

Psychological Capital Building the Mental Strength and Flexibility to Manage Stress and Boost Performance

by Martha Knudson, J.D., MAPP

Lawyering often comes with a generous helping of stress that can wear on the performance, mental health, and continued job satisfaction of the best of us. It's a byproduct of our role in handling challenges with clients. If increased well-being in the legal profession is indeed a priority, what do we do about stress? We begin by changing our relationship with it. We stop stressing about stress and, instead, we develop our capacity to engage with it in healthy ways.

Stop Stressing About Stress. Understand and Manage it Instead.

A stress-free life is not the secret ingredient for increased well-being. Even if that were possible (it's not), it wouldn't be advisable as a certain amount of stress is actually necessary for our happiness. Stress is bound up with the elements of life that many of us value most: personal growth, positive relationships, love, family, achievement, a fulfilling and successful career, and living a purposeful life. Without stress, none of these things would be possible. When you boil it down, stress is what occurs when something we value is at risk. See Kelly McGonigal, *The Upside of Stress: Why Stress is Good for You, and How to Get Good at It* xxi (2015).

Stress is also not the big bad monster it's so often made out to be. It's an adaptive biological response to help our bodies and minds perform better when challenge hits. Stress is also a great teacher, acting to rewire our brains so we can be better at facing a similar demand in the future and can do so with less agitation. See *id.* at 53–55. Think back to your first few years practicing law. Do the things that raised your stress levels then carry the same power now? If they don't, that has a lot to do with your stress response doing its job.

The real problem with stress isn't stress itself. In fact, stress is correlated with things like improved memory, faster brain processing, sharpened hearing, better performance, and increased resilience. Stress can also be cardio protective, lead to a longer

and healthier life, and better quality relationships. *Id.* at 50–56. Stress causes health concerns when our stress response is either chronically over-active or rages on unchecked and without recovery. When this happens, our body doesn't return to baseline and the physiological processes which are helpful in the short-term begin to burden our system. Over time, this over-active stress response can become harmful to our physical and mental well-being. See *id.* 1–223; Richard Sutton, *The Stress Code: From Surviving to Thriving a Scientific Model for Stress Resilience* 26–45 (2018).

The idea, then, is to learn how to manage the reactivity of our stress response and to make recovery a priority. One incredible tool we all have and can develop is the power of our own minds. Let me explain. Challenges trigger our stress response. When it happens, one of the first things our brain does is conduct a quick appraisal process where we assess both the demands of the situation and whether or not we have the resources to cope. The more we believe we have what it takes to handle the matter, the more likely we will perceive the stress as manageable and approach the challenge in a proactive way. This, in turn, results in less persistent worry and more confidence which translates into a less aggressive and shorter-lived stress response. See McGonigal, at 113.

Cutting edge research also shows that our mindset about stress and our ability to handle what life throws at us is, on its own, enough to actually alter the level and ratio of the stress hormones our bodies release. *Id.* at 14–24; Sutton at 63–70.

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Psychological Capital: Building Your Mental Strength and Flexibility.

Scientific research has demonstrated that a concept known as Psychological Capital, a state that can be thought of as mental strength and flexibility, can be incredibly effective in heightening our ability to meet challenge and manage stress. Also known as PsyCap, this resource, when developed, allows us to respond to challenge in a productive, healthy, and resilient way.

PsyCap has other important advantages. Scientific studies show that having elevated levels of this resource provides us with a competitive edge. It's linked with increased job performance over that which is related to skill and intelligence alone. And, it is also associated with higher job commitment, job satisfaction, and lower absenteeism and attrition rates, things that we and our legal organizations care about. Beyond that, PsyCap is preventative, helping to shield us from burnout, anxiety, and depression. See Martha Knudson, *Building Attorney Resources: Helping New Lawyers Succeed Through Psychological Capital*, University of Pennsylvania Scholarly Commons 30–34 (2015). Simply put, PsyCap goes hand in hand with our work as lawyers. It augments our traditional legal skills, allowing us to use them to our highest ability.

The good news is that our PsyCap can be developed. It takes a short training session followed by deliberate daily practice that can be done in connection with legal work. PsyCap is made up of the following four positive mental strengths:

- **Self-Efficacy:** The confidence to successfully take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks.
- **Resilience:** The capacity to cope, sustain, and bounce back when problems and adversity strike.
- **Hope:** The ability to persevere toward goals and, when necessary, to redirect goal pathways to succeed.
- **Optimism:** A positive expectation about one's ability to meet challenges and succeed now and in the future.

Fred Luthans et al., *Psychological Capital Development: Toward a Micro Intervention*. 27 J. ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAV., 387–93 (2006).

You're probably already using some of these mental strengths in your practice. If so, they're likely helping to drive your success as each strength is scientifically correlated to desirable outcomes.

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- **Strong self-efficacy is linked with better performance and work satisfaction, lower burnout, and increased well-being.** Merche Ventura, Marisa Salanova, & Susana Llorens Gumbau, *Professional Self-efficacy as a Predictor of Burnout and Engagement: The Role of Challenge and Hindrance Demands*, 149 J. PSYCHOL.: INTERDISC. & APPLIED 277–302 (2015).
- **People high in resilience are more likely be more flexible to changing demands, better equipped to deal with stress, and show higher job performance and satisfaction.** James B. Avey, Fred Luthans, & Susan M. Jensen, *Psychological Capital: A Positive Resource for Combating Employee Stress and Turnover*, 48 HUM. RES. MGMT. 677–93 (2009).
- **Hopeful thinkers tend to achieve more, have elevated work performance and satisfaction, and are more mentally and physically healthy than the non-hopeful.** Suzanne J. Peterson & Kristin Byron, *Exploring the Role of Hope in Job Performance: Results from Four Studies*, 29 J. ORG. BEHAV. 785–803 (2008).
- **Many of these same things are true for those who view the world through an optimistic lens as optimism is correlated, among other things, with heightened performance and productivity, job satisfaction, improved immune systems, and heightened ability to cope with stress.** Carolyn M. Youssef & Fred Luthans, *Positive Organizational Behavior in the Workplace; The Impact of Hope, Optimism, and Resilience*, 33 J. OF MGMT. 774–800 (2007).

The magic of PsyCap happens when we use these four strengths together. When we do the result is a synergy greater than when each strength is used alone. This means that, while each resource individually contributes to lawyers' positive mental strength and flexibility, when combined, they become stronger than the sum of their parts.

Improving Self-Efficacy.

Self-efficacy is our subjective belief about our ability to handle challenge and accomplish the goals we set out to achieve. At its center, this isn't based on our objective skills but rather on our subjective perception of what we can and can't do with the skills we have. This may sound simple, but our sense of self-efficacy impacts the difficulty of the goals that we choose, the efforts we put in to reach them, how well we handle the challenges that inevitably pop-up in the practice of law, and the severity of our stress levels when they occur.

Remember, when challenge hits we make some pretty quick

choices about the demands the situation requires and our own ability to handle it. These choices set the foundation for how we interact with our work. If we don't believe we have what it takes it's far easier to procrastinate and quickly give up. But when our confidence is high, we're more likely to dig in and put forth the effort necessary to get the job done.

Consider two young lawyers with very similar skills and experience. One lawyer has a strong sense of self-efficacy in her skills while the other one doesn't. The lawyer with high self-efficacy is more likely to: (1) approach problems as challenges to be mastered; (2) show higher interest in and commitment to tasks; and (3) put in the efforts needed to succeed even in the face of setbacks. In contrast, the lawyer with low self-efficacy is more likely to: (1) avoid or withdraw from challenging tasks; (2) believe that difficult goals are beyond his or her capabilities; and (3) quickly lose confidence when setbacks happen.

Which of these two lawyers will handle stress better? Which is more likely to perform better and have higher job satisfaction over time? Research says it's the one with high self-efficacy. Ventura, Salanova, & Llorens, *supra*, at 277–302. The relationship is cyclical in nature. Self-efficacy impacts performance, which in turn impacts self-efficacy perceptions, a cycle that can be either positive or negative in nature.

Self-efficacy can be developed in four ways. *See* Knudson, *supra*, at 18–20. We learn best by doing, so the first avenue is focus on our past wins, identifying the strengths and skills we used to get the job done, and then reflecting on how we can use these same things to meet the current challenge. The second is to seek constructive feedback from someone we trust. A third option is to learn vicariously. Watching others that we identify with overcome barriers and achieve success goes a long way to strengthening our belief that we can do the same. Fourth is understanding and reframing the stress response that often comes with challenge. *See id.* Instead of perceiving our nervous butterflies to mean we don't have what it takes, we can recognize these feelings as what they are, our bodies' way of preparing us to meet a challenge and succeed. *See* McGonigal, *supra*, at 120.

Developing Resilience.

The PsyCap mental strength of resilience isn't about sucking it up when challenge, curveballs, and setbacks happen in the practice of law. It's about being able to cope in healthy ways, to accurately frame the risk of a situation, and learning to recognize and use all the resources we have available to help us. Our resilience can be built through deliberate practice.

To do so, when a challenging situation hits, slow down and consider (and then re-consider) the real risk. A vital part of

doing this includes spotting those factors that we can and can't control. This is key because it helps us to focus our efforts where they can have impact and stop ruminating about things we can't control. Next, focus on finding realistic options for action. What options are there? Can we look at the matter in a different way that might offer more options? Seeking out the viewpoint of a trusted friend or colleague can really help here as others can often spot something that we missed. *See Knudson, supra*, at 24–27.

Resilience is also built by proactively considering the skills and resources we have at our disposal that can help us handle the situation. These can include anything from our knowledge, skill set, work ethic, and past experiences, to our finances, creativity, access to support staff, and our supportive relationships. *Id.*

Cultivating Hope.

Hope is more than just what “rebellions are built on” (shout out to you Star Wars fans), it's about learning goal setting and planning skills for meeting challenges and overcoming obstacles: skills that are really handy for lawyering. Hope levels can be built through deliberate practice. To start, when meeting our next challenge, we can set a goal that is directly related to helping us overcome it. The goal should stretch us but also be achievable and have clear beginning and end points. Difficult or complex goals should be broken down into manageable steps that can be tackled along the way. *Id.* at 13–16.

Next is to identify multiple routes to goal attainment. It helps to write down all the paths we can think of that could realistically lead to success, and to think through the skills and resources needed for each path. When considering routes to goal success it's also important to anticipate any possible obstacles and strategize ways around them. *Id.*

Building Our Optimism.

PsyCap optimism isn't an unchecked process of figuring that everything will somehow just work out. Instead, it's about learning to accurately evaluate a challenge while also believing that we have what it takes to succeed. Lawyers can find this to be tricky as we are basically trained professional pessimists. We're paid to spot risk and potential downsides to protect our clients. We're good at it and, when used correctly, it's a great lawyering skill. But unchecked, pessimism can come with a cost.

Pessimists tend to assume responsibility for negative things that happen, including for things that are way outside of their control. This can be highly demotivating when approaching challenge. In contrast, optimists emphasize favorable events and more easily see their role in making good things happen.

Having this mindset minimizes self-doubt and motivates us to make challenging goals and commit to achieving them. *Id.* at 20–24. To build this capacity, it helps to pay close attention to our mindset and self-talk in times of challenge and adjust if we are being overly pessimistic. *Id.*

Paying Attention to Building Our PsyCap Can Bring a Big Return of Investment.

Investing our attention to building our PsyCap mental strengths of self-efficacy, resilience, hope, and optimism is good for us and the organizations we work for and, ultimately, translates to our bottom line. Science tells us that our PsyCap resources of self-efficacy, resilience, hope, and optimism shape the underlying attitudes and behaviors known to increase and sustain performance while also keeping us healthy and able to successfully navigate the stresses of the profession. It takes a little training and deliberate practice, but it is an investment in ourselves that is well worth the effort.

Interested in learning more about working with stress and/or building PsyCap for yourself or for those in your law firm or legal organization? The Well-Being Committee for the Legal Profession can help provide you with resources and training. Contact martha.knudson@utabbar.org with questions.

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