



10 Strategies for Thriving Through Challenge

By Allison Wolf, PCC

For many of us working in the legal sector stress and worry a regular part of our life. There is always so much to do, and the work is often complex, and deeply important to our clients' lives and businesses.

What is important to know is that stress is not always a signal something is wrong, it can be a sign post that something is important, that you are learning, or that there is something you need to pay attention to.

A 2013 study held by University of Florida and Stanford University tracked adults between ages of 18 and 78. Participants were asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement: *Taking all things together, I feel my life is meaningful.*

What distinguished those who strongly agreed vs. those who did not? The most significant predictor was having a higher stress level. The people with higher stress levels were most likely to agree with the statement: *Taking all things together, I feel my life is meaningful.*

The researchers' conclusion? People with meaningful lives worry more and experience more stress than people with less meaningful lives.

To help you with thriving amid the daily stress and challenge, here are 10 strategies from my coaching toolkit that can help. Review this list and consider: which of these strategies are you currently using? Are there some that you want to bring into play? Are there others you would like to strengthen or do more of?

1. Say No: Set boundaries and say No to protect your priorities and commitments.
2. Simplify: Reduce the energy given over to decision-making by simplifying elements of your life for example wardrobe or meals.

3. Automate: Automate as much as possible through the use of technology, or by building in habits and routines.
4. Set Goals and Take Action: These are essential companions. Set goals and keep them in mind, plan, and implement to see them achieved. Connected with this is being aware of your priorities and keeping these top of mind and honouring them through your choices.
5. Ditch People Pleasing: Replace people pleasing with a focus on your values, goals, priorities, and commitments.
6. Self-Advocacy: Develop your negotiation skills so that you are able to skilfully advocate for yourself, make requests, and set boundaries.
7. Pause: Use brief breaks throughout the day to recharge and regain focus, to revisit your priorities and make choices about what you engage with, and to respond instead of react.
8. Team build: Develop a group of people – support staff, research lawyers, associates, and colleagues – whom you can depend on for support and guidance and who in turn can rely on you.
9. Practice Happiness: Use positive psychology practices to prime yourself for a positive outlook.
10. Plan Rest: Plan for rest and recuperation just as you would other priorities.

Bonus tip: Ask for help. When you are feeling stuck, when you are facing something that feels overwhelming, should the stress levels become too high, or if you are feeling exhausted, demoralised, and like burnout is around the corner - seek help. Contact the Lawyers Assistance Program; they have an excellent team of counsellors who can help you find your way through.



Personal Mastery for Advocates: Resources

What is Mindset?

“A mental frame or lens that selectively organizes and encodes information, orienting an individual toward a unique way of understanding an experience and guiding one toward corresponding actions and responses. The mindsets people adopt have downstream effects on judgment, evaluations, health, and behaviour.”

Professor Alia J. Crum, Stanford University

“Mindset is a belief that biases how you think, feel, and act. It’s like a filter you see everything through. Not every belief becomes a mindset...The beliefs that become mindsets transcend preferences, learned facts, or opinions. They are core beliefs that reflect your philosophy of life. A mindset is usually based on a theory about how the world works.”

Kelly McGonigal: Upside of Stress

- For learning more about Mindsets:

Watch this TedX Talk by Psychologist and Professor Alia Crum of Stanford University: Change your mindset, change the game

<https://youtu.be/0tqq66zwa7g>

Read her scholarly article:

Alia J. Crum, Peter Salovey Yale, Shawn Achor, “Rethinking Stress: The Role of Mindsets in Determining the Stress Response”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Section on Personality Processes and Individual Differences, November 14, 2012.

If you cut and paste this link in your browser you can read the article on line.

https://mbl.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/crum_rethinkingstress_jpsp_2013_0.pdf

- To learn more about the Growth Mindset watch these two videos:

A Ted Talk by Professor Carol Dweck: The power of believing you can improve

https://www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve?language=en

And the presentation by Dr. Heidi Grant Halvorson with Columbia University:

The incredible benefits of a get better mindset

<http://www.heidigranthalvorson.com/resource/the-incredible-benefits-of-a-get-better-mindset>

Read Carol Dweck’s book:

Carol Dweck. *Mindsets: The New Psychology of Success*. New York: Random House, 2007.

- To learn more about Kelly McGonigal’s work on positive stress I recommend the following resources:

Kelly McGonigal. *The Upside of Stress: Why Stress Is Good for You, and How to Get Good at It*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2015.

Her Ted video: How to make stress your friend

https://www.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend

And her article on the Ted site: “How To Be Good at Stress”: <http://ideas.ted.com/how-to-be-good-at-stress/>



- To learn more about Positive Psychology read: Martin E.P. Seligman. [Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment](#). New York: Free Press, 2002.
- A great book about managing your energy: Tony Schwartz with Jean Gomes and Catherine McCarthy PH.D. [The Way We Are Working Isn't Working](#). New York: Free Press, 2010
- A resource for managing anxiety: Alice Boyes, PH.D. [The Anxiety Toolkit](#). Los Angeles: TarcherPerigee, 2015
- The definitive guide to learning self-compassion: Kristin Neff, PH.D. [Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind](#). New York: William Morrow Paperbacks (Harper Collins), 2015.
- To learn about armouring up, taking it off, and recovering from a fall in the arena read: Brené Brown, PH.D. [Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead](#). New York: Random House, 2017.
- One additional article with an interesting finding and valuable tips related to how we engage in self talk:

[The Voice Of Reason](#), Pamela Weintraub, Psychology Today, May 2015 available at:
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201505/the-voice-reason?collection=1073568>



Learning to Wield Your Positive No

Miranda is stressed out and fighting fires on all her files. A slew of sudden departures and maternity leaves have left her as the lone associate in a busy corporate practice. She has more work than she can handle and is behind on it all despite working long days and taking no holidays. Yet when a partner comes by to ask for her assistance on a large transaction that is heating up, she finds herself agreeing even though she knows something is going to give.

Are you like Miranda?

- When asked for help is your first and immediate answer *Yes*, and thinking about the repercussions a distant second?
- Are you afraid to say *No*, for fear of letting someone down, of disappointing someone, or of other negative consequences that could result?
- Do you say *Yes* to things that you do not want to do?
- Do you put your own priorities and commitments last?
- Do you feel stressed and exhausted as a result of taking on more than you can handle?
- When you do tell someone *No* you are you plagued by guilt and regret?

I am writing this article on the principal that it takes one to know one. Like Miranda, I learned from a young age the value of people pleasing. I quickly realised the advantages of saying *Yes* to all requests for help. This was highly effective for making friends, building trust, becoming valued, and climbing the career ladder.

There comes a point though for all of us when this belief no longer serves us well, when it hinders our ability to discern what is most important and prevents us from making choices.

As your popularity with internal and external clients rises along with the complexity of your work a new habit is called for.

When you start a family and add a whole set of new parental commitments to your life a new work habit is called for.

When the cracks in your practice start to appear – missed deadlines, work handed in late, reduced performance – a new work habit is called for.



That habit is called the Positive No.

It is important to say *No* when:

- When it will take time away from priorities:
- When you're stressed or overwhelmed
- When you're already doing too much
- When you're tired or sick
- When it doesn't align with your priorities or prior commitments

There is no question that saying *No* can be challenging. The best resource I have found is William Ury's book [The Power of a Positive No](#). Ury, one of the world's top negotiators, explains how to say *No* in a way that is effective, sustains relationships, and is respectful. To learn more about delivering a Positive No read my quick summary [here](#) - Or for a deeper dive into the topic read Ury's Positive No article in the [Oxford Leadership journal on-line](#).

At the heart of Ury's work is the idea that every *No* in fact a *Yes* to something else. When your plate is overflowing with work, a *No* to a new file is a *Yes* to all the commitments you currently have on the go.

For this reason the other crucial "know" is know your priorities and commitments. Having a to-do-list and being able to do a high level assessment of what you have on the go is vital. So is knowing what your personal priorities are.

The process for delivering a Positive No works in three steps: Yes! No. Yes?

- Express your Yes!
- Assert your No.
- Close with a Yes?

Imagine you are declining an invitation to speak at your friend's organization:

Start by delivering your Yes and follow with your No. *I have taken on a number of large projects this autumn so I am not taking on any additional commitments at this time.*

If appropriate, follow with a possible Yes for another time. *Next year, if the organization is planning a similar event, I'd be happy to consider it.*

Finally, close with a note of respect. *Thank you for thinking of me.*

Here are some approaches to the Positive No for you to try out:



Simple explanation.

- *I'm focusing on this closing right now and a joint venture agreement for Jane so don't have the capacity to help out this time.*

Pause before responding. This is important, as you will often need a few minutes or more to think things over and/or consult your schedule.

- *I'm away from my desk right now, can I let you know once I have my schedule in front of me?*
- *I'm just in the middle of meeting a tight deadline. Can I get back to you about this tomorrow?*

Defer. This is for when you are not able to assist right now, but can later.

- *Thanks for coming to me with this. My plate is full this week. May I get this to you next week?*

Suggest. Make a suggestion about who else could do it

- *I know John is interested in this topic.*

Seek input. When you have work for a number of internal clients with competing deadlines or when your simple explanation has not been accepted seek input on priorities.

- *I am currently working on a number of projects that don't leave room for taking on anything else. How about we speak with Dennis or Jane to see if there is some leeway with the work I am doing for them so that I am able to take on your file?*

To learn more about Ury's Positive No read his article for the [Oxford Leadership Insights Magazine](http://tinyurl.com/y7d457p2) here: <http://tinyurl.com/y7d457p2>

Try my simple Positive No practice here: <http://www.attorneywithalife.com/monday-morning-practice-wielding-your-positive-no/>

I will leave you with a quote from William Ury:

“There is no doubt that delivering a Positive No requires courage, vision, empathy, fortitude, patience, and persistence. Changing old patterns takes practice. Fortunately, each of us is offered many opportunities a day to practice saying No. Think of it like exercise. You are building your Positive No muscle. With daily exercise, that muscle will get stronger and stronger. With practice and reflection, anyone can improve greatly at the art of saying No.”
(LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS / The Power of a Positive No, P. 6)



Productivity Habit: Focus on actionable next steps

By Allison Wolf, CEC, Shift Works Strategic

Beneath so many life challenges from organizing the office to improving productivity, lie the thinking traps that get us stuck in delay and procrastination.

Here are five versions of one simple *I'll get around to it later* thinking trap that has major implications for productivity.

Which of these thoughts have you had in the past week?

- *I need a dedicated block of time for this task.*
- *There's not enough time for it now.*
- *I will find time for it when I am not so busy.*
- *That's too big a project to start right now, and it's not due right away anyway.*

Yes, wouldn't it be nice if all of a sudden a huge block of time with no clients and no deadlines opened up in the calendar. And how often does that happen?

The reality is that big projects are best tackled, initially, with some small steps. To increase productivity tackle big projects earlier with initial small steps.

Here are two reasons why starting earlier with a small investment of time investment can increase productivity:

First, this approach is likely to produce a better end product.

Our brains need time to process information and cognate. When we begin work on a difficult project and then set it aside, our more powerful brain will continue to ponder it, silently, in the background.

Also, as our brain ponders in the background it is being exposed to a variety of other stimuli from our environment and this can help inspire new thoughts and promote creativity.

The result is that when we return to the task after a break of some minutes, hours, or days, we are likely to return with fresh ideas and insights.

Second, the pace of legal practice is intense and it is rare that a lawyer will not be busy handling a full plate of work. Leaving big projects for the perfect moment is an exercise in futility and perpetuates the fire fighting cycle of practice.

I frequently employ this strategy with positive results. I always have a number of large projects sitting in my work cue. I now try and take an initial start on each of them well in advance of the deadline. What I find is that by getting started early, when it comes time for the big push I am already well on my way.

This month give the “next small actionable step” approach a try.

Instead of *I don't have enough time for this now* ask *what is one small step I can make to advance this?*



Productivity Habit – Minimum Effective Dose

By Allison Wolf, CEC, Shift Works Strategic

The Minimum Effective Dose (MED) is a medical term adopted by lifestyle and fitness writer Tim Ferris to describe the smallest effort required to produce the desired outcome.

Use MED to get significant results in the most effective manner. Try it out in one or both of the following ways.

Exercise:

Apply it to your fitness routine. Exercise can be effective with as little as ten or fifteen minutes, and it can be done anywhere—even in your office.

Author and coach Christine Carter, Ph.D. used to try to run for 45 minutes to an hour several times a week. Now she just runs for nine minutes at a time and does one short strength building circuit three times a week. In her book The Sweet Spot she wrote:

“I’m now stronger than I have ever been in my life. I’m the same dress size I was before I had my kids and when I was running marathons – but I am also stronger because I have been doing one ridiculously unambitious strength training circuit three days a week (p.12).”

Try experimenting with your fitness MED.

Organization:

You can also apply the MED concept to getting more organized. Instead of waiting for a time when you can set aside several hours for filing or cleaning your office allocate a MED of 5 to 10 minutes daily on the organization project and watch how this simple and small investment of time can add up to major progress.

Try out an MED strategy on an area of disorder in your office and see what results.

THE STRESS ADVANTAGE

Understanding the Learning Curve

