

Understanding First-Year Associate Anxiety

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You're starting your brand-new career after a grueling three years of law school. You're expected to work long hours and weekends, do work for many assigning attorneys and, in true lawyer fashion, [believe that you are to be perfect and quick about all of your work](#). For first-year associates, the stress can become almost unbearable. While it's normal and probably a good thing to experience a degree of anxiety, too much anxiety can become more of a debilitating anxiety disorder. Understanding what you're going through is vital to your overall quality of life. Please read on to understand what experts are saying about first-year associate anxiety.

Define: Anxiety Disorder

The [National Institute of Mental Health](#) writes that those who experience Generalized Anxiety Disorder "display excessive anxiety or worry, most days for at least six months, about a number of things such as personal health, work, social interactions, and everyday routine life circumstances. The fear and anxiety can cause significant problems in areas of their life, such as social interactions, school, and work." Certainly, being a first-year associate tends to leave open the possibility of developing an anxiety disorder. Symptoms include the following:

- Feeling restless, wound-up, or on-edge;
- Being easily fatigued;
- Having difficulty concentrating; mind going blank;
- Being irritable;
- Having muscle tension;
- Difficulty controlling feelings of worry; and
- Having sleep problems, such as difficulty falling or staying asleep, restlessness, or unsatisfying sleep.

Not every first-year associate experiencing stress and anxiety is undergoing the clinical condition of an anxiety disorder. If you feel that you are or that you could be, then seek help immediately through a psychotherapist or your doctor.

For those going through the normal wear and tear of first-year associate anxiety, there are steps that you can take. In learning how to deal with stress and anxiety, it's important to note that though there is no cure-all to overcoming anxiety, there are insights you can use to alleviate anxiety.

Common Thinking Errors

Often, anxiety comes from "thinking errors," according to Debra Bruce in "[Two Ways Lawyers can deal with Stress and Anxiety](#)." These errors tend to cause stress and anxiety. They include:

- **Catastrophizing** - jumping to the worst possible conclusion; exaggerating the consequences;
- **Overgeneralizing** - telling yourself that this *always* or *never* happens;
- **Black or white thinking** - thinking in extremes, if it is bad, there can't be anything good about it;
- **Mind reading** - making assumptions about what other people are thinking;



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- **Fortune telling** – predicting the future instead of waiting to see what happens;
- **Filtering or disqualifying** – overlooking, discounting or ignoring the positive and focusing on negatives;
- **Labeling** – globally assigning traits to self or others (a failure, idiot, inept, clumsy, jerk);
- **Personalizing** – taking an event or someone’s behavior personally and overlooking other factors;
- **Should’ing** – making rigid rules about yourself or others (clue: frequent use of words like should, ought to, have to, must);
- **Emotional reasoning** – relying too much on feelings instead of facts; assuming perceptions are facts;
- **Can’t-stand-itis** – easily frustrated or intolerant of things you don’t enjoy, even when they are reasonable or necessary to achieve something desirable; and
- **Unreal ideal** –unfairly judging ourselves in comparison to others; comparing how we feel on the inside to how they *look* like they feel, on the outside.

Steps to Combating First-Year Associate Anxiety

If you feel you have tricked yourself into one or more of these thinking errors, stand back and evaluate the facts. Go into “attorney-mode” and analyze why you’re feeling the way you are and gather facts and evidence. You will probably find that these thoughts are neither logical nor true. Once you realize this, it will be easier to move on and away from these feelings and get back to business.

Many experts talk about mindfulness to ease anxiety. According to [Psychology Today](#), “Mindfulness is a state of active, open [attention](#) on the present. When we are mindful, we carefully observe our thoughts and feelings without judging them as good or bad.”

Jeena Cho, a leader in working with anxiety racked attorneys, suggests treating learning mindfulness as similar to gardening. You plant seeds in optimal conditions, nurture the plant and hope that it will produce fruit. Although you have set the optimal conditions, it may not produce fruit in your first few tries.

In “[Relaxing the Anxious Lawyer Brain Takes Practice](#),” Cho points out that “Getting to know your own mind and figuring out what helps it to relax takes a willingness to get to know yourself—a willingness to try different things and see what works.”

Cho also writes about meditation. When you start out meditating, your mind seems to whirl with a cacophonous jumble of thoughts colliding into one another, often thoughts related to work. “What does happen over time is that we can learn not to allow these thoughts to pull us away,” writes Cho.

Resilience is another option touted to mediate first-year associate anxiety. According to the [American Psychological Association](#), “Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of [stress](#).”

In “[What Resilient Lawyers Do Differently](#),” Paula Davis-Laack points out that resilient attorneys reframe their negative thinking like this:

1. They seek to quickly understand where they have a measure of control, influence or leverage in the situation instead of wasting their time and energy on things they can’t control.
2. They look for measurable and specific evidence to support the accuracy of their thoughts.
3. They look for the middle ground to diffuse black-and-white or all-or-nothing thinking styles.
4. They think about what they would tell a friend in the same situation (we often say things to ourselves that we wouldn’t speak to a friend or family member).

Conclusion

Experiencing first year-associate anxiety is just one of the factors in your career with which you must deal. The vast majority of new lawyers do learn how to deal with stress and anxiety that comes with being a new attorney. With thought and a bit of effort, you too will learn how to deal with the first-year associate anxiety.

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