



Presentation Outline

The Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) is an independent and confidential program for Colorado's legal community. COLAP supports members of the legal community who want to address behavioral health concerns such as stress management, burnout, compassion fatigue, substance use, addiction, mental health, and career related concerns. COLAP provides free and confidential consultations with licensed behavioral health specialists, tailored referrals for continued support, voluntary monitoring programs, supportive relationships with peer volunteers, and educational programs (including ethics CLEs). For more information or for confidential assistance, please contact COLAP:

303-986-3345 • info@coloradolap.org • www.coloradolap.org

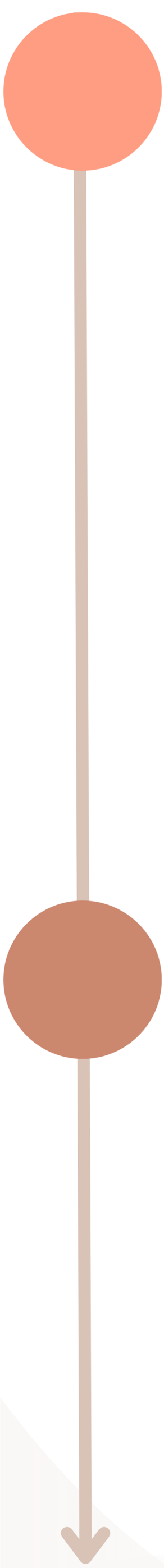
Featured Topics:

- I. The Basics of Stress
- II. Signs & Symptoms of Stress
- III. Getting to Know Your Stress
- IV. Resources for Healthy Coping
- V. Workplace Culture & Systemic Stress
- VI. Self-care Tips
- VII. Behavioral Health, Professional Responsibility, & Ethics

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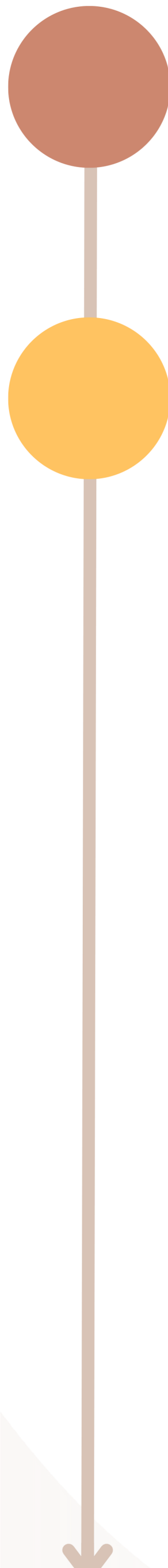
I. The Basics of Stress

- a. What is Stress?** Stress is the nervous system's response to a real or perceived threat, known as a stressor. Whether the stimulus is life threatening or merely an annoyance, your nervous system immediately activates communication between the brain and the body to determine the level of threat, and to prioritize bodily systems that are crucial for survival. We feel stressed when the system puts our fight/flight/freeze/faint response into action. For example, blood vessels dilate, allowing for increased blood flow to major muscle groups used for fighting or fleeing, while blood vessels constrict in other areas, such as the digestive system, that are not crucial for survival.
- b. Role of Perception:** Our brains interpret stimuli and stressors by analyzing the level of threat they pose. It's not uncommon for our interpretations to be too generous or too cautious depending on the mood we are in when the stressor occurs, or our history with that type of stressor. Factors such as uncertainty, expecting a negative outcome, or believing we don't have the resources to cope can contribute to feeling anxious, helpless, or isolated. For this reason, it's important to increase our awareness of what increases our stress levels and examine if our reaction matches the level of threat posed by the stressor.
- c. Eustress & Distress:** Not all stress is bad. Research suggests that our interpretation of the stressor determines what kind of stress response our brain and body deploy.
- i. Eustress:** Also known as "good stress," eustress results when we are excited about a challenge, enthusiastic about an opportunity to learn, or confident in our ability to solve a problem or cope with a difficult situation. The nervous system produces beneficial and healing chemicals that support focus and provide motivation when stressors are interpreted as surmountable.
 - ii. Distress:** If we perceive that the stressor is insurmountable or debilitating, and the stimulus scares us, worries us, or we dread it, our bodies deploy a distress reaction commonly referred to as "fight or flight." This response was designed exclusively for short-term, life-threatening situations. However, we commonly activate distress in response to psychological stressors that are not life-threatening. When we are regularly in distress, or deploy it on a long-term basis, we compromise our cognitive skills, problem solving abilities, physical health, and emotional intelligence.

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- d. Benefits & Costs of Stress:** There are several benefits of eustress and acute or short-term stress, including activating the immune system, heart rate variability which strengthens your heart, improved cognitive focus, and the urge to move yourself out of a stressful situation. Negative health impacts occur from prolonged exposure to the stress response without rest (chronic distress), and can include symptoms such as difficulty sleeping, cognitive decline, and digestive problems.
 - e. Limiting Stressors:** There are several ways to mitigate anticipatory stress associated with life events and work demands. For example, when we are in trial prep, presenting at a conference, or coordinating a family gathering, we can schedule and pack our meals, look up the travel route and parking instructions, plan our outfit, make sure we have a full tank of gas in the car, know where our keys are, etc. This type of planning prevents us from creating unnecessary stressors, such as running out of gas when we are already running late. Additional considerations include prioritizing quality sleep, drinking enough water, regularly moving or exercising, and engaging in rewarding social interactions.
 - f. Vicarious Trauma & Burnout:** Some stressors contribute to exhaustion, even in areas of our lives we are passionate about. Bearing witness to human suffering, pain and trauma can impact our perspective of the world. For example, regular exposure to highly contentious family law cases might make us more jaded and pessimistic about personal relationships, and exposure to graphic forensic evidence might give us a heightened sensitivity to danger or violence that amplifies our fear response. This kind of cumulative mental and emotional toll, on top of our own personal stressors, can contribute to burnout, empathic strain, and secondary trauma.

II. Signs & Symptoms of Stress

- a.** During the stress response, our limbic system and brain stem “hijack” the prefrontal cortex, compromising our executive function, compassion, judgement and decision-making, and creating physiological changes, including:
 - i. Cognitive:** memory problems, impaired judgement, indecision, viewing things through a negative lens, racing thoughts, constant worry, or rumination.
 - ii. Emotional:** anxiety, worry, fear, apathy, numbness, moodiness, irritability, agitation, anger, overwhelm, loneliness, depression, or unhappiness.



iii. Physical: aches and pains, digestive issues, fatigue, difficulty falling or staying asleep, reduced/increased appetite, reduced libido, pressured speech, restlessness, dry mouth, increased sweating.

iv. Behavioral: Impulsivity, isolation, use of drugs or alcohol, nervous habits such as pacing or nail-biting, avoidance or procrastination through distractions such as social media or television, reduced productivity or motivation.

III. Getting to Know your Stress

a. Stress is not the same for everyone, and effective techniques to manage stress will also vary. Try these activities and see what you find most useful.

i. Take stock: Increase awareness of how you are responding to stressors. What symptoms do you experience when you are stressed? Assess your symptoms and recognize what you are feeling.

ii. Track your own emotional reactions: Our emotions shift throughout the day as a result of our thoughts, our imagination, stressors we face, and physiological changes like blood sugar levels. Stress and emotional reactions are also contagious, so our emotional shifts and nervous system reactions can be additionally influenced by others in our environment, particularly if they are upset. Become aware of how your nervous system reacts to your thoughts and the situations or environments you are in, and “let go” of what you cannot control. For example, you can be compassionate or understanding about how your client feels, but you should practice caution if you find yourself getting equally upset about it or if you attempt to control their stress levels or emotional reactions, as this can activate your own stress response in harmful ways.

iii. Monitor your consumption: Since what we see and hear becomes part of our own experience, be mindful of the news, social media, and entertainment you consume, particularly when you are overloaded with stress. Consider engaging in a “news diet”, “media fast”, or increasing your exposure to funny or light-hearted and inspiring information when you are experiencing chronic stress.

iv. Create a proactive plan: It’s easy to react to stress in unhealthy or impulsive ways that lead to additional problems over time, such as isolating, increasing consumption of drugs or alcohol, reducing physical movement and exercise, and sleep disturbances. Instead, consider what helps you to de-stress and also makes you feel at your best. Create a proactive plan that you can share with loved ones, friends, and/or trusted colleagues who can support you in sticking to your plan even when you are stressed. Communicate the type of support you need during or after moments of stress. Not sure how to evaluate your support system? Watch Dr. Brené Brown’s “The Power of Empathy” and “Blame”.



IV. Resources for Healthy Coping

- a. Emotional Intelligence (EQ):** EQ is a protective skillset against stress that improves with practice. Accurately identifying and responding to your emotions as well as the emotions of others is one aspect of EQ that strengthens successful management of stress. This entails increasing your ability to identify emotions (emotional literacy) by observing emotions as they arise and nonjudgmentally seeking to understand why you feel the way you do in any given situation, heightening your awareness of emotions by paying attention to signs of stress in your body and behaviors, and waiting until you are calm before engaging in conflict resolution.

- b. Dimensions of Well-being:** Taking a holistic approach to well-being includes focusing on different aspects of our lives, including emotional, physical, occupational, social, spiritual, intellectual, environmental, and financial. [Click here](#) for ways to examine and make positive changes in these crucial aspects of well-being.

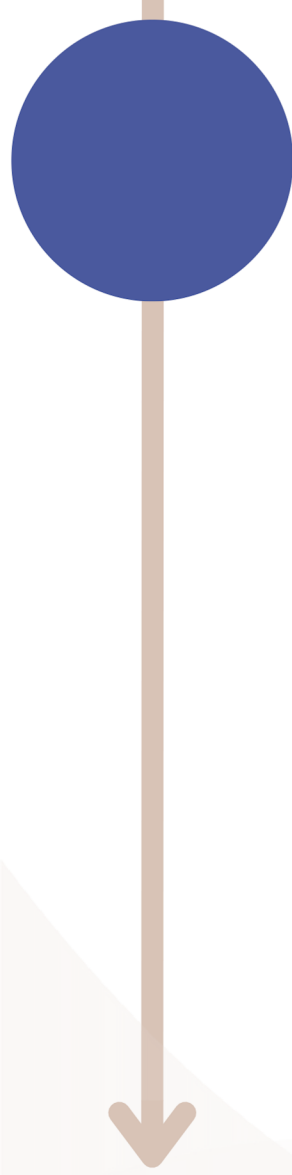
- c. Engage your Senses:** Spending time outdoors, listening to music that improves your mood, taking a few deep breaths, smelling something pleasurable, mindfully enjoying a meal, or engaging with your pets helps us to rapidly de-stress and activates executive functioning. Simply walking away from our computers and devices several times a day helps too!

- d. Mindfulness or Meditation:** Check out these helpful mindfulness, meditation, and deep breathing resources for beginners and those interested in furthering their practice.
 - i.** [Why Mindfulness is a Superpower | Happify](#)
 - ii.** [Meditation 101: A Beginner's Guide | Happify](#)
 - iii.** [How to Defeat Negative Thinking | Happify](#)
 - iv.** [A One-Minute Meditation with Deepak Chopra | Live Sonima](#)
 - v.** [Breathing Meditation | UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center](#)
 - vi.** [Box Breathing Relaxation Technique | Sunnybrook Hospital](#)



V. Workplace Culture & Systemic Stress

- a. **“Trauma Stewardship”** promotes the thoughtful tending to stress and trauma exposure at individual, organizational, and systemic levels. Research suggests that being aware of our own trauma, as well as how the trauma of others affects us, benefits workplace culture. This practice supports employers and employees in managing vicarious trauma exposure, empathic strain, and burnout. For more, see Laura van Dernoot Lipsky’s [TEDTalk](#).
- b. **“Low Impact Debriefing”** is a research-based method of maintaining positive relationships at work by debriefing stressful situations in a healthy and productive way that doesn’t “slime” your colleagues. For more on low impact debriefing, see [this handout](#) from the TEND Academy.
- c. **Both employees and employers play a role in workplace well-being.** As employees, we must take care of our own physical health, behavioral health and well-being in thoughtful and intentional ways. As employers and leaders within the workplace we must assess how the workplace culture, norms, policies, and procedures impact our workforce, paying particular attention to the impact on employees from diverse populations and cultures. Management cannot place the responsibility on their employees to become “more resilient” to a potentially toxic workplace or unhealthy levels of stress created in a work environment that does not support mental health. Leadership must actively work to resolve organizational and systemic stressors impacting the [psychological safety](#) of its employees. Employers can enroll in the [Colorado Well-Being Recognition Program for Legal Employers](#) for support in this important endeavor, and refer to the [U.S Surgeon General’s Framework on Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being](#).



VI. Self-care Tips

- a. **Challenge Unhelpful Thinking:** Try identifying the evidence for or against a thought before allowing it to influence your mood.
- b. **Create a Routine:** Assist your mind and body in transitioning to and from work. You may consider hobbies, music, journaling, changing clothes, showering, or exercise as ways to help you shift gears at the end of a long day.
- c. **Movement:** Take breaks to stretch and move throughout the day.
- d. **Single-tasking:** To increase focus, do one task at a time mindfully rather than multitasking.
- e. **Affirmations:** Think of a calming mantra, prayer, or positive saying to yourself when stressed.

- f. Body Scan:** Scan your body to find parts that need release and attention. Start with the crown of your head and move down your body slowly. Pay close attention to tension or strain. Notice any raised/furrowed eyebrows, clenched jaw, hunched shoulders, back pain, tension or restlessness in your legs, or curled toes. As you make your way through, relax each area through gentle stretching or movement while taking deep breaths. See [Harvard University Stress and Development Lab](#) for a guided progressive muscle relaxation recording and script.
- g. Physiological Sigh:** The physiological sigh is a technique used to help slow heart rate during times of stress. The key is to make sure your exhales are longer than your inhales. To release excess carbon dioxide you accumulate from shallow, quick breaths, inhale twice back-to-back, approximately one second each, followed by one long, slow exhale that lasts four to six seconds.
- h. Sleep Hygiene:** Gauge the quality of your sleep by considering the following: are you able to fall asleep at night; do you stay asleep, or, if you wake up, are you able to go back to sleep; do you wake up feeling rested? Evaluate your bedroom environment and daily routine, identify ways to promote restful sleep.
- i. Work/life Balance:** Invest in your life outside of your job. Prioritize hobbies, interests, time with social support, and things that bring you joy. Set healthy boundaries to protect your personal identity from being overwhelmed by your professional responsibilities.

VII. Behavioral Health, Professional Responsibility, & Ethics

- a.** Left untreated, stress-related illnesses and behavioral health struggles can compromise our personal relationships and our ability to meet our professional responsibilities, specifically competency, diligence, and communication as outlined in CRCP 1.1, 1.3, 1.4. COLAP services are free and confidential and provide members of the legal community with assistance to prevent well-being related issues from negatively impacting their personal lives or compromising their career.



Your Well-Being Resource

CONFIDENTIAL FREE SUPPORT

(303) 986-3345