditate quietly for 20 minutes in the traditional yoga-associated lotus position, whisper mantras to ourselves throughout the day or walk a labyrinth in the forest, the options are limitless as to how much we can incorporate mindfulness into our lives.

### ***Reading List Ideas:***

1. Sacred Texts (Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Daoist and others)
2. Krista Tippett’s program and podcast “On Being,” on National Public Radio  
[www.onbeing.org](http://www.onbeing.org)
3. Zucker, RN, Ph.D., Donna, *Reducing Stress Through Labyrinth Walking* (2016) (see also [www.veriditas.org](http://www.veriditas.org) for more information on the labyrinth movement)
4. Poetry by John O’Donohue, Hafiz, Mary Oliver, Khalil Gibran, David Whyte

5. Carnes, Ph.D., Patrick, *A Gentle Path through the Twelve Steps: The Classic Guide for All People in the Process of Recovery* (2012)
6. Peck, M. Scott, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (1986)
7. Wayne, Peter, *The Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi: 12 Weeks to a Healthy Body, Strong Heart and Sharp Mind* (2013)
8. Ostaseski, Frank, *The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully* (2017)
9. Tolle, Eckart, *The Power of Now* (2004) and *A New Earth* (2008)
10. Dyer, Wayne, *Ten Stress Management Strategies from Wayne Dyer* ([www.healyourlife.com](http://www.healyourlife.com)) (2016)
11. The Art of Living Retreat Center, Boone, North Carolina ([www.artoflivingretreatcenter.org](http://www.artoflivingretreatcenter.org))
12. Singer, Michael, *The Untethered Soul: The Journey Beyond Yourself* (2007)
13. Kripalu Center, Stockbridge, Massachusetts ([www.kripalu.org](http://www.kripalu.org))
14. Hanh, Thich Nhat, *How to Relax* (2015)
15. Zukav, Gary, *Seat of the Soul* (1989)
16. Ruiz, Don Miguel, *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom (A Toltec Wisdom Book)* (1997)

#### **D. Humor as a Stress Reliever**

No one needs to tell anyone, not even hard-driving, serious-as-a-heart-attack lawyers, to what extent humor and laughter can relieve stress. We all know how good a hearty laugh feels after a stressful day—or even in the middle of a stressful day. Some of the funniest people I know are lawyers—truly. But there are certainly times when life circumstances are complicated and urgent and we forget to laugh. One of the best pieces of advice many of us have received during our lifetimes was not to take ourselves too seriously. Yet we see ourselves taking ourselves (and definitely many opposing counsel) way too seriously. Maybe we need to share this idea list with them?

#### ***Reading/Watching/Playing Ideas:***

1. Sarah Knight, *The Life Changing Magic of Not Giving a F\*ck: How to Stop Spending Time You Don't Have with People You Don't Like Doing Things You Don't Want to Do* (2015)
2. Sedaris, David, *Calypso* (2018)
3. Sykes, Wanda, *Not Normal*, comedy special, Netflix (2019)
4. Ziegler, Roger, *Pee On It and Walk Away: How to Stay Stress-Free Among Difficult People. Life Lessons from Superdog Abby* (2012)
5. Degeneres, Ellen, *Relatable*, comedy special, Netflix (2019)
6. *Bob Ross Bobblehead: With Sound!*(Book & Figure), [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) (2017)
7. Meyers, Seth, *Lobby Baby*, comedy special, Netflix (2019)

8. *The Screaming Goat (Book & Figure)*, [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) (2016)
9. Reid, Jordan, *The Big Activity Book for Anxious People* (2019)
10. Participate in a game of Twister, Charades, Pictionary, Mad Libs (you get the idea)

## **E. Personal, Autobiographical Resources**

Hearing the story of someone who has been where we are stress-wise (or worse), yet has managed to pull him or herself out of the pit, is inspiring to those of us who are still stuck in the pit—or about to fall in. Although we know intellectually our stresses are not unique—and we may even understand intellectually that we are strong and smart and will survive these stresses, it helps to read about someone who has been through similar trials and tribulations to hear them describe how they felt, what they did to pull themselves out and how they feel now. Here are a few interesting stories that might be inspiring for overly stressed lawyers.

### ***Reading List Ideas:***

1. Cuban, Brian, *The Addicted Lawyer* (2017)
2. Brown, Cupcake, *A Piece of Cake* (2007)
3. *Recovering Lawyers Share Keys to Well-Being*, ABA website article (March 2018) and see also related site, [www.lawyerwellbeing.net](http://www.lawyerwellbeing.net)
4. Doyle, John Sean, *Mud and Dreams: Essays on Falling More Deeply in Love with Life* (2018)

## **F. Metaphysical Resources**

Okay, the time has come for the fringe-y, funky, outside the box, creative, metaphysical, woo-woo, interesting, could-be-totally-bogus-but-if-it-works-who-cares methods that lawyers (yes, even lawyers) might consider as alternative stress relief options. Many of us will absolutely love this part of the article. Others of us will skip it and think it is silly, hippy-dippy stuff. That said, here we go.

Keeping in mind that the options are truly endless in this category, we are only going to scratch the surface of the types of unique and unconventional ways people relieve stress. Most of these methods claim to have a basis in science, but we are not going to examine, discuss or debate the adequacy or inadequacy of those bases here. We are simply opening our minds to the idea that there may be things that seem unusual that really do alleviate stress in our lives. If we find something here that works, fantastic! If not—no harm, no foul.

Some alternative stress-relieving techniques about which we have heard may include Feng Shui, Reiki and other “energy” work, acupuncture and practices related to the “Law of Attraction.” Less widely known are therapies associated with the following: music, color, sunlight, aromas, visual arts, plants, animals, performance art, tattooing, charms, crystals (i.e. natural rock formations), EFT (Emotion Freedom Techniques, including “tapping”), fasting, past-life regressions, astrology, sweat lodges, healers from native cultures, nudism, tantra, reflexology, psychic readings, non-dominant handwriting, subliminal messaging, cord cutting, sound healing and various herbal therapies.

With so many choices, there is not enough room to cover them all here. Some of these unconventional techniques focus on “doing,” that is to say on your behaviors—and recommending certain actions to take for stress relief (e.g., EFT, fasting, sweat lodges, performance art, tantra, herbal therapy, non-dominant handwriting, decluttering, etc.). Others focus on “receiving” or subjecting/offering yourself to a catalyst in order to obtain stress relief (e.g., colors, sunlight, sounds, scents, crystals, reflexology, psychic readings, astrology, the great outdoors, etc.). I invite each of us to get curious and research a few techniques that are of interest to us and see what they might have to offer us, if anything. You never know, you might end up finding that placing certain crystals strategically in your home according to Feng Shui guidelines while burning Nag Champa incense and listening to classical music is your recipe for serenity. Would that not be a wonderful discovery?

### ***Reading List Ideas:***

1. Stein, Diane, *Essential Reiki: A Complete Guide to an Ancient Healing Art* (1995)
2. Kondo, Marie, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: the Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* (2014)
3. Byrne, Rhonda, *The Secret* (2006)
4. Ortner, Nick, *The Tapping Solution: A Revolutionary System for Stress-Free Living* (2014)
5. Hall, Judy, *The Crystal Bible: A Definitive Guide to Crystals* (2003)
6. Salerno, Toni Carmine, *Magdalene Oracle & Angels, Gods, Goddesses* (oracle card sets, 2014)
7. Worwood, Valerie Ann, *The Complete Book of Essential Oils & Aromatherapy* (1991)
8. Woolfolk, Joanna, *The Only Astrology Book You'll Ever Need* (2012)
9. Capacchione, Ph.D., Lucia, *Recovery of Your Inner Child: The Highly Acclaimed Method for Liberating Your Inner Self* (1991)
10. Li, Qing, *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness* (2018)
11. Gaynor, M.D., Mitchell, *The Healing Power of Sound: Recovery From Life-Threatening Illness Using Sound, Voice and Music* (2002)

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*The preceding article was researched, written and reviewed as part of the work of the NCBA Professional Vitality Committee (“PVC”). The lead author was **Dottie Burch**, Ragsdale Liggett PLLC, Raleigh, North Carolina. Please direct comments and suggestions to [Erna Womble](#), Committee Chair, and [Holly Morris](#), Communities Manager. See more of the [PVC's compendium](#) of articles and blog posts at (<https://ncbar.org/members/committees/professional-vitality/>).*