

# Stress-Free Living: The End of Life As You Know It

*Distinguish between two types of stress*

**By Dennis Coyne**

**A**s I waited outside the courtroom for my case to be called, I noticed a copy of the magazine Stressfree Living on the chair beside me with this tag line: “Let Stressfree Living Magazine be your escape from life!”

Initially, I was amused at the irony of promoting stress-free living to litigants awaiting their day in court whose stress was palpable. Perhaps the haggard people sitting around me would welcome an escape from their lives, especially if they could do so by reading a few pages in a magazine.

Days later, my thoughts returned to the premise of living a stress-free life. Is this possible, or even desirable? Is escaping life a worthy pursuit? What would my life be like today if I had sought to live a stress-free life; if I had lived each day to escape from life? I remembered several events from my life: having the training wheels removed from my bike when I was young and wobbling down the sidewalk; competing in the spelling bee in second grade; trying out for extracurricular activities in high school; choosing a college; sitting for the LSAT and applying to law schools. Getting married and raising kids wasn't stress-free, either. In fact, there were more stressful moments in my life than I could count.

## **Distinguish Between Two Types Of Stress**

I've come to realize that not all stress is the same, nor should all stress be avoided. Negative stress—suffering from chronic pain, grieving a failed relationship, or failing to meet the demands of jobs that require far too much of us—is more than simple stress: it's “distress.” It tends to occur over time, slowly eating us alive. Distress is not welcome, nor does it provide a positive outcome.

Positive stress, though, enables us to achieve desirable outcomes or objectives. Examples include winning an athletic competition, getting a promotion, or developing a new skill. This type of stress is “eustress.” It often occurs in short, adrenaline like bursts, as it does for athletes about to participate in a competition, and has a payoff or reward.

## **Managing Stress To Achieve Your Goals**

In my own life, I've lived through several situations, each of which has been a positive, if stressful, experience for me. My transition from public to private practice comes to mind. At that time, I was in my mid-forties, my children were heading toward college, and I wanted a change. The thought of practicing in the private sector was exciting but daunting. Although I was a specialist in a “hot” practice area, I had no clients and didn't know how I'd ever establish a practice. I didn't even know what a billable

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hour was. Just thinking about the transition made me stressed-out. How could I ever accomplish it?

Then it occurred to me that if I found an even greater fear and conquered it, the transition to private practice might be easier. I had just such a fear on hand—my fear of deep water (not knowing how to swim, I had nearly drowned while water skiing). I decided to learn to swim. If I could manage this fear, I could manage my fear of entering private practice.

Signing-up for swim lessons was the easy part. My instructor was a young athlete for whom swimming was second nature. Effortlessly, he dove into the water and moved powerfully across the pool. He showed me what my arms should do, and how to kick my legs. Then he gave me a kick board. I remember kicking furiously and not moving at all. Eight weeks later, when that series of classes concluded, I was still not a swimmer—nor was I after a second series of lessons with a different instructor.

My third instructor was not simply an athlete but also a teacher. During the day, he worked at a rehabilitation center with disabled students: some were missing arms or legs; others had paralyzed limbs. He brought his mastery of language and imagery to our class. For the first time, I learned to swim the length of the pool and dive into the deep end. That's when I knew was ready to transition to private practice.

Instead of seeking a stress-free life, I developed a strategy to manage the stress for the sake of accomplishing something important to me. And I'm glad I did, for I enjoyed private practice and was successful doing it. The confidence I gained during that transition was helpful to me when I began coaching lawyers and consulting with law firms.

Another stressful time occurred just a few months ago. My good friend Billy is a personal trainer and loves to kayak. He offered to teach me how to kayak and sent me a detailed lesson plan. I had no problem learning how to use the gear, but I shuddered at the notion of doing a “wet exit”—extricating myself from the kayak while upside-down, under water. Worse yet, I learned that the training culminated in doing a self-rescue in deep water. Even though I'm able to swim the length of a pool, I still dread being out in the middle of a lake.

Could I master my fear and learn to kayak? In the coaching I do, clients learn to trust me and explore whatever edge they're on, whether it's a fear, concern, or dream. Just as clients learn to trust me, I wanted to be able to trust others. I knew that doing the wet exit and self-rescue would require me to place a lot of trust in Billy and in his ability to coach me.

After twelve hours of instruction, I learned how to kayak. During my first wet-exit, I looked to Billy—he'd assured me that he would come to my rescue if I needed help—took a deep breath and rolled the kayak. I trusted him. Thanks to that experience, I'm more able to trust others. I'm also more self-confident. Billy and I are even better friends. Because of this, I've become a better coach.

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The poet David Whyte loves the imagery of kayaking. In his poem, *Out on the Ocean*, he writes about how stress can cause us to realize what is important, and enable us to rally when we need to do so:

*In these waves  
I am caught on shoulders  
lifting the sky*

*each crest  
breaks sharply  
and suddenly rises*

*in each steep wall  
my arms work in the strong movement  
of other arms*

*the immense energy  
each wave throws up with hand outstretched  
grabs the paddle*

*the blades flash  
lifting veils of spray as the bow rears  
terrified then falls*

*with five miles to go  
of open ocean  
the eyes pierce the horizon*

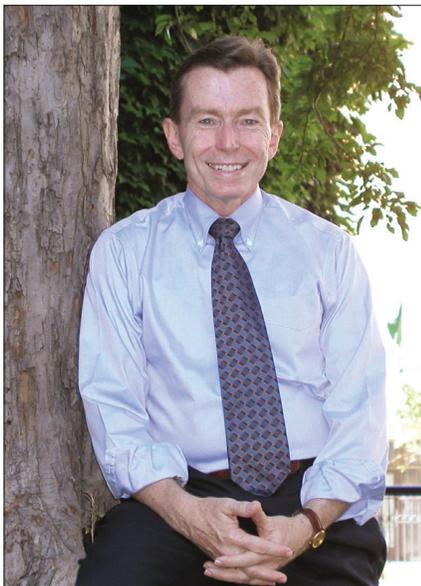
*the kayak pulls round  
like a pony held by unseen reins  
shying out of the ocean*

*and the spark behind fear  
recognized as life  
leaps into flame*

*always this energy smoulders inside  
when it remains unlit  
the body fills with dense smoke.*

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As you can tell, I don't believe in stress-free living. While reading Stressfree Living Magazine may have its benefits, I hope that you don't organize your life according to its premise that the best you can do is avoid stress and escape your life. Such a strategy will deny you many accomplishments and much joy. However, I do suggest that you pay attention to stress, distinguishing the eustress that promotes health and helps you to master the challenges in your life from the distress that causes illness and saps your strength. More poetically, I hope that you welcome the spark of life, whenever your life fills with dense smoke.



Dennis Coyne has practiced law for thirty-five years, most recently as a shareholder in a major Minnesota law firm. He is also a certified Hudson Institute career coach and certified by the Strozzi Institute as a somatic coach. Dennis works principally with lawyers to better align their values with their busy schedules, take effective action, and achieve results for their clients. As they do so, lawyers learn to better lead their lives, and to become leaders in their communities. Dennis serves as adjunct faculty in the Masters of Arts program in Human Development at St. Mary's College, and has taught law at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul. For many years he has convened a highly acclaimed seminar: "Our Challenge-To Thrive in Our Chosen Profession." And since 2005, Dennis has joined with Hamline Law School to present a series of CLE's entitled: "From Rules to Ethics: Identity, Responsibility, and the Recovery of the Law as a Profession."

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