

JUDICATURE

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Five ways judges can improve well-being

WHILE JUDICIAL STRESSORS ARE LEGION, RESOURCES TO HELP JUDGES COMBAT STRESS ARE SLIM.

Fortunately, social science research now touts a host of evidence-based practices that can help judges learn to boost resilience and enhance overall well-being.

In a nutshell, the term resilience is defined by these researchers as one's ability to bounce back and, ideally, grow from adversity. Many common challenges faced by judges, including extreme stress and burnout, are undoubtedly the result of the demands of the bench.

The following five tips are proven ways to increase resilience and healthfully cope with the daily stressors of life on the bench — and may prove particularly helpful during this season, when work stress is compounded by the frenetic pace of the holidays.

1 PRACTICE GRATITUDE. Studies have shown that being mindful of life's blessings is one of the most effective character strengths of people who lead flourishing lives. The practice of keeping a gratitude journal several days a week, logging a short list of the things for which you are most grateful, has been shown to increase a person's happiness by 25 percent over ten weeks. Studies also show that practicing gratitude benefits us physically, resulting in more energy, healthier bodies, better sleep, and increased life span.

2 PRACTICE MINDFULNESS. The mind is an instrument that too often becomes the master. Breathing exercises, meditation, and mindfulness practices have proven highly effective for those in cerebral professions who need to relax and "quiet the mind."

Meditation can increase focus, reduce negative effect, decrease depressive symptoms, and decrease rumination — all of which benefit judges and lawyers. Meditation also increases memory and recall function in high-stress situations.

Meditation, or mindfulness, is not as "out there" as you might think. It simply means paying attention to the present moment with intention and without judgment. Practicing mindfulness is often done by focusing on the breath or on a phrase; many instructional exercises exist online or on apps. One excellent resource can be accessed for free through the UCLA Mindfulness Awareness Research Center.

3 VOLUNTEER TO HELP OTHERS. Studies have shown that doing volunteer service work, or helping others, can lead to an enhanced sense of well-being and an overall improvement in mental health and happiness. In one major study, people employed in high-stress jobs had a 43-percent-higher rate of death over a ten-year period; however, a related study of people in high-stress jobs found those who regularly performed service work for others in need had a normal rate of death.

4 PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION. Essentially, self-compassion is sensitivity to the experience of your own suffering and a deep desire to alleviate that suffering. Self-compassion practices can deactivate the nervous system's "fight-or-flight" reaction to stress, returning the body to a self-soothing system associated with secure attachment and safety. This practice also has been shown to substantially improve motivation, coping abilities, and interpersonal relationships. How

do you do it? When dealing harshly with yourself ask, "How would I talk to a friend about this?" Reframe self-critical thoughts as they arise so that they are fair and kind. And each time a critical thought arises, balance it with a complimentary one. Find additional self-compassion practices online.

5 CULTIVATE YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR. Having a sense of humor has been shown to directly relate to reduced stress, better psychological well-being, improved coping ability, better perspective, stronger social support, better temperament, and better physical health. A 2014 study found that a good sense of humor may in fact be one of the most important ingredients to resilience because it creates a behavioral tendency to engage in acts that promote happiness while stabilizing a positive attitude.

Perhaps these practices seem time-consuming. But they are likely easier than repairing the damage done by stress and lack of self-care. A judge's work can be particularly lonely, challenging, and emotionally draining. But it doesn't have to rob you of your well-being. Taking time to take care of yourself helps you manage your stress, improve your health, and be a better judge.

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