



Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program

Stress Rolls Downhill

"Primates [including humans] are super smart and organized just enough to devote their free time to being miserable to each other and stressing each other out." ~Dr. Robert Sapolsky

Dr. Robert Sapolsky is a neuroendocrinologist and Stanford professor who has spent almost four decades studying the physiological effects of stress on health in baboons and humans. In addition to the conclusive evidence that long-term stress suppresses the immune, digestive, and reproductive systems (thus making us sick, amongst other side effects), Sapolsky's research also revealed that rank in society (usually dictated by the rank of hierarchy at work for humans) directly correlates to stress levels, and thus to overall physical and mental health. Simply stated, those who are of a lower rank and/or that socially isolate have the highest incidence of stress related illnesses; thus, stress rolls downhill. Why? According to Dr. Sapolsky's work, in environments where primates are not in daily physical danger from predators, they create psychological stressors; basically, they take out the stress on each other in accord with the hierarchy. When those who are close to the top of the hierarchy, especially those with type-A personality traits (usually the dominate males in most primate troops; usually the boss in human society), are having a bad day (when they are angry, fearful, confused, or feel threatened about something), they take it out on those who are subordinate to them.

The Whitehall Study, a longitudinal research project that commenced in 1967 and continues to the present, has traced the same phenomena exclusively in humans in

their work environment. The results mirror Dr. Sapolsky's findings; those who have lower rank in the workplace suffer from much higher stress related illnesses and diseases than those who are higher in the organizational hierarchy. Why? Those in lower ranks in the workplace are generally in positions without any power or control over decisions; the perception is that the higher-ups, or bosses, have the power and control over the lives of the subordinates. Often times, those who are higher up in the ranks remind their subordinates often that "they are the boss" by micromanaging subordinates, randomly changing the expectations of employees so that the employees "can never get it right," negating subordinates ideas, reprimanding or yelling at staff (showing poor boundaries; treating staff or employees as if they were children), using the threat of control over the person's employment over their heads (thus instilling fear in their employees), and generally behaving as if they were dictator. The stress created from this type of situation makes subordinates physically, mentally, and emotionally ill.

What do these research projects have to do with lawyers? The practice of law is about helping others, yet is based on a hierarchical, adversarial process. The adversarial process is often used as an excuse for belligerent and even unprofessional behavior amongst many attorneys (and judges) that leads to a type of institutional bullying. In fact, research suggests that "lawyers...[are] more likely than other professionals to be exposed to toxic behavior in the workplace including verbal abuse, mistreatment, bullying, competition and destabilization from colleagues as well as sexual harassment."¹ This culture directly contributes to the fact that attorneys have the

¹ Marianna Papadakis, *Lawyers Have Lowest Health and Wellbeing of All Professionals, Study Find*, FINANCIAL REVIEW, (Nov. 20, 2015, 1:00PM), <http://www.afr.com/leadership/lawyers-have-lowest-health-and-wellbeing-of-all-professionals-study-finds-20151117-gl1h72>.

highest rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide of any profession.² Neither Dr. Sapolsky's research nor the Whitehall study focused exclusively on lawyers, and yet their findings and the environment they studied mirror the legal culture almost exactly.

But don't despair...it's not all bad news! Next time we will discuss the positive messages from this research, and the ways we can improve our own physical and mental health while working as lawyers. In the meantime, when you notice the findings of this research at play in your personal or professional life, think about the positive aspects of your life that help you mitigate the stress that might be created in the hierarchies in your environment. There's a good chance you have instinctively been using resources to build resiliency (such as cultivating positive relationships, exercising, eating well, taking a deep breath before reacting to a disturbing situation, etc.) to handle the stress that might be rolling downhill around you!

By Sarah Myers, JD, LMFT, LAC
Clinical Director, Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program
April 2016
© Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program, 2016

Do you need help coping with your stressors and letting them go? Your Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program provides free and confidential services for judges, lawyers, and law students. If you need resources for ANY issue that is compromising your ability to be a productive member of the legal community, or if there is someone you are concerned about, contact COLAP at (303) 986-3345. For more information about COLAP, please visit www.coloradolap.org.

² Rosa Flores & Rose Marie Arce, *Why Are Lawyers Killing Themselves?*, CNN (Jan. 20, 2014) <http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/19/us/lawyer-suicides/>.