

Keeping the Balance, Judicial Stress and Wellness ¹

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Being a judge can have many perks, including prestige, self-satisfaction, and the opportunity to provide a community service in the judicial system. At the same time, being a judge can be lonely, stressful, and can carry a burden shared by few. To make matters worse, violence against judges has been on the increase in recent years, as noted by two high profile shootings. In February, 2005, the husband and mother of a Chicago area US District Judge were killed. In June, 2006, a Reno family law judge was shot standing by the window in his courthouse. As word of these shootings has spread throughout the country, judges have had even more to be concerned about. Maintaining wellness in the face of one's fears, stressors, and challenges can be difficult, but at the same time, judges who practice wellness are rewarded with increasing self-satisfaction and positive regard.

In short, wellness means taking care of yourself. Wellness connotes an attitude of self-care, a practice of health maintenance, the management of stressors, and an enjoyment of life. The practice of wellness incorporates emotional, physical, and spiritual elements, all of which are designed to help you take care of yourself in healthier ways.

In recent years, there has been limited, but growing research into the areas of judicial stress and judicial wellness. Sources of stress for judicial officers include the weight and burden of the task, a sense of loneliness, fears regarding one's safety and the safety of one's family, a sense that there is not enough time to do what one is charged with doing, among others. There has been growing research in the area of vicarious or secondary stress, as judges are regularly exposed to the traumatic experience of individuals in their courtrooms. A related stressor, commonly known as compassion fatigue, can affect judges who regularly feel overwhelmed with the compassion toward others in their courtroom. Many judges

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experience burnout and have limited opportunities to deal with those experiences because of the loneliness many judges experience.

Managing this stress is the task of wellness. Understand your feelings, pay attention to your emotions, your physical and spiritual well-being, and the ways in which the stressors may be affecting you. Do you sleep enough? Are you drinking too much? Have you gained considerable weight over the past several months? Are you feeling tired most of the time, or find little joy in your life? Do you avoid close or intimate relationships? These are all potential signs that this stress is interfering with your well-being in an unhealthy way.

The first step in any wellness program is recognizing that you are having a problem. Consider the ways that you are stress manifests within you. Know that this can occur psychologically, emotionally, physically, or spiritually. Pay attention to how your crowded docket affects you and your family. Learn to find outlets that give you a sense of pleasure away from your work. Learn to manage your time at work productively so that you can enjoy your time away from work. Physical activity not only helps with your physical health but your mental health as well. Less traditional wellness practices can include yoga, tai chi, etc. These and other wellness efforts, including adult networking, are all designed to help you manage your stressors and improve the quality of life for you and your family.

If you are interested in learning more about judicial stress and wellness, and in particular about how you and your colleagues become stressed, the typical effects of such stress on individuals and their families, and ways to manage stress from a wellness perspective, you may want to consider enrolling in the National Judicial College course, "Judicial Wellness and Personal Security" in September, 2008.

Judicial Wellness and Stress References

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