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# IN SIGHT

*for Oregon Lawyers*

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## SOCIAL SUPPORT AND THE REDUCTION OF STRESS

Stress is the common cold of the legal profession. It is ubiquitous, affecting lawyers of all ages, genders, and backgrounds, and all sizes, types, and areas of practice. For some, stress is merely a mild irritation or an occasional challenge that passes with time. For many, it is a much more frequent problem, but one they can handle. For still others, stress poses a daily obstacle that regularly interferes with nearly all aspects of life. When ignored, even moderate stress levels can have physical and psychological consequences, including:

- Cardiovascular disease;
- Immunological and neurological disorders;
- Depression and anxiety;
- Social alienation; and
- Marital dissatisfaction.

Clinical research, empirical studies, and surveys focusing on health issues in the legal profession over the past 30 years consistently suggest that lawyers in this country experience:

- Clinical depression at much higher rates than the general population;
- Substantially elevated rates of anxiety disorders;
- Alcohol abuse and dependence at rates estimated by some as *twice* that of the general population; and
- Levels of paranoia, hostility, and anger far exceeding those in the general population.

### Social Support and Stress Reduction

A variety of well-recognized and effective strategies can lessen the adverse physical and psychological consequences of excessive and chronic stress. In

addition to appropriate medical assessment, one strategy increasingly recognized by authorities in the field is also the most readily available: social support.

Unlike the common cold, stress is not contagious. In fact, human connection and the presence of others are valuable and perhaps even indispensable weapons in the arsenal needed to combat the harmful consequences of stress. Social support networks are made up of the friends, family, domestic partners, coworkers, colleagues, and acquaintances in our individual familial, social, recreational, and occupational communities. They range from confidants to casual acquaintances.

### Forms of Social Support

Social support can take different forms, with a single relationship at times serving multiple functions:

- *Emotional support* – support gained from relationships in which experiences are mutually shared, and love, empathy, and caring are provided;
- *Logistical support* – support provided from relationships in which practical or other day-to-day assistance is provided (such as rides to doctor appointments or help with other tasks that you are unable to do yourself);
- *Informational support* – support provided from relationships in which information, advice, and suggestions are made available; and
- *Appraisal support* – support provided by relationships in which there is an exchange of reflective information such as constructive feedback.

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### Benefits of Social Support

Although the precise neurobiological mechanisms are not fully understood, current medical and scientific research demonstrate that social support networks act to facilitate physical and mental health (*protective effect*) and serve as a valuable resource during times of stress (*buffer effect*). Strong social support promotes:

- Our sense of self-worth (i.e., feeling we are relied on and valued by others);
- Our sense of belonging (i.e., knowing that we are not alone in the world);
- Our feeling of security (i.e., knowing that others are available in times of need); and
- Our self-knowledge (i.e., having others whom we trust to provide affirmation and non-judgmental feedback).

### Developing and Nurturing Support Networks

When developing a social support network, it is important to carefully assess our own values, interests, and sources of enjoyment and to seek connections that are both genuine and mutually beneficial. Here are some ways to develop and nurture such relationships:

- Get involved – Community activities, places of worship, social service agencies, and professional groups provide valuable opportunities to establish connections with others;
- Volunteer – Work with others on a cause that is important to you;
- Expand your social network – Accept invitations to social events, especially if they involve new or different people;
- Draw on your existing network – Call a friend or acquaintance. Social relationships are a two-way street and require giving as well as receiving;
- Get out with your pet – Dog parks and gatherings of pet owners provide good opportunities to meet others with similar interests;
- Work out – Local fitness centers and exercise classes are often good places to get to know

like-minded others;

- Invite someone to lunch – Sharing a meal together can provide an enjoyable and non-threatening way to connect with new acquaintances;
- Go back to school – A college or community education course can be an opportunity to interact with others in a shared learning environment;
- Be a good listener – Find out about others and what interests them;
- Spend time with family and significant others – Take time to appreciate those closest to you and let them know their importance to you.

Remember that one of the goals of developing and nurturing social relationships is to decrease, not increase, stress levels. Carefully assess current and prospective relationships to determine whether they are obligatory, oppressive, codependent, or otherwise harmful to you.

Healthy relationships are well worth the effort. Strong social support networks are a valuable resource in combatting the adverse effects of the stress-related health conditions that are so prevalent in the legal profession.

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