

[Practicing Law: When was I most stressed out?](#)

By [Cordell Parvin](#) on April 14th, 2014

A lawyer I coach asked me when I was most stressed out practicing law.

For most of my career I didn't think about what I was feeling as being stressed out. I guess I thought it was just part of being a lawyer.

Looking back now, there were two primary things that were stressful and I remember both of them causing me to wake up in the middle of the night.

1. When I knew it was VERY important to get a certain result for my client, and I did not have total control over getting the client's desired result.
2. When I had delegated work from my most important clients to my partners.



Stress Arising From NEEDING to get a result

When was I most stressed out over the need to get a result for a client?

Let me tell you a story. I think it was in 1982 when I was asked to defend a 60 something year old high level federal government employee who, close to his retirement had been accused of accepting bribes.

When he first came to see me with his wife, I saw a tall, once proud man slumped over, visibly shaking and looking like he had not slept a full night since he had been indicted. He proclaimed his innocence. But, almost everyone accused does that.

The meaning of his life had been challenged. I could see it was a chilling feeling. He had been removed from a job he loved, everyone in his small community who had respected him, now wondered whether he was on the take, and his integrity had been challenged.

He looked at me and told me to do everything I could to get his trial scheduled right away.

Preparing his defense, I visited his modest one-story home in a small Virginia town, where he and his wife had grown up and lived their entire life. You know this kind of town. Even if you live in a large city you have driven through a town with two stoplights a policeman stationed at one end or the other to catch speeders, and a place where everyone knew each other's business.



When I entered their house and sat down on his couch, I looked up at a portrait of a young woman, their only child, who his wife painfully told me had been killed in a car accident, a few years before.

The prosecutor was a DOJ lawyer with whom I had gone to law school. When we first met before the trial, he bragged that he had never lost a case and did not intend to lose this one. I guess he was showing his macho side. That opening gambit set the tone for how well we got along, but on that day, I saw an opportunity to use his arrogance against him with the jury.

The chief witness against my client was an government IG investigator. He was a short, ruddy faced guy who wore scuffed brown shoes to court each day and sat at the table with the prosecutor. He reminded me of one of the Three Stooges characters and I hoped the jury might see him the same way.



I suspect it could not be done today, but back then I arrived at the courtroom early each day to crank down the height of the government's chief witness's chair as low as possible. I wanted the jury to see him, barely peering over the table. I am sure you understand the method in my madness.

When the jury came back, my law school classmate had suffered his first defeat. If looks could kill, I would have been dead on the spot. He refused to shake my hand, or even look at me. I understood, I could see the pain in his face. (It's another story, but I was a defense expert witness in a Denver case, which I assume was his second loss.)

While this trial was the most stressful client matter I ever handled, I have never felt more relieved, and later more exhilarated than I did when I heard the jury say: "not guilty" and watched my client stride out of the courtroom with his head held high. I kept the transcript of my final argument. It is in a folder in one of the boxes in my garage now.

Why was this experience so stressful? I believed my client was innocent and I knew the meaning of his life depended on being found not guilty. He had put his faith in me.

Stress Arising from Delegation

I want to tell you about this kind of stress because you can't make rain by yourself. There comes a time when you have to delegate work. Later, there comes a time when you have to delegate lead attorney work to your partners.

Even if your partners say they will keep you in the loop, it is not the same as being responsible for the matter yourself.

My best clients repeatedly told me:

Cordell, we did not hire Jenkins & Gilchrist. We hired you.

I was never stressed over delegating to associates, because I was still in charge and supervising them. I was far more stressed when I delegated the matter to another partner. I woke up many times thinking about whether my partners were making the right decisions, making a good impression, and treating my client the same way they would if it was their client.

Stress is a part of practicing law. How you handle it, will in part determine your level of success.

Cordell M. Parvin built a national construction practice during his 35 years practicing law. At Jenkins & Gilchrist, Mr. Parvin was the Construction Law Practice Group Leader and was also responsible for the firm's attorney development practice. While there he taught client development and created a coaching program for junior partners. In 2005, Mr. Parvin left the firm and started Cordell Parvin LLC. He now works with lawyers and law firms on career development and planning and client development. He is the co-author of *Say Ciao to Chow Mein: Conquering Career Burnout* and other books for lawyers. To learn more visit his Web site, www.cordellparvin.com or contact him at cparvin@cordellparvin.com.