

Stress Rolls Downhill

Surviving an Unhealthy Workplace

BY SARAH MYERS



“Primates are super smart and organized just enough to devote their free time to being miserable to each other and stressing each other out.”¹

—Dr. Robert Sapolsky

Dr. Robert Sapolsky is a neuroendocrinologist and Stanford professor who has spent almost four decades studying the physiological effects of stress on health in baboons and humans.² In addition to the conclusive evidence that long-term stress suppresses the immune, digestive, and reproductive systems, Sapolsky’s research revealed that rank in society directly correlates to stress levels, and thus to overall physical and mental health. Simply stated, those who are of a lower rank have the highest incidence of stress-related illnesses. According to Dr. Sapolsky’s work, in environments where primates are not in daily physical danger from predators, they create psychological stressors, and they take out this stress on each other in accord with the hierarchy. Thus, stress rolls downhill.

The Whitehall Study, a longitudinal research project in England that commenced in 1967 and continues to the present, has traced a

similar phenomenon in humans in their work environment.³ The study found that those who have lower rank in the workplace are more likely to suffer from stress-related illness and disease than those who are higher in the organizational hierarchy. Why? Those in lower ranks in the workplace are generally in positions without any power or control over decisions; the perception is that the higher-ups, or bosses, have the power and control over the lives of the subordinates. The stress created from this type of situation makes subordinates physically, mentally, and emotionally ill.

Stress and the Law

What do these research projects have to do with lawyers? The practice of law is about helping others, yet is based on a hierarchical, adversarial process. The adversarial process is often used as an excuse for belligerent and even unprofessional behavior among many

attorneys that leads to a type of institutional bullying. In fact, research suggests that “lawyers . . . [are] more likely than other professionals to be exposed to toxic behavior in the workplace including verbal abuse, mistreatment, bullying, competition and destabilization from colleagues as well as sexual harassment.”⁴ This culture contributes to the fact that attorneys have the highest rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide of any profession.⁵ Neither Dr. Sapolsky’s research nor the Whitehall study focused exclusively on lawyers, and yet their findings and the environment they studied mirror the legal culture almost exactly.

Reducing Stress at Work

Thankfully, there are ways we can mitigate the damaging effects of stress individually, and as a culture as a whole, to support our physical, mental, and emotional health. According to Sapolsky, “the same things that make us smart enough to generate the kind of psychological stress that’s unheard of in other primates can be the same things that can protect us. We are malleable.”⁶ Self-care is an obvious remedy, but in some cases, exercise, eating well, spending

less time with technology, or taking time to relax isn't enough to mitigate the stressful environment we are in on an almost daily basis. There are, however, four tried-and-true methods for reducing the negative effects of a difficult work situation.

1. Cultivate a Sense of Control.

Even though the concept of control is ultimately illusory, we need to feel a sense of control over our own lives in general. For example, we can't control the rush hour traffic we find ourselves in, but we can control our car and we can control our reaction to the traffic. Experiencing even the perception of control or "having a say" in a situation can drastically reduce our stress levels. Focusing on the resources or support you have to solve the problems you are facing is a highly effective way to reduce stress levels because the sense of powerlessness is neutralized by a goal to solve a problem. In our place of employment, if we can advocate for ourselves and have discussions with the "higher ups," or with the human resources department, we should do so; it's important to express what works for us and what doesn't.

2. Create a Support Network Outside of Work.

There are times when a work environment is too threatening or unstable to have mature discussions. If you cannot discuss your needs

with those you work for or with, another remedy is cultivating relationships and social groups outside of work that foster a sense of belonging and positivity. The resiliency to cope with the stress comes from using our social nervous system, the system that is activated when we are around others we feel appreciation and love for. This system produces the chemicals that neutralize and heal the damage created by stress. Positive interpersonal relationships (with friends, family, members of a weekend sports league, colleagues, romantic partners, etc.) cultivate a sense of safety that is missing in stressful work environments; they allow us to feel like we can be ourselves without the fear of doing something wrong. As Sapolsky noted, "We are capable of social supports that no other primate can even dream of."⁷

3. Focus on Your Own Behavior.

It's a natural response to behave badly when we feel mistreated by others. However, that just perpetuates the stress cycle. If we have been gossiping about others, being judgmental, bullying or gas lighting, chronically complaining, or generally being difficult, we are actually making the situation worse for ourselves. While we cannot control other people's behavior, we can certainly focus on behaving with maturity, integrity, compassion, and honesty ourselves. When we are proud of our own words and

actions, stress levels diminish, and we can make better choices about how to respond to other people who might not be behaving well.

4. Communicate with Intention.

When it comes to dealing with demanding or difficult clients, setting boundaries and explaining reasonable expectations at the beginning can help prevent conflicts down the road. It is also crucial to express a level of understanding for the situations that bring the individuals to our office. This can be difficult when we are stressed out, overwhelmed, or in a bad mood (or if we have a personality that finds exercising compassion difficult), but if we allow our own issues to impact communication, we will escalate a situation rather than diffusing it.

Reframing and Beyond

Whether you are on the employee or employer side of the employment hierarchy, or if you are dealing with issues between colleagues, with clients, or with opposing counsel, we can all benefit from reframing the stress in our lives. Remembering why we decided to work in the world of law, focusing on the aspects of our jobs that we appreciate, and taking the time to communicate with those around us in a meaningful way can go a long way in reducing our daily stress. In some cases, we can't change the environments we are in, but



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we can change our reactions and responses to that environment. If, however, it is a change of environment you are looking for, contact Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) for confidential, free assistance. The majority of calls COLAP receives are from attorneys who are looking for direction on how to change their present circumstances. COLAP can assist you in getting the “ball rolling” in whatever level of change you are ready for. ^{CL}



Sarah Myers, JD, LMFT, LAC, is the executive director of the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP), which provides free and confidential services for judges, lawyers, and law students. If you need resources for any personal or professional issue compromising your practice, your well-being, or your quality of life, contact COLAP at (303) 986-3345 or visit www.coloradolap.org.

NOTES

1. See Schwartz, “Robert Sapolsky discusses physiological effects of stress,” *Stanford News* (Mar. 2007), <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2007/march7/sapolskysr-030707.html>.
2. *Id.*
3. Marmot et al., “Employment grade and coronary heart disease in British civil servants,” *J. Epidemiology and Community Health* (1978); Marmot et al., “Health inequalities among British civil servants: the Whitehall II study,” *The Lancet* (1991).
4. Papadakis, “Lawyers have lowest health and wellbeing of all professionals, study finds,” *Financial Review* (Nov. 2015), www.afr.com/leadership/lawyers-have-lowest-health-and-wellbeing-of-all-professionals-study-finds-20151117-gl1h72.
5. Flores and Arce, “Why Are Lawyers Killing Themselves?” *CNN* (Jan. 20, 2014), www.cnn.com/2014/01/19/us/lawyer-suicides.
6. Schwartz, *supra* note 1.
7. *Id.*

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