



Working While Overwhelmed

BY CARRIE BOWERS

The practice of law requires attention to detail, focus, time management, organization, and other cognitive skills that help us plan, monitor, and execute tasks. But it also comes with stressors that can cause distractibility and make it difficult for us to stay organized, pay attention, and accomplish our goals. In fact, stress, whether sustained or acute, can cause neurotypical individuals to experience challenges commonly associated with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).¹ Similarly, it can exacerbate challenges in those with an ADHD diagnosis.² Thus, even the most organized among us may struggle at times with managing details, juggling schedules, pre-planning for projects or events, or even interacting with others, socially or professionally.

So, given the impacts and inevitability of stress in our profession, what's a lawyer to do?

Understanding ADHD and Related Symptoms

First, it can be helpful to understand how ADHD affects the brain. ADHD is a genetic neurodevelopmental disorder associated with lower levels of neurotransmitters dopamine and the brain's chemical reward system.³ Despite what the name implies, ADHD is not necessarily a deficit of attention—it is best characterized as the dysregulation of attention to both internal and external stimuli.

Individuals with ADHD typically have more restricted networks for transmitting information about emotion and other functions in the brain than those without the disorder. New

advancements in technology reveal that certain deficits seen in individuals with ADHD may link to networks of fibers that spur communication among different parts of the brain.⁴ Imaging studies have revealed irregularities in the white matter structure of individuals with ADHD across different age groups, which could be behind their challenges in multitasking.⁵

According to the current model of ADHD, the corpus striatum (the part of the brain that acts like an executive assistant) functions at 99% of the capacity of a neurotypical brain, but instead of prioritizing one task that really matters, it's prioritizing several tasks that don't.⁶ These non-prioritized tasks are mismanaged by the brain's ability to hold them effectively in short-term memory, limiting the ability to process and manipulate multiple chunks of

information at the same time. Behaviorally, this may look like disorganized panic—for example, intensely engaging in an organizational project at the expense of an overdue assignment.

Alternatively, an individual may experience functional freeze, which is feeling so paralyzed by an inability to start a project that the whole effort seems unreal or overwhelming. PET scans of people with ADHD reveal that fewer receptor sites in their brains are targeted by chemicals that activate reward-processing pathways, in comparison to a control group without ADHD.⁷ These imaging studies may help explain why people with ADHD often find it difficult to anticipate pleasure or feel satisfaction with tasks that offer future rewards and how this, in turn, impacts time management, motivation, and prioritization.

Strategies for Overcoming Task Paralysis

As noted above, stress can elicit or exacerbate some of the more common challenges associated with ADHD. That's because when we're experiencing high levels of stress, executive dysfunction can occur in the pre-frontal cortex of the brain, causing difficulty with auditory processing, sustained focus, short-term memory formation, time awareness, productivity, and self-restraint.⁸ Additional issues, such as chronic lack of sleep, co-occurring learning or cognitive disabilities, or behavioral health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders, can also affect the executive functioning of the brain and lead to attention dysregulation.⁹

Learning how to effectively manage your stress can lessen the effects it has on executive functioning—regardless of the symptoms' origins.¹⁰ Below are helpful tips that anyone can use to feel less overwhelmed when the to-do list still calls:

- **Chunk your tasks.** Break down any task into its subcomponents and handle them one at a time. This gives you the motivating satisfaction of crossing things off a list with greater frequency.
- **Use a timer.** One example of using a timer to structure work is called the Pomodoro¹¹ method. This technique uses a timer to

set aside 25 minutes to focus on a task followed by a 5-minute break. In the Pomodoro method, a 30-minute break is “awarded” after completing four sets of this 25-minute focus and 5-minute break structure. The idea is to galvanize motivation and focus by using an impending deadline, while rewarding work with brain-refreshing breaks. Build in flexibility as needed; if breaks are not motivating for you, using a timer can help break hyper-focus mode and increase time awareness.

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- **Delegate.** Is there something you can hand off to someone else? Maybe a loved one can help cross off a household or personal task, or a colleague can help tick a small work item off your list. You don't need to do everything; consider prioritizing your tasks and delegating when possible. If you find you don't have anyone to delegate either personal or professional tasks to, it may be an indication that you could benefit from building a larger support system. If you struggle to delegate due to concerns about quality, consider whether your standards are truly helping you succeed, and if increasing flexibility and tolerance

for imperfection may be more beneficial to your productivity and well-being in the long run.

- **Fight procrastination with procrastination.** Don't want to tackle that project or sink full of dishes? Make a call or finish some emails instead. Engagement with another human can often spur more energy. Try the inverse if the correspondence isn't urgent and enter your billable hours instead. Use the time spent procrastinating one task to complete another and you will feel productive regardless; just be sure to mindfully separate and rank your priorities.
- **Give yourself a break!** Take that nap, watch that show, go for a walk, or even just stare out the window for a while. If you feel guilty, or think you need to do a few more things before you “deserve” to rest, please give yourself some grace and consider challenging your perspective. Allowing your brain to rest is essential for cognitive functioning, not a reward tied strictly to productivity. Today's challenges are not always easy to navigate, and everyone is doing the best they can, including you!
- **Get moving.** Engaging in movement or exercise regularly helps the brain shift focus. Get up and walk around more often when you have “desk jockey” days in front of the computer. Build a routine that tunes into what type of movement is most effective for your body at a particular time of day. For some people, more strenuous exercise is helpful for waking up in the morning, while others may find that it facilitates restful sleep when practiced in the evening. Likewise, for some of us stretching, yoga, and deep breathing are beneficial first thing in the morning, while for others these activities help them wind down in the evening.
- **Lighten up.** Humor and gratitude are two antidotes to feeling overwhelmed. Engaging in activities that activate your sense of humor, like reading or watching something funny, redirects your brain chemistry in ways that activate your ability to problem solve more effectively and


keep things in perspective. Identifying something that you are appreciative of or grateful for has the same effect.

For attorneys who have (or suspect they have) ADHD, there are further steps you can take to safeguard your well-being and productivity:

- **Seek answers:** If you have not yet done so, a good starting point is meeting with a doctor or psychologist who specializes in ADHD assessments and evaluations, or speaking to your existing care provider about medication, therapy, and lifestyle changes.
- **Get professional support:** Seeking support from coaches or therapists specializing in ADHD can provide strategies and coping mechanisms tailored to individual needs.
- **Use technology and create structured routines:** Implementing structured routines and using organizational tools (like calendars and task management apps) can help manage ADHD symptoms.
- **Workplace accommodations:** Small adjustments can make a big difference for lawyers with ADHD. For instance, flexible deadlines, quiet workspaces, or time management tools can help mitigate some of the challenges.

Conclusion

These are some small adjustments you can make to help yourself meet your goals. Not all techniques are helpful for everyone. Finding what works for you may involve a process of wins and losses, or trial-and-error, but patience is sometimes hard to practice when we feel anxious and overwhelmed. Try not to get discouraged if something you try doesn't lead to the outcome you wanted. The practice of law can bring out the competitive and perfectionistic sides to our personality. This can lead us to believe that if a certain hack works for someone else, it should work for us as well. But we are all different, and knowing the time management or organizational techniques that don't work for us is valuable in discovering what does work. If you could use some support determining what could help you reduce stress and overwhelm, or other confidential and free support, consider reaching out to the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) for a well-being consultation and/or tailored referrals.

For more well-being related strategies, visit the COLAP website at www.coloradolap.org. Or contact COLAP at info@coloradolap.org or (303) 986-3345 to request a free, confidential well-being consultation. 



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NOTES

1. National Institute of Mental Health, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Adults: What You Need to Know, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/adhd-what-you-need-to-know#pub1>.
2. *Id.*
3. *Id.*
4. Dodson and Brown, "6 Things You Didn't Know About the ADHD Brain" (Apr. 8, 2024), <https://www.additudemag.com/how-the-adhd-brain-works-expert-answers>.
5. *Id.*
6. *Id.*
7. *Id.*
8. National Institute of Mental Health, *supra* note 1.
9. "5 Problems That Can Mimic ADHD," Harvard Health blog (Jan. 9, 2018), <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/5-common-problems-that-can-mimic-adhd-2018010913065>.
10. *Id.*
11. Mandal, "The Pomodoro Technique: An Effective Time Management Tool," 11(20) *NICHD Connection* (May 2020).



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