



Happier where you are, or getting to a better place

How to improve satisfaction and reduce stress wherever you are

Lawyering is stressful. Lawyers expect to handle the pressures of solving individuals' high-stakes, emotionally-charged problems.

What lawyers don't necessarily anticipate is that they may suffer stress from being stuck in a work situation that is not their first choice. Competition for jobs may mean that a lawyer needs to accept work outside his or her preferred area of practice, work for a difficult boss, or work in a high-pressure, long-hours environment.

The ultimate cure for this kind of stress is to find another career that is a better fit. But if there are good reasons for sticking it out for a while, there are steps you can take to be happier where you are.

When work is uninspiring (or outside your preferred area)

During articling or in the first few years of your career, you may need to accept work in an area of practice outside your main area of interest. You may even have to do rote or low-autonomy work. After putting

Strategies to help you cope

Feeling overworked, under-challenged, or unappreciated? Try these strategies to improve the quality of your work environment:

- Set a time limit by which you'll make a move if things don't improve
- Learn a new skill or try a new technology – even if the current context you use it in is uninspiring
- List the aspects you like best – and least – about your current work, to gain insight about how to steer your career in the future
- Find ways to use the skills you don't use at work in other areas of your life – for example, volunteer on a residents' association executive, or coach kids' sports
- Study and practice the Buddhist principle of non-attachment or other spiritual discipline or philosophy that helps you improve emotional and mental balance
- Impress yourself: take new risks; or set a "personal best" standard for a task (for example, drafting a lease agreement, negotiating a price) and strive to beat it
- Find an inspiring mentor outside the organization
- When your workload feels overwhelming, aim to do the work while rejecting the stress – consciously choose your reactions
- Identify and reaffirm the reasons you've chosen a legal career
- Address your lifestyle so that you can better cope with work: eat well, exercise, spend time outside, reconnect with friends.



in the effort to obtain a legal education, this can be very discouraging. In the interests of reducing your student debt and feeding yourself and your family, you may have decided that you need to stay put until something better comes along. What can you do to find meaning in uninspiring work?

Hone general skills

Regardless of the context, there are certain skills you can hone in almost any legal environment. You can gain proficiency with unfamiliar technologies. You can work on your writing style, aiming for clarity and effectiveness. You can develop your listening skills. Improve whatever skills you can, so that when the right opportunity comes along, you're more likely to be an excellent candidate for the job.

Practice self-analysis

Make an effort to learn from your frustration. What are you looking for, in a career, that you feel is lacking in your current work? Do you crave one-on-one interaction with clients? The authority to make important decisions? Variety in the legal issues you encounter? Identifying the features of the right work for you can help identify what you would like to do instead, helping you to steer your future career development. In the meantime, if you feel you can have a positive conversation with your current co-workers/practice leaders, let them know how you would like to grow. They are busy, too – maybe they have not turned their minds to your aspirations, and there could yet be a win-win outcome achieved.

Find your inspiration elsewhere

Work need not be the sole source of personal fulfillment. If your work doesn't offer opportunities to use skills that you value, you can try using those skills in other parts of your life.

If you enjoy public speaking but don't get to do it at work, you could look for opportunities to do so in your community, perhaps in connection with a hobby. If you enjoy being a leader but are very junior in your workplace, you might seek leadership roles in community organizations. If you find fulfillment in making a difference for people in need, but your area of practice does not align with that personal value, you can donate your time and skills to charitable organizations that inspire you. Instead of letting an uninspiring job sour your overall attitude to life, use the mental energy you retain by not being challenged at work to build a more satisfying personal and community life. You may also develop competencies that serve you well in your next – more inspiring – work environment.

Put a limit on it

If you are truly miserable in your current situation, mitigate your negative feelings by treating your current position as a time-limited experiment. Determine how long you are willing to stay, define what needs to change and which strategies you are willing to employ to effect those changes, and commit to moving on if you don't see progress. In the meantime, maintain your network of contacts and your positive relationships with coworkers; in other words, no "checking out."

When you have a difficult supervisor or colleague

Interpersonal problems can add an enormous amount of stress to work life. A recent Danish study¹ found that much more so than a heavy workload, a feeling of being treated unfairly by one's boss is likely to lead to worker depression. What can you do to minimize the impact of a difficult supervisor on your mood and mental health?

Practice non-attachment

The most powerful thing you can do to minimize the impact of a supervisor's actions on your mental health is to actively resist taking those actions personally. It's important to give appropriate consideration to feedback and to put effort into finding ways to collaborate, but when a supervisor or colleague's demands or criticisms are unreasonable or excessive, they can generate counterproductive stress. Everyone starts out wanting to impress a new boss, but once it becomes clear that a supervisor or colleague's support and approval are being unreasonably withheld, it's emotionally healthier to practice "non-attachment" – a concept embraced by Buddhist practitioners, among others. Non-attachment involves letting go of one's desires, including one's investment in particular outcomes, such as winning the approval of others.

Non-attachment can help you weather a wide range of challenging situations and emotions. The article "Let it R.A.I.N. – a journey into mindfulness" on titleplus.ca offers a four-step process for handling difficult emotions.

Another clever technique to avoid taking a colleague's actions personally is to imagine yourself as an actor playing a role, and to "watch" yourself enduring an unpleasant interaction, rather than feeling yourself enduring it. What do you have to say for yourself? What are the feelings you observe? What is your facial expression? Seeing yourself from the perspective of an outside observer, and making adjustments to your own behaviour can help you feel like you have some control over the situation.

¹ The findings of the study were published in three articles in the scientific journals *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, *Psychoneuroendocrinology* and *The Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*. See a summary at: sciencenordic.com/boss-not-workload-causes-workplace-depression

Fail better

Doron Gold, Staff Clinician and Presenter with the Law Society's Member Assistance Program (MAP)², notes that particularly in the early years of their careers, many lawyers have a sense of irretrievability: they believe that if they make a mistake they will never recover. The truth is that there are very few permanent mistakes. Working in an environment in which it feels like you can't do anything right may be a golden opportunity to take risks that help you learn and grow. If you're going to be criticized no matter what you do, why not take bolder risks? Fail bigger and better – propose the strategies and defend the positions you truly support.

Impress yourself

If there is no way to impress the boss, at least you can impress yourself by practising according to your personal convictions. Learn how to generate internal motivation and a strong sense of self-worth. This kind of personal development will serve you well throughout your career.

One of the dangers of a difficult boss is that a steady diet of criticism can lead you to doubt your own abilities and to undervalue your skills when it comes time to look for new work. Try to keep a sense of perspective on your skills and protect your self-image. Got a compliment from a judge, a colleague or a client? Remember it, and give it at least as much weight as you give to the negative feedback you are receiving.

No mentors? Look further afield

Instead of stewing about the lack of role models within your organization, look outside the organization for mentors in the profession at large. As long as you are respectful of their time, many senior lawyers will be happy to teach you a thing or two. Our “Managing the mentoring relationship” booklet, available for download from practicepro.ca, provides tips about how to structure the mentoring relationship so that it's safe and rewarding for both mentor and mentee. It is a common misconception that acting as a mentor exposes a lawyer to a greater likelihood of a professional liability claim. In fact, LAWPRO rarely sees claims arising out of mentoring relationships. We believe that mentoring can reduce claims. And to encourage mentoring, we will waive any deductible and claims history levy surcharge for a claim made against a mentor and arising out of a mentoring relationship, provided some simple guidelines have been followed (see page 20 of the booklet).

When the hours are long or the pressure is high (or both)

Depending on the nature of your legal career, the hours may be long, unpredictable, or both. Feeling tired in the face of a grueling schedule is normal; feeling hopeless and depressed is not. Don't

ignore symptoms and thoughts that go beyond the normal stress associated with a demanding job.

Rethink your reactions

It's a cliché, but there is some truth to it: life is 10 per cent about what happens to you, and 90 per cent about how you react. Consider trying to change how you think about your workload. After all, the work will still be there whether you feel stressed or calm in the face of it. See the passage on page 15 about non-attachment, and remind yourself that feeling stress is not the only possible reaction available to you.

Be clear about the “why”

When your workload is high enough to cause you significant stress, it's important to reflect on why you have chosen your particular career. There are areas of practice, locations, and organizations in which you can practise law without working extremely long hours. If you find yourself in an especially high-pressure work situation, consider whether the sacrifices are worth it.

When asked how they cope with very long hours, many lawyers explain that they feel that the work they do aligns with their values and gives them a strong sense of purpose. Feeling as though you are making a difference and doing work that has value can greatly reduce your stress. If, on the other hand, you *don't* experience this sense of personal reward, long hours are harder to justify.

Live well outside of work

If you have no power over your work schedule, you can improve your life satisfaction by working on things over which you do have control. In other words, make sure the rest of your life is ship-shape.

To cope better even on stress-filled days, be sure to take the time to eat properly, get some exercise, prioritize sleep, and get out in the fresh air and sunlight. Many people find that meditation, mindfulness practice, or yoga help them feel calmer and more centred. Finally, take the time to nurture existing relationships with family and friends, and strive to build new ones. Having a supportive social circle can reduce your stress, make your days feel more meaningful, and even improve your physical health.

Invest in yourself

Hardly anyone spends their entire career in his or her “dream job,” and many lawyers will work in less-than-ideal settings. Invest in the best version of yourself by taking steps to be happier where you are, and you will be ready when opportunity finally knocks. ■

Nora Rock is Corporate Writer and Policy Analyst at LAWPRO.

² The Member Assistance Program (MAP), co-funded by the Law Society of Upper Canada and by LAWPRO, can be reached at 1-855-403-8922 (TTY: 1-866-433-3305). Online resources can be accessed at myassistplan.com