



Work Smarter: The Power of Recharge



By Hallie Neuman Love



A 2012 ABA Law Practice article states that burnout in the legal profession is greater than that of other professions.¹

Why does law practice lead to such extreme results for so many attorneys? This article will examine data from a broad spectrum of scientific research in positive psychology, exercise science, neurobiology, neuroscience, and complementary and alternative medicine (the new mind-body sciences) in order to identify factors that may lead to attorney burnout and to explain why those factors may contribute to attorney distress. Further, this article will introduce work trends that utilize the emerging mind-body sciences to pioneer smarter ways to be more productive and thus avoid burnout. Finally, this article will offer an overview of scientifically proven interventions and recharging techniques that may provide a buffer against the occupational hazard of attorney depression and burnout.

Factors Contributing to Attorney Burnout

Thorough review of the exploding research in the mind-body sciences and legal education reveals six significant factors that may contribute to attorney distress. By understanding how these factors affect brain chemistry, brain wiring, biology, and the stress response, we can alter their adverse effects by modifying our behaviors.

1. High Demands

Ever-higher demands, frustrations, and deadlines will always persist, but mind-body science proves we can cultivate vast control over their deleterious effects. The common logical response to overwhelming legal responsibilities is to log more continuous hours, nose to the grindstone, and view downtime as time wasted. The problem is that humans are not designed to burn up energy continuously. The need for physical and psychological recharging is embedded in our physiology. When we expend too much mental and emotional

energy without recharging, we become exhausted and it takes more hours to get the job done. Our bodies regularly tell us to take a break, but we supersede these signals with caffeine, sugar, and stress hormones.

Stress hormones work optimally when they flood our bodies for only for a short time until we are out of harm's way. This is neurobiology's famous fight/flight survival response. While it's true that stress physiology can provide motivation and improve performance in small doses, it's also true that the brain-body does not distinguish between physical and psychological threats. Every type of stressor releases a deluge of stress hormones. Chronic stress keeps the immune system suppressed 24/7, setting the body up for serious health risks, draining energy as the stress chemicals amp up the body's physiology for fight or flight, increasing heartbeat and blood pressure, and sending all energy to the muscles. Operating in chronic stress mode is physically exhausting, emotionally dispiriting, and is not sustainable. Continuous stress is so commonplace in law practice it seems "normal." The whole truth is that the real problem is lack of recovery from stress. The key to thriving is to strategically practice turning off the stress response and continually recharging energy throughout the day.

2. Multitasking

Juggling too many things at the same time splits focus and attention so that we are partially engaged in multiple activities but rarely fully engaged in any one primary task. Psychology studies conclude that multitasking typically increases the time it takes to finish the primary task by an average of 25 percent. Further, multitasking trains the brain to be ineffective at focusing and concentrating. Doing one thing at a time helps the brain get over this "cultural ADD." The better we are at focusing on one thing at a time for sustained periods, the more effective we are and the higher quality work we produce in less time, thereby decreasing the sense of overburden and stress.

3. Emotions

Studies in positive psychology and neuroscience reveal that the neurochemistry of emotions impacts attorneys daily. When we are confronted with an onslaught of demands and unexpected challenges, we slip into negative emotions—irritability, impatience, anxiety, insecurity, fear, frustration, anger, blame, resentment—multiple times a day. These negative emotions have a cascading effect. The stress response turns on, which undermines the brain's capacity to think clearly, logically, or broadly, which in turn makes us less productive. We are more likely to move into reactivity, which further drains energy. As we become physically and emotionally depleted, we are less engaged, more distracted, and less rational.

Without intermittent recharging, we are not physiologically capable of sustaining positive emotions that nourish the body with dopamine and serotonin. These feel-good chemicals counteract stress, build emotional resilience, and turn on the learning centers in the brain

that help us organize and store information, retrieve it faster, and make and sustain more neural connections which in turn allow us to think more quickly and creatively.

4. Legal Training

Experts in legal education have pointed out that the very nature of legal training may play a part in depression and burnout. In law school we learn to look for flaws and the holes in arguments. We train ourselves to be critical thinkers. We further our legal careers with optimized analytical thinking, defensive posturing, and looking for and zeroing in on weaknesses in opposing counsel. All are crucial skills for lawyers and make for the successful practice of law. By training this way hour after hour, we have ingrained neural pathways that are very adept at looking for and targeting the negative. The problem is that the better we get at scanning for the negative, the more we miss out on the positive.² Studies in positive psychology divulge that a lawyer's view of the whole world (not just legal issues) may become stuck in scanning for the negative, a concept called "cognitive afterimage." Unless there is an ability to compartmentalize these work-related skills, "legal thinking" can lead to a negative fault-finding, energy-draining, and stress-producing mindset. However, the brain is malleable and can change throughout our lives, allowing us to train our brains to scan for positives and create new neural pathways that afford conscious activation of positive emotions and their neurochemistry of wellbeing.

5. Mirror Neurons

Neuroscience has uncovered certain brain cells called "mirror neurons" that act as reflectors and tune us to each other at physical and emotional levels. Mirror neurons may be partially responsible for feeling energized while in the company of positive people and feeling depleted or frustrated while in the company of negative people. This may also help explain why lawyers who have direct and continuous contact with trauma-exposed clients may experience a sort of secondary trauma that can lead to burnout. There is evidence that exposure to overwhelmed clients, frustrated partners, and difficult opposing counsel can trigger negative emotions akin to their feelings as mirror neurons begin to resonate in a manner similar to theirs. Recharging techniques are useful for maintaining emotional balance in light of mirror neurons.

6. The Sedentary Nature of Law Practice

Neurobiology provides that continuous hours of sitting slows our body's metabolic rate and triggers a type of hibernation mode, shutting down the immune system as well as other systems. The body's chemistry becomes depressive. It is vitally important to move throughout the day and to get exercise, which is an anti-depressant.

Smarter Work Trends: A New Paradigm

The six factors discussed above typically result in less productivity. Left unchecked, one or more of these factors may result in overwhelming depression or burnout.

The explosion of research in the mind-body sciences makes the case for an alternative work ethic—working smarter, not longer, hours. Research shows that people have more energy and are more productive when they move from periods of high and fully engaged focus to periods of recharging their energy throughout the day. It's clear from emerging data that the quantity of energy available to us affects how well we feel, how well we think, and how motivated we are to do our jobs. In high productivity we can accomplish more in less time. By using techniques of recharging energy throughout the day, we have creative breakthroughs, broader perspectives, and reflective and long-term thinking. We will have time to metabolize what's learned, feel more motivated, and be capable of greater

cognitive functioning. By understanding that energy is renewable, we can strategically recharge our energy and remain productive. Recharging turns off the stress response, thereby building physical, mental, and emotional resilience as a buffer against depression and burnout. This is the new science of sustainable work stamina and high performance success.

Overview of Interventions and Recharging Techniques

Simple behavioral interventions that may help increase productivity include the reduction of interruptions that interfere with high focus; avoiding multitasking in an effort to help re-train the brain to focus on one thing at a time; eating right, sleeping right, and exercising (core-based exercise is most energizing); taking lunch fully unplugged away from the desk; getting up from the desk periodically to stretch (yoga is most effective); and moving the body to stave off the hibernation response.

Easy-to-learn recharging techniques include mini-recoveries that switch off the stress response and turn on the stress antidotes of dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins. Unplugging and completely changing channels are key because true recharging requires full disengagement from work. It takes practice to learn how to do it, but once learned, mini-recoveries needn't take more than 5–15 minutes to kick in the "reset" button. Some common mini-recoveries include breathing and relaxation exercises; resiliency training of the nervous system (provides for quicker discharge of negative emotions); rediscovery of the purpose of work and life (which provides increased focus, commitment, and perseverance); consciously cultivating positive emotions (confident, engaged, happy, invigorated) that build resilience and are an antidote to stress; and mindfulness meditation which can create one-pointed focus, a sense of calm and contentment, and more resilience.

A power recharging tool is Integrative Restoration® ("iRest") meditation. In the author's view, it is the most effective and long-lasting recovery available. It encompasses all of the mini-recoveries discussed above rolled into one easy practice.

In conclusion, the practice of law can easily include daily doses of recharge. Thinking and acting like a lawyer does not have to result in chronic stress or depression or burnout. There are easy-to-learn techniques to re-train the brain, body, and spirit to work smarter, with more productivity, decreased stress, and increased positivity. ■

About the Author

Author Hallie Neuman Love is a New Mexico attorney and nationally certified mind-body therapist (YA E-RYT 500.) She specializes in teaching iRest® for lawyers (currently at the State Bar Center) as well as strategic recharging techniques for optimal productivity.

Endnotes

¹ www.americanbar.org/publications/law_practice_magazine/2012/may_june/burnout-avoidable-not-inevitable.html

² Peterson, T.D., & Peterson, E.W., *Stemming the Tide of Law Student Depression: What Law Schools Need to Learn From the Science of Positive Psychology*, 9 Yale J. Health Pol'y L. & Ethics, 357-434 (2009).

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