

WELLNESS AT YOUR DESK: STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING STRESS AND IMPROVING PRODUCTIVITY

Stephanie Melnychuk
October 16, 2017



The practice of law takes a heavy toll on the mind and body. Devotion to our work often means late nights, prolonged sitting, and elevated levels of stress. While most lawyers appreciate the importance of mental and physical health, the demands of the job rarely leave time to take care of ourselves the way we know we should.

One of the biggest barriers to realizing health goals is time – there just aren't enough hours in the day to fit everything in. While time is static, energy is not. By deepening our energy reserves, we can effectively make room for more productivity and less stress in each day. The formula is simple. To deepen our energy reserves, three elements must be nurtured:

- physical activity (mobility and exercise);

- diet; and
- sleep

There are no short cuts. Fortunately, there are elegant and effective ways to practice each element without overburdening our already-overcomplicated lives.

Physical activity. Research shows that the positive effects of exercise can be obtained by elevating your heart rate for mere minutes per day. Not only can this be done from your home or office, but simple sweat-inducing exercises can strengthen the muscles that suffer greatest in desk bound office workers – the posterior chain. For example, with proper technique, the kettle bell swing is a straightforward exercise that can be used to slay two birds with one stone by targeting the muscles in the hips, glutes, hamstrings, lats, abs, shoulders, pecs, and grip all the while increasing heart rate. However, if weights aren't your thing, play is an effective way to reach exercise quotas and to relieve stress.

Unfortunately, exercise isn't enough to offset the ill-effects of the prolonged sitting that most lawyers do. Mobility must be incorporated into our day. Mobility has a positive impact on our stress levels. Research has demonstrated that the body releases the stress hormone cortisol when seated in a hunched over position (e.g. at a desk or computer). By correcting our posture throughout the day, we can reduce levels of cortisol and also enhance the release of the dominance hormone testosterone. Since people only need to hold postures for a short period of time (i.e. 2 minutes) to observe a hormone change, periodically shifting positions and taking mobility breaks throughout the day can have a huge impact on stress and energy levels. A mobility break can be as simple as getting up for a glass of water, retrieving a document from a printer down the hall, speaking with a colleague in person instead of over the phone.

Diet. Most diets work, provided they're followed. For most people, this is the tough part. When we're tired, it's easy to reach for sugary foods or

caffeine to artificially inflate our energy reserves. Knowing this, we can invoke a set of rules to target the weaknesses we'd like to change. For example, a vegetarian sets the rule that they will not eat meat. With the rule in place, they are free to make other choices without deprivation. Similarly, by setting rules for our moments of weakness, we can keep our diet on track and avoid missing the things we love. Some rule examples include: "I eat vegetables with every meal"; "I don't eat fast food (at lunch)", "I only drink alcohol on weekends".

Sleep. Sleep deprivation is the norm for many lawyers who struggle to turn off their over-active brain. A lack of sleep leaves people irritable and affects their stress level. But, with 7-8 hours of quality sleep, we can optimize our overall health and allow our brain to think clearly. Of the three above-listed elements, sleep is often considered the most crucial to our health and must be zealously protected. To prioritize sleep, consider establishing a sleep schedule and pre-sleep routine, which could include turning off screens 30-60 minutes before bed or setting devices to automatically eliminate sleep-destroying blue light at a specified time. For people with an overactive brain, meditation can be a useful tool.

Conclusion. It's not always possible to get a sound night's rest, to have a clean diet, and to squeeze in a work-out. And, that's just fine. We only set ourselves up for failure if we expect perfection. By routinely practicing the three elements, we can build a foundation for improved health and reduced stress levels. Since most people will overestimate what they can accomplish in a week or a month and underestimate what they can accomplish in a year, don't be discouraged if changes don't happen overnight. You will be amazed by the results of your commitment to your health if you persevere.

The above is not intended as medical device. Sleep and anxiety troubles should be canvassed with your doctor. Your doctor should also be consulted before engaging in a new exercise program.

*Stephanie Melnychuk along with Madam Justice Michele Hollins will be speaking at the upcoming CBA West 2017 Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada from November 17 – 19, 2017. Their presentation is called **The Supple Lawyer: Tools for Reclaiming Health and Mobility from a Deskbound Occupation.***

NOT LEGAL ADVICE.

Information made available on this website in any form is for information purposes only. It is not, and should not be taken as legal advice. You should not rely on, or take or fail to take any action, based upon this information. Never disregard professional legal advice or delay in seeking legal advice because of something you have read on this website. Oyen Wiggs Green & Mutala LLP professionals will be pleased to discuss resolutions to specific legal concerns you may have.

Oyen Wiggs Green & Mutala LLP
480 – The Station
601 West Cordova Street
Vancouver, BC V6B 1G1
Canada

tel: 604.669.3432
fax: 604.681.4081
toll free: 1.866.475.2922
mail@patentable.com