



## **The Invisible Saber - Toothed Tiger: The Attorney and Stress**

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In 1978, I wrote an article, Do Lawyers Have Problems Being People?, that appeared in Barrister Magazine for the Young Lawyer division of the American Bar Association. In that article I attempted to address the conflict that attorneys face when they try to serve the needs and responsibilities of their professional lives and those required of parents and husbands or wives. If anything has changed in the more than twenty years since then, it is not in direction; it is in intensity. Most of the lawyer's waking hours are spent in environments that encourage competition, attempting to present superior language skills and logic to defeat the opponents' case. You must uncover and expose their weak points, find the holes in their arguments, analyze, articulate, organize, fight and win! Stress, in this environment, is unavoidable.

But we face it daily, not only in our careers, but in our relationships with our family members, and our friends and business associates. We worry about the future and, as we read in the papers about the old, stable firms folding, bowing to new, super-sized partnerships, we realize our fears are well founded. Never before has security and confidence been so thoroughly shattered. The stress increases as the stressors do: billable hours, percentage of cases won, conviction rates and all the rest. For those who attempt to achieve a balance between what is arguably the most competitive profession and some semblance of a normal home life, when there isn't really enough time to do either satisfactorily, the stress is almost palpable. Ironically, those qualities that produce victory and success in the legal arena are often the components of emotional chaos at home.

The result of all this emotional friction may be perpetual exhaustion, free-floating anxiety, sleeplessness, loss or increase of appetite, weakness, dizziness, frequent headaches, stomachaches, muscle pain, depression, teeth grinding, asthma, ulcers, high blood pressure, inflammatory diseases of the colon and bowel, skin diseases of various kinds and even death; all the products of stress.

On the other hand, we all know that a certain amount of stress is desirable, even pleasurable. In fact, we seek it in sports and games and a host of other diversions. Stress is such a persistent companion, in fact, that we each develop our own personal stress management strategies. Some of us deal with it in positive ways by taking daily naps or walks in the park or listening to pleasant music; and the body restores itself and repairs any damage. Others resort to drugs or alcohol or other “quick fixes.”

We’ve all heard of the “fight or flight” paradigm, that adrenalin flow is the body’s way of gearing up for conflict just as it was in prehistoric times when we faced dinosaurs and mammoths and saber-toothed tigers. In fact, however, since we aren’t nowadays facing bone-crunching monsters, we usually don’t fight *or* fly; we do neither; we rely on strategies that we learned early in life. When we kick a flat tire, we are throwing a childish tantrum. Or we do a sort of culturally approved combination of the two; we make a sarcastic remark and a hasty exit. Most commonly, though, we do nothing; we endure and behave as cordially as we know how; but, internally, the acids eat away at us. There are steps, however, that you can take to reduce your stress, and they are not complicated, but they all take small moments of your time.

The first of these is to identify the sources of stress in your life. What causes you the most worries and concerns? What situations make you feel anxious, nervous or afraid? Keep a “stress diary” to jot down the events that cause emotional pressure in your daily activities. Note, also, any physical symptoms you’re experiencing. When you’ve determined what upsets you the most, try to decide whether you can make changes in those situations or prevent them from recurring entirely.

Talk about your thoughts and feelings with others whom you trust. It is, in most cases, surprisingly helpful to talk to your spouse, a family friend, a co-worker or member of the clergy or even a therapist to help you see your problems from different perspectives.

Learn to say, “No.” If you don’t respect the limits of your time, energy and pain, you will become so exhausted that you won’t be able to be the kind of friend, lover or parent you want to be.

Learn to express your anger without hurting others. Feelings show, so say what you feel. Otherwise, the stress will be apparent in your non-verbal behaviors; and you will erode your own credibility. It's all right to feel angry, but it's better to say you're feeling angry than to say, "You're making me angry!" As you express your feelings without blaming someone, the negative emotions will begin to subside.

Learn to live in the here and now. We so often allow fears and resentments from the past to be projected into the future, thus limiting our capacity to make the human contact we need in the present.

Learn to relax. This may appear to be a contradictory directive. After all, if we knew how to relax, we wouldn't have all this stress! Relaxation, however, can be learned. It is amazing what can be accomplished in as few as five minutes each day in meditation or self-hypnosis. Its principles are really quite simple.

1. Find a place where you will have five minutes of undisturbed privacy.
2. Relax comfortably in a chair. Loosen any tight clothing.  
Do not cross your legs.
3. Try to let your eyes roll up to "look" at the center of your forehead.
4. Slowly close your eyelids while keeping your eyes elevated.  
You may feel them flutter, and you may feel your breathing change to a deeper, more relaxed rate. These are good signs.
5. Take a deep breath and continue deep, slow breathing.
6. Give yourself the suggestion that, each time you exhale, stress will leave your body on every breath.
7. Recall a time and a place where you felt calm and relaxed; and let yourself go there.
8. After about five minutes, or when you feel you're ready, count from 1 to 3, and open your eyes, refreshed, alert and fully awake.

We are told that we have more leisure time available to us than previous generations had, but we know that isn't true. We have more time, but we have busier, more hectic schedules; we fill our time with frenetic attempts to "get it all done." We have more time, but we have more heart attacks and more cancer and more domestic strife. The modern attorney must fight the tigers and mammoths and, at the same time, struggle with his own internal turmoil. The strategies I've included here should help with this last. After all, if you don't take care of yourself, who will?

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*Publications And Activities Concerning Lawyers*

- "Lawyers And Their Loves", Published In **The Recorder**.
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- "Loving The Law Above All Else", Published In **The Recorder**.No.69  
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- "Psychological Insights Can Be Helpful Tools In Mediation" **Alternatives**  
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Lectured At University of California - Law School Bolt Hall  
Conducted Seminars and Lectures for The San Francisco Bar Association  
Keynote Lecturer (1978,/80 ) Canadian Bar Association Annual Meeting  
Alberta, Canada  
New Zealand Mediation and Negotiation Society Wellington, New Zealand  
Lecturer to The Office of The City Attorney San Francisco

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