

Stress and the Law: *Finding Balance in Life and Work*

// Highlights from “The Bridge Between Everyday Stress and Burnout” – How to Obtain a Balance in Life & Work,” an event featuring a panel discussion on stress management, mindfulness, and overall well-being in the legal profession sponsored by Mintz and ACC-Northeast.

By Sheri Qualters

Wednesday, March 20, 2019, 8:30am | Boston

MODERATOR & PANELIST:

Brenda Fingold

Assistant Director of Workplace and Leadership Education at the Mindfulness Center // Brown University

PANELISTS:

Reena Thadhani

Member/Chair of the Estate Planning Practice // Mintz

Paul Francisco

Chief Diversity Officer and Head of Workforce Development Programs // State Street Corporation

Although stress in the legal field is far from a new problem, there’s been a recent shift in how the profession is approaching the issue. Notably, the American Bar Association and other influential legal organizations formed the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being to take a comprehensive look at the subject. The task force’s report issued last fall called well-being an “indispensable part of a lawyer’s duty of competence” and offered recommendations aimed at reducing attorney stress throughout the profession.

To educate members of the local legal community about stress and how to manage it, Mintz and the Diversity & Inclusion Committee of the Association of Corporate Counsel’s Northeast Chapter (ACC-Northeast) convened a panel on “The Bridge Between Everyday Stress and Burnout – How to Obtain a Balance in Life & Work.” The panelists discussed the different types of stress, why minorities and women are particularly affected, mindfulness and other coping mechanisms, and steps the legal profession is taking to address the serious physical and mental effects stress can have on attorneys. A few dozen participants from Mintz and the ACC-Northeast Chapter attended the event.

Brenda Fingold, the Assistant Director of Workplace and Leadership Education at the Mindfulness Center at Brown University and a former big-firm litigator, served as the moderator and a participant. She explained the difference between positive stress, or so-called eustress, that helps people stay energized and focused and chronic stress, which is linked to fatigue and physical symptoms like insomnia or aches.

Although people often face systemic stress from ongoing demands and difficult situations, and research shows that individuals have different levels of tolerance for stress and “happiness set points,” Brenda emphasized that anyone can learn more effective responses.

“We can have a lot of control over how we choose to relate to what’s going on,” Brenda said.

For Reena Thadhani, a Mintz Member and Chair of the firm’s Estate Planning Practice, a “perfect storm” of work challenges, family issues, and taking care of elderly parents prompted her to explore various ways to reduce stress, including exercise, yoga, and keeping a journal.

She said attending the firm’s 8-Week Mindfulness @ Work program and continuing to practice through Mintz’s weekly meditation sessions and on her own has helped her make positive changes.



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ROBIN WALKER

*Chair of the Diversity
& Inclusion Committee,
ACC-Northeast Chapter*

*Vice President,
Head of Legal,
Casebia Therapeutics*

In a conversation after the event, Thadhani described how mindfulness helps her when she's in a situation that can trigger stress.

"It all comes down to the little space between the stimulus and response," Thadhani said.

Learning about the different types of stress, how they affect you, and how you can address any negative impacts were key takeaways for Robin Walker, ACC-Northeast Chapter board member, Chair of its D&I Committee, and Vice President, Head of Legal at Casebia Therapeutics. Walker came up with the idea for an ACC-Northeast event on the topic after reading a much-discussed BuzzFeed News article about burnout in the Millennial generation and a responsive piece about "black burnout" penned by a college instructor.

"In my mind lawyers are always stressed. I thought 'why aren't we talking about this?'" Walker said.

Panelist Paul Francisco, Chief Diversity Officer and Head of Workforce Development Programs at State Street Corporation, first became aware of stress when he moved from the comparatively relaxed culture of Honduras to the United States as a 17-year-old — and found the corporate world even more stressful.

"I am visible as a person of color, but I don't want to be the person of color. That's a whole set of dynamics that adds stress to our professional and personal lives," Francisco said.

In a response to a question to the panel about how managers can help people who report to them manage stress, Francisco said he makes a point of getting to know his direct reports and what's happening in their personal lives. He also said that corporate affinity networks can provide support for employees in managing the stresses of work and relationships with colleagues.

"There is a space for organizations to be mindful and to be thoughtful about the people who work for them. That means creating those spaces where you can have those conversations," Francisco said.

The discussion around creating a positive environment for people to thrive struck a chord with attendee Benjamin Brown, who is Assistant General Counsel, Intellectual Property at Analog Devices Inc.

"As a manager, your goal is to make your team as effective and high-performing as possible. It's like coaching," Brown said.

Gemma Dreher, Vice President and Senior Counsel, TD Bank, NA and vice president of ACC-Northeast compared the legal profession's current interest in mindfulness and stress reduction to its earlier embrace of diversity and inclusion programs.

"Maybe 10 years ago diversity and inclusion was batted around, and policies were put in place. Then people got serious about the benefits to having a diverse workplace. Mindfulness is at the beginning of that curve," Dreher said.

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