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# IN SIGHT *for Oregon Lawyers*

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## MANAGING ANXIETY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Most people would agree that our modern world is overloaded with stress even in the best of times. For the past six months, the world has been hit with shock waves from the financial sector almost weekly. The global economic crisis and recession have brought an enormous amount of uncertainty for most people. Many lawyers are living with the fear of losing their jobs or of not finding a new one.

The loss of the familiar and predictable is frequently a frightening and unwelcome prospect. Uncertainty and lack of control can fuel feelings of anxiety and depression. The sheer volume of troubling news can easily lead us to feel paralyzed with indecision or to react impulsively. Add to this mix the usual daily stressors of life in the law, and you have circumstances that are ripe for high anxiety.

### Common Anxiety Reactions

The cumulative effect may create a chronic, heightened sense of worry and vigilance – an emotional state of what-will-happen-next fears. While nearly everyone feels stressed during times of crisis and uncertainty, the way it is experienced varies from individual to individual. Some people are quite aware that they are experiencing stress and are aware of their responses to it. For others, the worries may operate “under the surface,” and they may not connect that some of their reaction is due to a particular stressor. The following are normal reactions to anxiety that you may recognize in yourself or others:

*Feelings:* anxious, fearful, angry, confused, hopeless, losing control, numb, sad, moody, irritable, guilty;

*Behaviors:* withdrawal from others or activities, disrupted routines, startle reactions, easily crying;

*Cognitions:* preoccupation with possibility of trauma, concentration difficulties, self-doubt, worry, indecisiveness, memory difficulties; or

*Physical complaints:* muscle tension, headaches, sleep and appetite changes, fatigue.

### How Stress Affects Your Health

Your finances may not be the only thing in jeopardy – your physical well-being may also be compromised. Increased levels of stress can have serious implications for your health. Acute stress leads to the “fight-or-flight response” that can be beneficial, protecting us from danger or enabling us to accomplish a seemingly impossible feat. But in these uncertain times, it is the continued presence of worry, fear, and concern that is particularly dangerous. In long periods of tension and stress, the increased release of the fight-or-flight hormones never truly dissipates, which can lead to an array of health problems, both short and long term.

### Strategies for Coping

When the future looks unpredictable and there may be no quick solution to external stressors, learning healthy ways to manage anxiety is crucial. You may have very real concerns – financial and otherwise – but suffering from anxiety is an additional, unnecessary burden.

There is no single right way to cope. Just as different people experience differ-

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### OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

503-226-1057  
1-800-321-OAAP  
[www.aaap.org](http://www.aaap.org)

#### Lawyers Helping Lawyers

- Alcohol & Chemical Dependency
- Career Change & Transition
- Gambling Addiction
- Mental Health
- Procrastination & Time Management

A free, nonprofit, confidential program for you.

ent feelings from anxiety, they also handle it in different ways. Focus on the approaches that work best for you.

Here are some tips you may find helpful in coping with anxiety during difficult times:

**1. Pause but don't panic.** Don't get caught up in doom-and-gloom hype. Don't make decisions – financial or otherwise – in the heat of the moment or during an emotionally charged period of time.

**2. Get clear about the facts and make a plan.** Evaluate your particular financial situation and what causes you stress. Determine whether immediate action is required. Make a plan, whether it's to call a financial adviser, delay a major purchase, or even to do nothing right now. Collect facts from several sources, followed by dispassionate analysis of what is right for your life. What works for a friend may not be right for you.

**3. Recognize how you deal with stress.** In tough times, some people are more likely to relieve stress by turning to unhealthy activities, like smoking, drinking, drugs, gambling, binge spending, or emotional eating. The strain can also lead to more conflict and arguments between partners. Be alert to these behaviors. If they are causing you trouble, get help.

**4. Control your immediate environment.** Limit your exposure to upsetting news reports in the media, especially if they add to your fear and anxiety. Attempt to normalize your daily life by maintaining your routine as much as possible.

**5. Engage in realistic self-talk.** While we can't always control what happens to us, we can always control what we say to ourselves. Reflect on challenging events that you coped with successfully. Consciously look for things you can appreciate every day.

**6. Establish and maintain healthy habits.** Get regular exercise, eat regular and well-balanced meals, avoid excess alcohol and caffeine, get sufficient sleep, and allow for personal time. Such basic yet effective measures help to inoculate us from the adverse impact of stressors. Conversely, if you are exhausted – physically or emotionally – it will be more difficult for you to handle stress and anxiety.

**7. Cultivate and preserve personal relationships.**

Healthy relationships can be a major source of comfort and support, especially if you can share spiritual beliefs, humor, or the healing powers of social contact. People thrive when they develop healthy interdependent relationships.

**8. Turn these challenging times into opportunities for personal and professional growth.** Times like this, while difficult, can offer opportunities to take stock of your current situation and make needed changes. Take this time to reassess your priorities. What is really important to you? In times of intense stress, it can help to declutter and simplify your life to give yourself more space – both physically and psychologically – to think clearly about your life.

**9. Seek and accept help.** If you feel overwhelmed by stress or anxiety, call the OAAP at 503-226-1057 or 800-321-6227 and ask to talk to an attorney counselor. We are here to help.

*Source: Part of this article was excerpted and adapted from "Living in Uncertain Times: Coping with Anticipatory Anxiety," Concordia University St. Paul Counseling Department.*

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## **Additional Resources for Managing Stress and Anxiety**

**The following *In Sight* articles are available on the OAAP Web site ([www.oaap.org](http://www.oaap.org)):**

- Transform Your Life Through Breathing – September 2008
- An Obvious and Inexpensive Exercise – December 2007
- Social Support and the Reduction of Stress – July 2007
- Humor Your Way to Happiness, Health, and Success – July 2007
- 10 Proven Stress Reducers – September 2006
- Pay Your Monthly Bills Simply – June 2006
- Reducing Your Stress Can Enhance Your Performance – June 2004

**The following CLE programs are available on the PLF Web site ([www.osbplf.org](http://www.osbplf.org)):**

- “Taking Care of Ourselves While We’re Busy Taking Care of Others – Stress Reduction for Professionals in Conflict Resolution” (available in audio)
- “Stress Management” from the “Reducing the Pressure” series (online Personal Management CLE)

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