

Stress Relief for Lawyers

7 SURPRISING WAYS TO
IMPROVE YOUR
EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

BY IDARA E. BASSEY, ESQ.

According to the American Institute of Stress some 83% of US workers suffer from work-related stress. [1]

The American Bar Association (ABA) has noted in no uncertain terms that the adversarial system that lawyers work within coupled with demanding schedules and heavy workloads contribute to their increased levels of stress. [2] In recent years what has been informally acknowledged (and amply complained about among practitioners) has been the focus of more serious inquiry and on the receiving end of organizational initiatives to address and to educate legal professionals how best to alleviate this issue and bring about better outcomes as far as operating optimally and addressing this pervasive problem. Our ability to offer the best service to our clients hinges on expending our best efforts.

This e-book is written for the Black woman in the legal profession who recognizes her role in becoming her best self and wishes to explore new wellness practices to contribute to her optimal functioning.



VISUALIZATION

One gold standard technique in ushering in improved emotional well-being is visualization. On the most basic level it is “the technique of using your imagination to create what you want in life...us[ing] your imagination to create a clear image, idea or feeling of something you wish to manifest...focus[ing] on the idea, feeling or picture regularly until it becomes objective reality.” [3] It’s not a particularly mysterious process but in the heat of whatever stress we happen to dealing with we forget that we have the option of envisioning a different way to handle matters and acting accordingly with said vision.

A few years ago, I remember noticing a black dog that was regularly running around loose where I live. I did not get the sense it was posing any danger, he just seemed to be tearing up and down the street "communicating" to anyone who passed by, “Look at me, look at me!” Several of my neighbors noticed this dog as well and we talked among ourselves that someone should call Animal Control. After a couple of weeks, I did not see the dog anymore and I figured that he had either moved on or the matter had otherwise been taken care of.

Shortly afterwards during my morning power walk I saw the same dog who had undergone a transformation of sorts- he was docile, following a fellow neighbor sedately on a leash. As I fell in step with her the full story unfolded: she too, had seen the dog tearing around aimlessly, and she and her husband took it upon themselves to take it to Animal Control and to inquire as to its health and ownership status.



VISUALIZATION

During this process she had come to fall in love with the dog and when it was established that it was not missing, she and her husband adopted it. Judging by the way she told the story it was clear that both she and the dog were incredibly happy with how things transpired.

I continue to see this same dog walking quietly with its new owner and think how on some level it had to claim the circumstances he desired before they actually came to pass. He had set his sights on bringing desirable new circumstances (a nice neighborhood, a nice owner) into being when was running around in what appeared to be in an aimless fashion; and by persistently “making his case” he attracted the means to achieve his objective.

So looping back to one stress another might you be able to envision responding differently to a client request that has typically sent you over the edge? Does a change in your trial prep plans always have to lead a meltdown followed by a rant to an unsuspecting individual who isn't even connected to the matter at hand? Hone in on an aspect of your professional life that elicits a less than optimal reaction on your part and begin envision yourself being able to handle such triggers more and more easily; perhaps enlisting the assistance of others who are similarly challenged to compare notes with.



VALUES ALIGNMENT

Mahatma Gandhi was long known for stating, “Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.” The corollary of this statement then recognizes that when these items do not line up, we are in for a less than ideal state of emotional well-being. Living in an integrated fashion- i.e.- when who we are is in alignment with what we value happiness is more likely to be the result. Actions that move us closer to living in a values-aligned way in our professional lives include:

Getting clear on what you value

Committing to implementing said values in the work you do and how you do it

Seeking out colleagues and/or other professional alliances that hold us accountable

Minimizing aspects of our professional experience that pull us away from our best selves

Cultivating a dialogue with mentors who are already where (and how) we would like to be

Perpetually working at cross purposes to what you value is unsustainable and stressful. While you may not be able to implement the changes you desire in your work life right away; just identifying the areas of disconnect and committing to take action to rectify them can go a long way to improving your well-being. We are happier when what we value is incorporated in our lives.

VALUES ALIGNMENT

An important component in making this shift is becoming self-referencing. It is one of the most important life skills we can ever develop in life. It is perfectly fine to have friends, spouses, colleagues, and the like, but at the end of the day we have look within ourselves and become the authority of our own experience. Only we can determine our values and priorities; and this task is too important be outsourced. This “baseline” foundation of inner knowledge moves us along in creating a work life that is in alignment with who you are and what you bring to the table.

First and foremost, regardless of what permutation of legal practice which you choose to pursue, your primary “job description” is to determine your “Why?” and use it as an anchor to guide you each and every time you are at a decision point about how you wish your career to unfold. It can begin with asking yourself every time whether a contemplated course of action is moving you closer to being aligned with what you value or further away. Increased alignment creates more internal harmony and it plain feels better to be on your own side. You may also find it useful to learn from the experiences of other attorneys who have embarked on their own value alignment journeys as I did in my book [Reflections of a Mystical Sistah: On Traveling the Road to Self-Definition](#) (iUniverse Publishing)

GRATITUDE

During a given workday it can be deceptively easy to latch on to a narrative that would lead to a downward spiral. A missed filing deadline, a client who “forgot” to share some vital information that throws your defense strategy into the realm of the unbelievable; all that further reinforce a belief that all is really unraveling. However, if we choose to consciously integrate a gratitude practice at any point of the day that it practicable (for example I enjoy early mornings and evenings before I sleep)- a simple recitation of what is actually going right or what we are appreciative of, we can build up a pleasant way to fortify us against the aspects of our workdays that go awry. In the beginning it may seem rather artificial or even contrived when the first few lists we make are along the lines of “well...1.) I woke up this morning and 2.) I have a job and 3.) I am breathing...” But if basic is where you need to start, so be it. The proverbial gratitude list can quickly evolve into a surefire way to lift our spirits and shift our perspective about what we happen to be dealing with in each moment.



GRATITUDE

We have a more accurate (an expansive) idea of what we have and how much we have going for us in that moment. Think of it as a baseline understanding that goes beyond appearances or makes us less likely to let them sway how we proceed through our workday. These days there are so many options to kickoff such a practice from old school blank journals to more sophisticated apps that trigger reminders- whichever end on the spectrum you choose to land on pick a way to consistently spend some time dwelling on all the things that of are value in your experience- soon it will become an automatic habit and boost for your well-being. Like a muscle that grows stronger each and every time your work out, consciously taking the time to identify what you are grateful for makes it that much easier to find something in a given situation at hand that is worthy to lift you up; thus shifting your perspective in the process.



TAPPING

Tapping (also known as Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT)) is a holistic treatment technique used to alleviate various emotional conditions [4]. It consists of an amalgamation of principles from Chinese acupressure and Western psychology and recipients of such treatment (be it self-administered or in led by a Practitioner) “tap” on various points on the body while talking through the triggering events in question. If you have ever witnessed an actual session in process it can look unusual to the uninitiated, but it has been reported to be quite effective. Dr. Peta Stapleton of Bond University in Australia recently conducted a groundbreaking study that realized a 43% reduction in cortisol (stress hormone) levels after an hour-long session [5]. The basic protocol is simple to learn and since its introduction in the 1980s it’s gained more popularity and more and more highly trained Practitioners and Psychologists offer services along these lines to assist individuals who wish to experience this technique for themselves.



MEDITATION

In its simplest iteration meditation refers to activities that lead to the end result of focused attention and they are increasingly being acknowledged for their effectiveness in the relief of stress. Many of us are familiar with some variation of an individual sitting cross-legged, eyes closed repeating a mantra, however there are so many different types of meditation and/or activities that could be included under this umbrella concept. The main thing they have in common is a conscious effort to slow down, withdraw our attention from the busyness around us to bring us back to the here and now. So much our stress has its origins in being anywhere else but the present moment; ruminating over what has happened in the past or attempting to anticipate what the future may or may not hold. Anchoring ourselves in the here and now-a moment that can be shaped and impacted- calms us down and with repeated practice improves the quality of the energy we do expend, producing a grounded sense of calm. Whether you choose to silently concentrate on your breathing, follow along with a pre-recorded guided meditation or to take a walk in nature, your intention to be fully present bodes well for creating a foundation for better overall emotional well-being. You will see a myriad of recommendations about how, when, and how often to practice meditation. If all you can manage is closing your office door and taking a few minutes between client calls to focus on your breathing, then by all means embrace the time you have until you can manage to carve out time for a more sustained practice. Every bit helps.

CHANGE

SAME

RE-PATTERNING

“When you repeat a mistake, it is not a mistake anymore: it is a decision.” (Paul Coelho)

When we are racing through the typical schedules many of us maintain as legal professionals, we often do not have the presence of mind to engage in deep reflection. As such, when it comes to addressing issues relating to our emotional well-being there could be repeated patterns that escape our immediate attention which are not only valuable in their own right, they (actually) have wisdom to share as far as what issues in our lives require our attention.

Does your commute always result in arriving to the office with a low-level underlying anger you did not wake up with? Despite your best intentions to eat healthy does your lunch always wind up being a meal you have to recover from? And despite your awareness of these patterns have your efforts to change course through your personal will met with little to no success?

Repeated patterns of any kind have a lot to teach us about ourselves if we are open to pausing and exploring further. Just the knowledge alone that we are not automatically hard-wired to respond in the ways we always do is enough to lift our spirits! If you feel you are not realizing the clarity you wish in this regard, rather than letting these types of concerns lead you down a non-productive downward spiral of self-blame, think of them as cause for pause or in the alternative a sign that securing additional support is in order. There is often cause to believe that the root causes of why you react the way you do are not immediately visible with our five senses. As such, the modality of energy healing can offer some new insights to go on.

RE-PATTERNING

“Energy healing” is best understood as an umbrella term that encompasses a myriad of modalities that address imbalances and distortions in the non-physical energy realm to bring about health, harmony, and balance. The nature of modern-day life has many people thinking (and ultimately believing) that perpetual drama that our patterns of being in the world often trigger-be it at home, at work and everywhere in between- is par for the course. This author begs to differ. The extent to which one is experiencing such can often be connected to state of their energy field.

For context, let us backtrack a bit here. Although these are largely beyond the view of the naked eye, every existing thing has an energy field—a ring of energy vibrating at a speed in correlation to the state of being of the person/thing in question. In many non-Western traditions, said energy fields are deemed to be invisible templates for our physical experience. To the extent that this is so, one can address physical, professional, and/or emotional issues or challenges by examining the state of a person’s energy field. Patterns (behavioral or otherwise)- particularly when they are repeated and are non-responsive to our efforts to change things up- are clear indicators that one needs to look more deeply at the source of said patterning. Now while beyond the scope of this introductory e-book, there is a virtual army of practitioners who specialize in analyzing energy fields in addition to removing blockages that hinder or otherwise compromise your ability to realize more emotional well-being.



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Personal Development Planning

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Personal development planning is the process of creating an action plan based on awareness, values, reflection, goal-setting and planning for personal development within the context of a career, education, relationship or for self-improvement [6]. Now while this approach may not immediately spring to mind when thinking about how to improve your emotional well-being, for the predominantly left-brained/analytical types that are very common to members of the legal profession this approach may be one you wish to consider. How did you get through law school if not for some level of planning even if it looked more like making conscious decisions about how to expend your energy and time during that time of your life? If chronic stress is an issue that has plagued for some time, and you are clear that it's not an optimal way of operating in your life and in your law career it stands to reason for anyone on the outside looking to ask, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" or if said person has had the benefit (or the access) to witness you in a less- than-optimal state for an extended length of time, the question may very well be, "What are you waiting for?"

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Through the introductory discussion provided by this e-book, one or more of these approaches may either be new to you and/or piqued your interest. If you are not yet at this level of clarity, perhaps enlisting the assistance of trusted friends, colleagues who are similarly situated may be a useful step. Or if they are at an advanced stage of wellness challenge themselves opting for consultation and/or support who can assist you in creating an overall regimen to address your specific concerns while introducing an additional level of accountability that can bode well for sustainable progress.

In Closing

We all deserve to enjoy optimal well-being on a daily basis. While we find ourselves ensconced in a profession that tends to have more of its share of workplace stress than others, the deterioration of our emotional well-being does not have to be a foregone conclusion. Often in our search to create what we are not currently experiencing we must keep an open mind to explore new avenues of support. Consider the very real fact that your current base of knowledge brought you to where you are today in all its components that are worth of praise and in need of adjusting. The degree to which you remain receptive to looking beyond your current habits is the degree that new possibilities in your experience of the legal profession can unfold.

ABOUT JOY Legal LLC

At its best a law firm (or other organization where legal counsel is dispensed) is a unified entity – all pistons firing with all its constituent parts- all members of the team- giving their 100%

As such, the thinking is that the whole is only as good as its constituent parts

Chronic stress- unlike acute stress- that lasts for a longer period of time is the enemy of the optimal functioning of the constituent parts.

Stressors run the gamut of objective personal and professional experiences we can witness, identify and categorize- their commonality being that they all affect the way we show up in the workplace and our ability to be of service to ourselves, our clients and the profession

As professionals we've gotten good at "powering through" (how else did we get through law school and pass the Bar?) using our critical thinking skills to eliminate or otherwise manage said stressors (or increasingly not as the case may be). We can all "think like a lawyer, right?"

Until "thinking like a lawyer" doesn't quite cut it.

This is where our work begins.

ABOUT JOY Legal LLC

As your partner in Helping the Black Women Lawyer Thrive in the Workplace without sacrificing her wellness, her spirit and her authentic self, we translate cutting edge modalities such as the ones discussed here to pave the way to your optimal professional functioning. These new tools will help you move past the stressors in your experience so you can bring your A-game to the table and realize the benchmarks that will keep you there and beyond.

Unearthing root causes of stressors bring you closer to operating at 100% and clear the way to achieving your aligned vision as you define it. What emotional or physical states of being or levels of executive performance do you wish to reach? Let's work together to release the blocks to making this happen so you can assume your rightful place at your workplace ready, willing and able to operate at the highest levels.

Book your Workplace Assessment today and take the first step in creating a roadmap for going from stressed out, miserable and misaligned to peaceful, fulfilled and on purpose in your lawyer- life! Look forward to connecting soon!

(<https://calendly.com/loveyourlawyerlife/workplace-assessment>)



Notes

- [1] American Institute of Stress, 42 Worrying Workplace Stress Statistics, Daily Life Blog <https://www.stress.org/42-worrying-workplace-stress-statistics>
- [2] American Bar Association, Stress, American Bar Association Resources
https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/resources/stress/
- [3] Shakti Gawain, Creative Visualization (1995).
- [4] Timothy J Legg, PhD., CRNP, A Guide to EFT Tapping, Medical News Today <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/326434>
- [5] American Psychological Association, [Reexamining the effect of emotional freedom techniques on stress biochemistry: A randomized controlled trial](https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Ftra0000563) (summation) APA PsychNet
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Ftra0000563>
- [6] Justine Chinoperekweyi, Exceptionality Without Relapse: Pathways and Principles to Creating an Exceptional Life (2017).