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Q&A

How I Deal With Stress: A McDermott Partner on Setting Boundaries and the Difficulty of Taking Time Out

In the latest in Law.com's stress series, private equity partner Fatema Orjela discusses how she has juggled motherhood with her career, and the importance of not 'bottling up' your feelings.

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Mental Health



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Reporter



In the latest in Law.com International's series on how senior corporate lawyers cope with the pressures of both their work and personal lives, McDermott Will & Emery partner Fatema Orjela talks about how she has succeeded in the high-pressure environment of private equity, juggled motherhood and honed her stress management skills.

Orjela, who recently joined McDermott's London office, has practised at some of the world's biggest law firms, including Sidley Austin, where she spent almost eight years, Kirkland & Ellis, where she first made partner, and Hogan Lovells.

In this time she has had three children, been frequently recognised by the industry for her achievements, and set up an expansive mentoring programme for up-and-coming associates.

Can you give an example of a time you felt overwhelmed, stressed or particularly low?

Getting ready to have my first child and go on maternity leave was quite stressful. Having spent 110% of my time invested in work for multiple years, having to entrust close clients with colleagues and plan taking time out is really hard. I didn't have the right support as I didn't have anyone listening to what I actually needed—which was not to be cut out. Too many people make assumptions for those about to go on leave and that just exacerbates the stress.

What coping mechanisms do you use in such situations?

I try to remember that you can only really be concerned about the things that you can control and sometimes you just have to lean in to what needs to take priority at that time (i.e. having one's first child) and come back and smooth out the rest later. It goes against every fibre of my being to not want to solve every issue immediately. But there really is always time and these periods that feel like forever are actually, often, very short in the grand scheme of things—speaking with the lens of having now had three children.

Have you ever had counselling?

I have had excellent professional coaching throughout my career. Not quite the same as counselling but it armed me with critical skills for resilience and self-reflection. I also have an incredibly close “counsel” of family, friends, colleagues and clients whom I lean on frequently. I would highly encourage anyone who is internalising anything to find an external source to speak to. Having access to another viewpoint is important.

Do you ever feel guilty about the hours you work? How does that conversation go in your mind?

I don't feel guilty about the hours in aggregate, but have felt guilty at times about *when* those hours needed to be done e.g. if I had to miss a bed time for my kids. I have no issue working all day and night—the opposite as I really do love the substance of my work—but there are only a couple of select hours a day which are reserved for my family time. I manage guilt creeping in by setting boundaries and trying to ensure that those reserved slots don't get cut across without very good reason—e.g. an all party call, a deal signing etc—and are kept to the majority of times. That way I know I've tried and, overall, it's okay. So I don't need to feel any guilt.

What do you do to manage your work-life balance?

I start by not approaching my time with a work vs life lens. There's just life and my goal is to fit as much into my life as possible and be balanced in general. So there'll be times where work is more of an intense pull, but then I couple that with investment into the other areas—family, friends etc—as soon as I can. So work is less of a pull against life, it's just one of the facets of me and my life that needs to be in balance alongside all of the other facets that make me “me” and by protecting the balance by being intentional with how I spend my time in different periods that enables me to be the best that I can be across every area.

What advice would you give to someone who is feeling very stressed at work?

Do not bottle up how you feel. A problem shared really is halved. It is important to let someone—anyone—in to help, to help confirm they see the issue the same way, to help support to find a resolution and to generally just help you feel less alone. It does actually take a village.

Any other thoughts?

Managing stress is a skillset. I have got better at it over time. You have to build the right tools and practise being resilient. So don't feel weak or a failure if you're stressed. Just work at it.

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