

The Dangerous Link Between Chronic Office Chaos, Stress, Depression & Substance Abuse

by Nancy Byerly Jones

Have you ever found yourself screaming, “this isn’t a law practice, it’s hell with fluorescent lighting!”? You may not realize how great an impact office stress can have on our overall well-being. It is exactly this kind of stress that can cause a lawyer to sink into depression or start down the path of substance abuse.

Impaired or addicted lawyers usually turn to medical and mental-health professionals for help. They can also get help through their bar association’s lawyer assistance program. To ensure the most secure foundation for recovery, however, it is also important to address the negative and costly influence on our lives of chronic chaos, disorganization, low morale and similar problems in our offices. Too often, this important factor in our emotional welfare is overlooked, and unfortunately there are too few community or bar-sponsored resources for this type of help.

If ignored for too long, chronic problems at the office can play a big part in setting the stage for battles with depression, substance abuse and other stress-related problems.

This omission leaves us vulnerable to backsliding, short-lived success stories and increased odds of repeating a vicious cycle.

Are your work habits and office environment putting you at risk? A few key questions to ask yourself include:

- Is your office in a state of constant

chaos, disorganization or high stress?

- Do you find yourself with the same stresses on your plate and the same problems within your office year after year?
- Are you setting goals for yourself and your office that never seem to be achieved?
- Do you dread the start of yet another day at the office?
- Are you in control of your work, or is your work in control of you?

If you answered yes to even one of these questions, then your personal health and quality of life are likely to be negatively affected sooner or later. The extent of the negative impact depends on factors such as:

- How long the problems have existed.
- How often office morale is low and interoffice tensions are high.
- The frequency and severity of client complaints.

- How far (and long) we can stick our heads in the sand in an effort to avoid the truth.

If ignored for too long, chronic problems at the office can play a big part in setting the stage for battles with depression, substance abuse and other stress-related problems. Traditional sources of help tend to focus on medical and psychological needs only, often overlooking chronic office stress as a factor to address. Medication, therapy and support groups do have admirable success records. However, these success stories may only be temporary if chronic and stressful office issues are not factored in when creating and applying a comprehensive and realistic recovery plan.

Below you will find a few tools and suggestions for identifying and correcting office matters that may be adding stress to your life. Treat this information as a “starter kit” to help you focus your attention on an often overlooked area that can dramatically affect the likelihood that a lawyer will sink into depression or turn to substance abuse as an escape.

A Look in the Mirror

The following situations offer a small sampling of office patterns that, if ignored, can lead to chronic and crippling stress:

- Chronic, office-wide chaos.
- Unclear mission; no written long-term goals.
- Weak or haphazard internal leadership.
- Unclear and inconsistently enforced policies and procedures.
- Little, if any, true teamwork, cross-selling of services or support of one another.
- Lack of loyalty to the firm and a distrust of partners or other coworkers.
- Poor communication and people skills.
- Criticism voiced publicly and frequently; compliments or appreciation rarely, if ever, offered.
- Low office moral.
- High employee turnover.
- Chronic procrastination.
- Poor planning and prioritizing, resulting in last minute panics.
- Lack of time-management skills.
- File mismanagement and disorganization.

What to Look For Chemical Dependency and Alcoholism

Chemical dependency and alcoholism is not a moral weakness – it is a chronic but treatable illness. It is estimated that at least 20% of the attorneys in Mississippi are affected by this disease – even more experience problems in their lives because of alcohol or drugs.

If *any* of these symptoms are present in your life, or in the life of someone you know, there may be cause for concern.

- Drinking or using to bolster courage, calm nerves, improve performance or deal with difficult people or situations.
- Drinking or using “on the job,” before appointments, meetings, depositions or court appearances.
- Failing to show for appointments, meetings, depositions, or court appearances; failing to return phone calls.
- Missing deadlines or neglecting work; overall work quality declining.
- Blaming others for mistakes, difficulties or problems.
- Avoiding partners, office staff, friends, family or clients.
- Drinking or using alone.
- Increasing family or marital discord.
- Making excuses for or lying about frequency or amount of drinking.
- Driving while under the influence (whether caught or not).
- Experiencing “blackouts” or memory lapses when drinking or using.

- Repeated failure to meet deadlines promised to clients.
- Frequent client complaints, many of which are of the same type (e.g., unreturned phone calls, not being kept informed about the status of their cases).

There is good news and bad news about this incomplete list of potential time bombs within our offices. The bad news is that these types of problems are all too common within many offices. The good news, however, is that there is a great deal that we can do to fix these problems and thus decrease work-related stress. All it takes is your willingness to get started, rather than waiting for someone else to “just fix it.”

Let’s be honest. We all have days when we grumble to ourselves,

- “Can I trade this job for *whatever* is behind Door #1?”
- “Nice perfume, but must you marinate in it?”
- “Daily panic and chaos...this is what I get for surviving law school?!”
- “Our office is the world’s largest natural source of sarcasm!”
- “Is there a sign outside my door that reads ‘Endless Interruptions Appreciated and Welcome’?”
- “Have I thanked you lately for your whining, chronic complaining and negative attitude?”
- “If our cash flow was as big as your ego, we would be enormously rich!”
- “Thank you for being such a jerk; it helps make me look nicer!” ■