

The Dangerous Link Between Chronic Office Chaos, Stress, Depression, and Substance Abuse

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Have you ever found yourself screaming, "This isn't a law practice, it's hell with fluorescent lighting!?" You may not realize how great an impact office stress can have on your overall well being. It is exactly this kind of stress that can cause a lawyer to sink into depression or start down the path of substance abuse.

Impaired or addicted lawyers usually turn to medical and mental health professionals for help. They can also get support through their bar association's lawyer assistance program (LAP). To ensure the most secure foundation for recovery, however, it is also important to address the negative and costly influence on our lives of chronic chaos, disorganization, low morale, and similar problems in our offices. Too often, this important factor in our emotional welfare is overlooked, and, unfortunately, there are too few community or bar-sponsored resources for this type of help. This omission leaves us vulnerable to backsliding, short-lived success stories, and increased odds of repeating a vicious cycle.

Are your work habits and office environment putting you at risk? A few key questions to ask yourself include:

Is your office in a state of constant chaos, disorganization, or high stress? Do you find yourself with the same stresses on your plate and the same problems within your office year after year? Are you setting goals for yourself and office that never seem to be achieved? Do you dread the start of yet another day at the office? Are you in control of your work, or is your work in control of you?

If you answered yes to even one of these questions, then your personal health and quality of life are likely to be negatively affected sooner or later. The extent of the negative impact depends on factors such as:

How long the problems have existed. How often office morale is low and interoffice tensions are high. The frequency and severity of client complaints. How far (and long) we can stick our heads in the sand in an effort to avoid the truth.

If ignored for too long, chronic problems at the office can play a big part in setting the stage for battles with depression, substance abuse, and other stress-related problems. Traditional sources of help tend to focus on medical and psychological needs only, often overlooking chronic office stress as a factor to address. Medication, therapy, and support groups do have admirable success records. However, these success stories may only be temporary if chronic and stressful office issues are not factored in when creating and applying a comprehensive and realistic recovery plan.

Below you will find a few tools and suggestions for identifying and correcting office matters that may be adding stress to your life. Treat this information as a "starter kit" to help you focus your attention on an often overlooked area that can dramatically affect the likelihood that a lawyer will sink into depression or turn to substance abuse as an escape.

A Look in the Mirror

The following situations offer a small sampling of office patterns that, if ignored, can lead to chronic and crippling stress:

Chronic, office-wide chaos. Unclear mission; no written long-term goals. Weak or haphazard internal leadership. Unclear and inconsistently enforced policies and procedures. Little, if any, true teamwork, cross-selling of services, or support of one another. Lack of loyalty to the firm and a distrust of partners or other coworkers. Poor communication and people skills. Criticism voiced publicly and frequently; compliments or appreciation rarely, if ever, offered. Low office morale. High employee turnover. Chronic procrastination. Poor planning and prioritizing, resulting in last-minute panics. Lack of time-management skills. File mismanagement and disorganization. Repeated failure to meet deadlines promised to clients. Frequent client complaints, many of which are of the same type (e.g., unreturned phone calls, not being kept informed about the status of their cases).

There is good news and bad news about this incomplete list of potential time bombs within our offices. The bad news is that these types of problems are all too common within many offices. The good news, however, is that there is a great deal that we can do to fix these problems and thus decrease work-related stress. All it takes is your willingness to get started, rather than waiting for someone else to "just fix it."

Let's be honest. We all have days when we grumble to ourselves,

"Can I trade this job for whatever is behind Door #1?" "Nice perfume, but must you marinate in it?" "Daily panic and chaos...this is what I get for surviving law school?!" "Our office is the world's largest natural source of sarcasm!" "Is there a sign outside my door that reads 'Endless Interruptions Appreciated & Welcome'?" "Have I thanked you lately for your whining, chronic complaining, and negative attitude?" "If our cash flow was as big as your ego, we would be enormously rich!" "Thank you for being such a jerk; it helps make me look nicer!"

It is indeed a good thing our thoughts can't be heard by our supervisors, peers, and employees. When these types of thoughts recur on a daily basis, however, you run the risk of losing your sense of humor, and the risk of becoming overwhelmingly stressed increases. Couple chronic office stress with other health problems or tension on the home front and the odds for addiction or mental health problems increase astronomically. And yet, when faced with substance abuse problems or depression head-on, many lawyers fail to consider what role the "state of the office" may have played in getting them to that point. It makes sense that a lot of our stress-related problems could be eliminated or greatly reduced if only we took a proactive stance toward the state of our firms and offices before it's too late.

What to Do

The tips offered below suggest a few ways to get the ball rolling toward a healthier, stronger, and friendlier office, which also translates into happier and better-served clients. These tips are for those folks so fed up with the chronic stress at their offices that they are willing to roll up their sleeves, seek out whatever resources are needed, and do their part in improving their work environments. This necessarily includes a commitment to work on improving personal work habits and attitudes. In other words, the tips are for those who are ready to sever (once and for all) the frightening link between chronic office problems and excessive office-induced stress, depression, and/or substance abuse.

Finally, you should be aware that others in your office may refuse to help address the real issues.

They prefer the risks associated with chronic office stress, and just won't cooperate in your efforts to turn things around. If that is the case, and you feel you've tried your best and given proposed changes a fair time frame within which to take root, then it's time to consider other workplace options. The bottom line in this situation presents a stark choice-Are you willing to accept and live with your current office environment as it is, or should you summon the courage to replant yourself and your skills in a different office with a different group of people?

Tips for a healthy office include:

1. Decide what kind of firm and reputation you want to build and in which direction you want your "ship" to be heading.
2. Take a hard, honest, and thorough look at the strengths and weaknesses of your entire office-its "crew," the equipment, space, design, systems, policies, procedures, clients, marketing, and so on.¹
3. Make a master list of all the changes needed and then prioritize them.
4. Create and follow a simple, annual action plan.²
5. Decide what steps need to be taken by whom and by when.
6. Make sure all employees understand the firm's philosophy, mission, and goals. Of course, make sure all your partners are in agreement first!
7. Monitor your action plan regularly. Hold everyone (including yourself) accountable to do their parts. If there are no consequences for noncompliance, there's no need to create a plan in the first place.
8. Obtain employee input on ways to improve efficiency, systems, and technology.
9. Voice criticisms privately.
10. Praise deserving employees openly.³
11. Ensure that the right person with the right background, training, and people skills is managing the day-to-day administration of your office. Don't give this person too many hats to wear or he or she will be stretched too thin to give his or her full attention to the administrative duties.
12. Provide sufficient training for all employees. Offer a variety of teaching styles (classroom, individual one-on-one training, training manuals) to accommodate your employees' diverse learning styles.
13. Make sure all employees understand that a good attitude is just as important as their skills and that a consistently poor attitude may cost them their jobs. Adopt a zero-tolerance level for employees who are chronic troublemakers or poor team players, no matter how great their skills. The other employees they scare off over time and the energies required to put up with their bad attitudes far outweigh the value of their skills.
14. Lead by setting a good example and offering support.
15. Treat, value, and respect your employees as you would your best client.⁴
16. Give clear instructions and avoid last-minute planning whenever possible.
17. Review your interviewing and hiring system and techniques; take steps to avoid future "bad" hires.
18. Update your systems and procedures-avoid the dangerous pitfall of "We've always done it this way so why change now?" Beware, however, of making rules or policies that you are unwilling to consistently and fairly enforce.
19. Take risk management seriously. Malpractice-proof your firm through up-to-date risk management systems, and ensure that all employees understand the risks and how to avoid them

through attentive, thoughtful, and timely client servicing.

20. Settle all unresolved conflicts with your partners and any others in your office (you need to demonstrate healthy conflict-resolution practices so that other employees will follow your example).

21. Read *The Lawyer's Guide to Balancing Life and Work*, by George W. Kaufman.⁵

22. Avoid becoming a "threshold" practice that takes any and every case that crosses your office door's threshold.

23. Develop a simple and realistic marketing plan no matter how small your firm.

24. Practice smart client selections in line with your marketing goals.

25. Stop procrastinating.⁶

26. Make a budget, stick to it, and hold others accountable to do the same.

27. Don't make promises you can't or won't keep.

28. Read and reread *Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal With Change in Your Work and in Your Life*, by Spencer Johnson and Kenneth Blanchard.⁷

29. Hang on to your sense of humor!

Remember, it's easy to point out others' faults, but it takes courage to take an honest and thorough look at ourselves, our work habits, and our offices. It also takes a lot of character to make the really tough decisions, even if they prove unpopular, in order to create a less-stressful work environment.

Attitudes Worth Catching

"I'm so lucky to have work worth doing and to love my work." "I look forward to coming to the office each day." "Anyone here would help me out in a pinch if needed." "We're a diverse bunch of folks, but together we make a great team."

I have actually heard many lawyers and their support staff make these types of statements. In fact, I have been most fortunate to have witnessed hundreds of success stories by courageous individuals, law firms, and legal departments. Each one has motivated and inspired me personally and professionally.

Likewise, each of those success stories involves lawyers and staff members who were stressed out, exhausted, and fed up with their work being in control of them instead of the other way around. In many cases, the lawyers had to face the reality that they were working in the wrong office or with the wrong mixture of personalities for them. However, with healthy doses of patience, determination, and resourcefulness, they all eventually carved out paths that led them to the right position and place. This, in turn, had tremendously positive effects on their personal lives.

You can do the same if you are truly tired of the chaos, stress, and in-house fighting that poorly managed offices generate. You don't have to cut through tons of red tape, and you don't need a doctor's prescription to get going. The only thing needed is your commitment and determination to take the ball in your hands and keep it moving in the right direction. You-no one else-are in charge of when you pick up the ball and run with it.

There is no doubt that unchecked chronic office stress is an often overlooked factor in depression, substance abuse, and other impairments. Just as there are many excellent programs and resources for these types of problems, there are many self-help tools to assist us in turning things around in our offices-if we really want to do so. Experienced legal management consultants can assist in the

process, as can practice management advisors provided by a few proactive and very caring state bar associations for their members.⁸

The bottom-line question is this: Are you willing to accept the same work-related stresses in your life year after year and accept the fallout from them? Or are you willing to take the necessary steps to look for and create healthier and better working environments for yourself and for your employees? The answers may not always be easy to face, but the ultimate choice is indeed yours, thank goodness.

[Stress Management Self-Audit Chart](#)

Notes

1. Easy Self-Audits for the Busy Law Office, Nancy Byerly Jones, published by the American Bar Association, 1999, 1-800-285-2221.
2. Id. at 7-8, 303 (discussion of and sample form for simplified strategic planning).
3. See 1001 Ways to Reward Employees, Bob Nelson, 1994, Workman Publishing (available in most book stores along with his newer book, 1001 Ways to Energize Employees).
4. Read The Man Who Listens to Horses, Monty Roberts, 1997, Random House Press (Trust me- this is a must-read for people managers as well as horse lovers and trainers!).
5. The Lawyer's Guide to Balancing Life and Work, George W. Kaufman, 1999, ABA Law Practice Management Section. To order, call 800/285-2221.
6. Read It's About Time! The 6 Styles of Procrastination and How to Overcome Them, Dr. Linda Sapadin with Jack Maguire, Viking Press, 1996.
7. Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal With Change in Your Work and in Your Life, Spencer Johnson and Kenneth H. Blanchard, 1998, Putnam Publishing Group.
8. See a listing of the bar associations that staff practice management advisors and the Practice Management Advisor Planning Guide online at www.abanet.org/lpm/bparticle12282_front.shtml.

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