

# DE-LAP Zone

A Message from the Delaware Lawyers Assistance Program

## Coping in Today's Upside Down World

By Carol Waldhauser, Executive Director

**J**ohn is thirty-eight and feels ninety-eight. After earning a joint degree in Law and Public Policy, John recently accepted a position in a large New York law firm. His talent and long hours of work culminated in this prestigious, but stressful promotion. Today, the promotion leaves John with mixed feelings. On the one hand, it was what he had been working so hard to achieve. On the other hand, John fears that his division will implode during these tough economic times. Moreover, he fears, too, that he will lose his job. John ponders: "How do I survive and stay healthy in today's upside down world?"

Economic stress and other sources of stress do not *seem* to be everywhere; they are everywhere! Furthermore, legal professionals are not immune. Professionally, some salaries and/or hourly rates have grown while others have not. Sadly, many clients cannot pay their bills. Professionally, some lawyers are facing job loss and/or major decreases in income. Personally, others may have concerns about college costs, retirement, and even their mortgage. In fact, many professionals are experiencing an attitude adjustment from optimism to pessimism.

Ironically, the way an individual copes with stressful events, as well as the world around him or her, is as important as the stressors themselves. In other words, stress can be your ally by protecting you from harm and motivating you to succeed, or it can be your enemy by paralyzing and defeating you. For John, he decided that he wanted to be optimistic—not pessimistic. Similarly, John decided to think about what he could gain in these tough economic times instead of what he could lose.

### The Big Issue

We hear it every day and pray it won't reach us—a shrinking paycheck, gas costs reaching \$4.00 a gallon, and your house losing value. But, what if it does reach us? Needless to say, change and uncertainty do cause worry and stress. Accordingly, worry and stress, whether real or perceived, can cause a lot of damage both to the body and the mind. Reactions include, but are not limited to: excessive daydreaming, anxiety, hostility, change in appetite, accident proneness, apathy, indigestion, loss of concentration, loss of sexual interest, low self-esteem, diarrhea, constipation, forgetfulness, fatigue, irritability, loss of creativity, impulsive behavior, headaches, allergy flare-ups, yelling, feelings of rejection, increased smoking, increased use of alcohol, moodiness, frustration, and mental blocks.

Conversely, we cannot eliminate stress from our life nor should we want to do so. A life with no stress is boring. On the other hand, we can and should work on changing our reactions, perceptions, and attitudes toward it. Plus, we must stop worrying excessively over events we may have little or no control. Rather, we need to sharpen our life skills and coping mechanisms.

### Life Skills

The way you think and the way you feel are closely connected. In fact, you feel the way you do now because of the thoughts you are thinking at the moment. When we are stressed or down, we have a built-in selective bias to attend to negative thoughts and images from the past. This affects our perception of the present and future. Your environment can have a noticeable effect on your state of well-being and your ability to cope with stress.

There are a number of tips you can use to manage your thinking, as well as, your stress.

1. The major factor in determining mood is the way you interpret events.
2. The more information you have about a situation, the less likely you are to be frightened by it. Be aware of over-reporting or information overload, too.
3. Your attention tends to be directed according to your mood. If you are feeling happy, your memory will be slanted to recall positive events. This is why our thinking and mood can so easily spiral down in either an anxious or a depressive vicious circle. In effect, a pessimistic mood may just be based on an inaccurate, filtered perception of reality.
4. Be aware of distorted thinking, and if you are aware that your views can become distorted, it is possible to change your manner of thinking and your mood.

There are a number of tips you can use to manage your financial stress:

1. Keep a written summary of all your finances and where your money is going.
2. Keep organized and updated records.
3. Learn to say "no."
4. Have goals for the future and stick to a plan.
5. Pay yourself first and keep an emergency fund.
6. Demolish your worries by accepting the things that you cannot change, find the courage to change the things that you can, and have the wisdom to know the difference.

Realistically, you can show willingness to do whatever needs to be done to elimi-

nate the distress that affects your thinking and health. Even in today's uncertain financial environment, you can accomplish and achieve, through honesty about your needs, wants, feelings, expectations, and attitudes. Furthermore, through acceptance, you can learn new ways of thinking, feeling and acting.

Go to [www.de-lap.org](http://www.de-lap.org) and click on "stress" for an informal self-assessment of your level of distress. And, for more information about this subject or other quality of life matters, call The Delaware Lawyers Assistance Program (DE-LAP) and/or e-mail [cwaldhauser@de-lap.org](mailto:cwaldhauser@de-lap.org). And, plan to attend the ongoing lunchtime series, The Wellness Factor, sponsored by the Delaware State Bar Association to pick up additional life skills. ☺