

Balancing life



Leota Embleton and John Starzynski

Life is a balancing act.

Family, work, friends, hobbies, exercise, volunteer activities, spirituality: These are but some of the many balls we try to keep in the air in our quest to live fulfilling and responsible lives.

Our families – immediate and extended – often compete for our time and energy. We have relationships with partners and spouses to nurture. Children occupy a special place, and add yet another set of variables: We're responsible for teaching, guiding, and helping them fashion life skills. Many of us coach soccer, baseball or hockey teams. Others ferry children to dance classes, music lessons and other activities. Our spare time, such as it is, becomes even more scarce. As our parents age, we may be faced with additional caregiving duties. We do all these things with love and with no expectation of reward.

Personally, we lead lives that fulfill us. Lawyers are prime candidates for community activity. We sit on charitable boards, hospital foundations, sports committees. We help at church. We sit on provincial and

national boards. We give back to our communities. We are the backbone of strong cities and towns.

On the whole, lawyers balance all these life and work roles quite effectively. But it's not easy, as a recent

Canadian Bar Association-Ipsos Reid survey points out: 68 per cent of those surveyed say that they have difficulty achieving a balance between their professional and personal lives. The biggest challenge, according to 84 per cent of lawyers? Time demands.

How do you know when you need help?

Feeling out of balance however is not the same as being out of balance. And sometimes the pressures of keeping all those balls in the air become overwhelming.

Like the general population, lawyers face the challenges of stress, burnout, addictions and mental health issues. For lawyers especially, stress and burnout are common – and often an indicator of a potential for more serious problems. Stress often leads to addiction-related issues: About 10 per cent of the general population will have an addictions problem with alcohol, another 10 per cent with drugs (although these two overlap), and another 10 per cent end up with gambling problems. About 10 per cent of the population will have mental health issues, and a small percentage are affected by other addictions and issues – sexual addictions, eating disorders and internet addiction.

On a cumulative basis, people will usually have two or even three problems at the same time, so that at any one time up to 20 per cent of people struggle with an addiction or mental health problem or both.

This article will examine the most common, easily diagnosed and treated issue: stress and burnout. Discussions of other potential concerns, including depression, substance abuse and addictions, are available on the practicePRO website at www.practicepro.ca/wellness.

Stress and burnout

Stress is very much part of everyone's everyday life. But when stress becomes overwhelming, our ability to cope becomes impaired. The following are early indicators that stress in your life may be affecting your ability to cope. Keep in mind that these are just signs. The more signs you have, the more likely you are not handling stress well.

Physical indicators: Panic attacks during which your heart races and pounds, your head feels like it is going to blow off, fast breathing or gasping for breath, muscle tension and dry mouth; headaches; dizziness; clenching jaw or grinding teeth; chest pains;

OBAP + LINK = OLAP

In the Winter 2006 issue of LawPRO Magazine, we carried a notice that OBAP and LINK had agreed to merge the two organizations. The new organization is called Ontario Lawyers' Assistance Program (OLAP). Contact names and phone numbers will remain the same as for OBAP.

indigestion; nausea; bloating; cramps; constipation; ulcers; colitis; back pain; appetite loss or increase; loss of interest in sex; shut down of menstruation; fatigue; insomnia; high blood pressure; heart disease; increased number of flu, colds and infections.

Mental indicators: Memory impairment and concentration difficulties; trouble making decisions.

Emotional signals: Nervousness; anxiety and tension; agitation; apathy; depression.

Behavioral signs: Fidgeting; nail biting; compulsive eating; smoking excessively; aggressiveness.

Dealing with stress and burnout

If you feel that you are stressed or burned out, your first step is to get professional medical help. Go to your family doctor to get a medical workup to check your thyroid, blood pressure, cholesterol, etc. Get a referral to a counselor.

On your own, follow these suggestions:

Physical: Get eight hours of sleep a night. Eat three, reasonably sized meals a day; have snacks with protein during the day. Watch your personal hygiene. Cut down or cut out caffeine and smoking. Watch your weight. Enjoy regular sex. Exercise three times a week for a minimum of half an hour each time. Take breaks during the day to catch your breath. Create opportunities to laugh – a lot.

Mental: Read something light and not law-related. Do cross-words or Sudoku. Write out the pros and cons of decisions you must make to help you focus. Meditate.

Emotional: Find a good friend or confidant with whom to share your hopes, dreams and disappointments. Get a pet. Time manage and learn to say "no." Do something you enjoy – golf, gardening. Use relaxation techniques such as yoga, cognitive behavioral therapy and/or mindfulness. Recognize your anger and stress through personal and physical awareness and release it by deep breathing.

Behavioral: Quit smoking and cut out drinks with caffeine. Watch your diet and alcohol consumption. Play with your kids.

Conclusion

Lawyers face challenges much like the general population. Most lawyers will find balance and health in their lives. Some will struggle with addictions and mental illness.

If you think that you may have a problem and could use an assessment, counseling and another lawyer to talk to about your issues, call the Ontario Lawyers' Assistance Program. All communication with OLAP is confidential. To reach the program manager, Leota Embleton, please call 1-877-576-6227. To reach the volunteer executive director, John Starzynski, please call 1-877-584-6227.

John Starzynski is the volunteer executive director with the Ontario Lawyers' Assistance Program (OLAP).

CBA survey: Lawyers' solutions to work/life balance

The Canadian Bar Association's Futures Initiative survey (conducted by Ipsos-Reid Corporation) asked lawyers a number of questions related to their decision to practice law and their satisfaction with that decision. Lawyers who said they did not have difficulty balancing professional and personal lives were asked how they achieved this balance. Their solutions:

- Managing workload (including declining work) – 16%
- Flexible hours – 15%
- Not working for a large firm – 15%
- Having/developing effective time management skill and working efficiently – 14%
- Working in government legal system/work in-house – 11%
- Being involved in personal interests outside the workplace – 10%.

For the complete survey results, go to www.cba.org/cba/futures/pdf/ipsos_final.pdf

OLAP workshops address special women and wellness topics

Without a doubt, women are changing the face of the law profession: They now account for 50 per cent or more of students enrolled at law schools across the country. More and more of them are partners, managing partners, members of the judiciary and senior corporate leaders. Women have high expectations for themselves and for their careers. They also have high expectations of their employers. They are making changes in the workplace: Reports of job sharing, flexible work schedules and reduced billable hours requirement may be rare, but they are real.

How are women lawyers and the challenges they face different from their male colleagues? What do they expect from a career in law – and what do they need to get there?

As part of its ongoing focus on wellness and balance in the legal profession, the Ontario Lawyers' Assistance Program (OLAP) offers women lawyers a Women's Wellness and Balance Luncheon Series. This special programming aims to involve women lawyers and provide interesting and practical information to promote wellness.

In the past year, more than 125 women have participated in quarterly workshops that covered a wide range of topics including:

- **Women's Health and Alternative Therapies** – questions to ask and how to assess alternative therapies;
- **The Feminine Spirit at Work** – insights to close the gap between one's personal and professional values;
- **How to be a Board Member in a Charity of your Choice** – the rewards of giving back to the community; and
- **Take Care of Yourself** – tips on creating your own success in health, wealth and well-being.

Presenters provide information and lead discussion – all in the time it takes to have lunch!

The workshops are sponsored by OLAP with support from the Ontario Bar Association and the Women's Law Association – Ontario. To get reports of the series and to find out about upcoming luncheons check out the website www.olap.ca.