

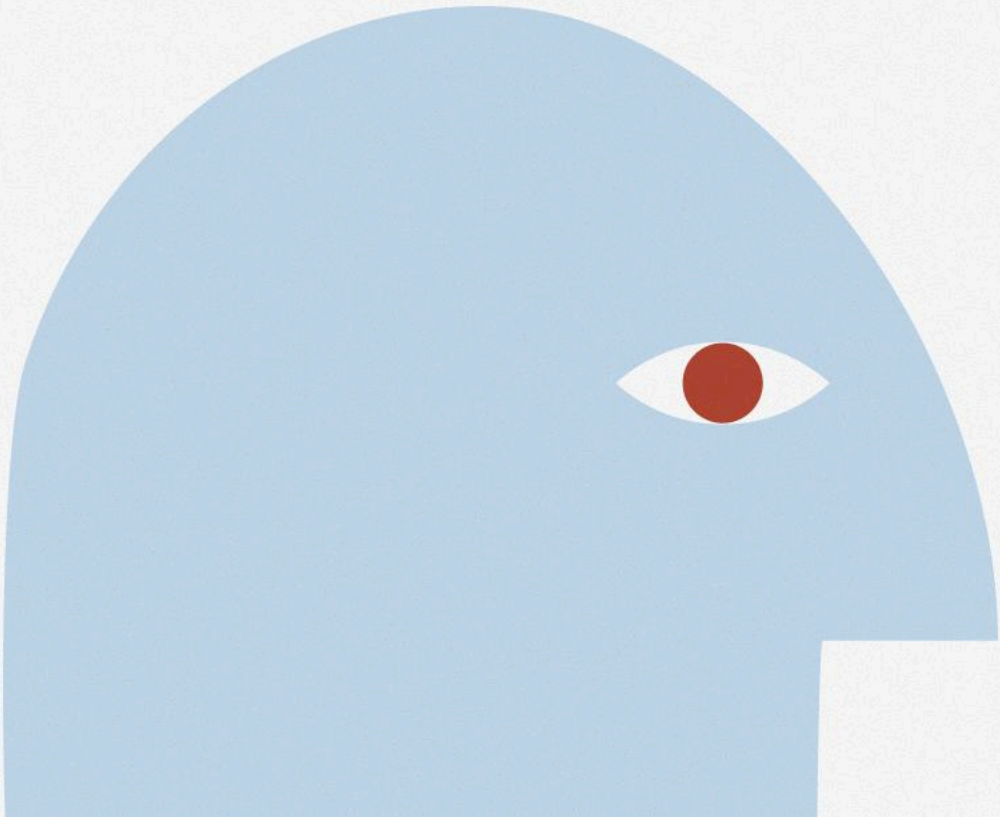
OVERCOMING OVERWHELM

**The pressure to perform.
The cost of coping.
And how to reclaim control.**

An LOD report with Barbara Patchen

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Foreword

AT **Lawyers On Demand (LOD)**, we like our reports to be on topics that feel important to the particular moment, and yet not sufficiently aired. The things that are a little difficult for our profession to grapple with, things that might challenge how we think and operate. We don't promise all the answers, indeed being able to do that would suggest a dull theme, but we like to progress the discussion. In 2025, the feeling of overwhelm for lawyers and legal teams is one of those topics.

Perhaps I'm the wrong person to be writing this foreword. After 30 years in the world of law, I finally seem to have reached a lucky stage where things are largely manageable—my career is under control (ish), my kids are self-sufficient (ish), and my colleagues are more than capable of getting most things done without my helpful (ish) involvement. That's a lot of ish but not too much overwhelm. But when I reflect over previous decades, the situation was very different—big job, small children, big mortgage, ever smaller gaps in time. And for those at this same stage now, it seems to have gotten a whole lot harder. LOD's recent Global Survey Report reminded me that a large percentage of our clients have this issue hitting them hard. The overwhelming amount of stuff to get done is number one on their list of priorities year after year.

Whilst the Global Survey Report surfaced the external forces driving overwhelm (unsustainable workloads, rising complexity, and reduced resources), this piece gives us a chance to look inward. It explores how legal culture itself quietly teaches us to normalise overwhelm and what we might do to offset it.

This isn't a report on life hacks, or quick tricks to squeeze more out of your time. There's enough of those on the internet to last a lifetime, and most are a zero-sum game. Simply getting through ever larger workloads with an apparent efficiency hack often just creates more to do. Instead this report goes deeper and examines the issues hidden below the surface. Barbara Patchen is an organisational psychology practitioner who spends much of her life working with lawyers. She brings a different perspective to the legal world, grounded in a strong understanding of what we do and has a track record of success in helping us do it.

She offers the context to understand ourselves and our teams a little better, to give insights on what may be going on that finds so many of us overwhelmed. Barbara then suggests some strategies that have worked for others (and at the end I share with her some that have worked for me, if you get that far). Some may be helpful in themselves, but even better, they can spark your own ideas specific to where you're currently at.

This report can't promise to erase the hard work—we chose that when we became lawyers. But it might make the hard work not only more manageable but more fun, helping us to build careers and teams that we can be proud of. And there's a bonus oblique outcome too; by not being overwhelmed, it can even (whisper it) be ultimately more productive too.

~Simon Harper
Founder, LOD

“Overwhelm isn’t just happening to lawyers—it’s happening within them. And it’s rooted in identity, culture, and decades of unexamined norms.”

Introduction

Every ambition comes with a tradeoff. Sharp minds and driven hearts often carry a quiet cost: deep fatigue, mental overload, and the relentless toll of needing to perform.

As one in-house counsel told me,
"I'm still detoxing from my law firm life."

It's not just the workload—it's the way urgency settles into the body.
"If I'm copied on an email and no one replies, I feel like I have to."

These aren't outliers. They're familiar rhythms across the profession—and *frankly, across the world of business*. And they point to something deeper.

This overwhelm isn't a personal failing. It's professional conditioning.

From law school onward, lawyers are trained to operate with little rest and perform under pressure. To be the last one to leave, the first to reply, and the calmest in a crisis. Over time, these habits become identity. And often, culture.

That culture has evolved inside structures built for speed, precision, and constant responsiveness—shaped by client demands, complex risks, and technology that keeps everyone reachable, always. These forces weren't designed with burnout in mind—but they've contributed to it nonetheless.

And now, many legal teams are feeling the effects—not just after a tough case or busy quarter, but in a sustained way. A kind of chronic overload embedded in the nervous system—and, often, quietly rewarded by the environment.

This report explores that culture—not to cast blame, but to spark awareness. It blends **psychological insight, lawyer interviews, and practical strategies** to help lawyers navigate stress in the moment—and to support the leaders shaping the environments in which lawyers work and live.

You'll hear some of my perspective as an organisational psychology practitioner, but mostly you'll hear from lawyers themselves—from global GCs to junior counsel. From 3 a.m. cross-border investigations to parenting toddlers while managing C-suite expectations.

Their stories shaped what follows.

But before we dive into the fixes, let's begin with what this kind of chronic stress actually feels like. Not in theory, but in your calendar. In your body. In your kitchen at 7:30 p.m.

That's where we begin.

A stylized blue silhouette of a human head and shoulders. The head is filled with a solid blue color, while the neck and shoulders are a lighter blue. A simple eye is depicted on the face, with a light blue iris and a yellow-orange pupil. The word "OVERWHELM" is written in a bold, blue, sans-serif font across the forehead area, with the letters slightly overlapping the eye.

**OVER
WHELM**

**Your brain on
overwhelm**

Your brain on overwhelm

You just produced the most convincing fake laugh of your career on a Zoom meeting with a colleague. It's five minutes before the meeting is supposed to end, and apparently your teammate thinks it's time for a comedic interlude. You, on the other hand, need to end precisely on the hour so you can get to your next meeting—one that requires exactly 90 seconds of pre-thinking so it appears you've done your homework.

After that, your eyes well up with tears when you glance at your to-do list and realise you can't possibly do, and be, everything the world needs from you today. And right on cue, there it is: a red exclamation point email from your boss about an urgent matter that needs your immediate attention. You dive in, miss a meeting, show up late to another, and don't bother looking at your to-do list again. But hey—the matter is moving.

You go home craving a single moment of silence. Maybe a drink. Maybe a song from college that reminds you you're still a Rage Against the Machine badass. Your inbox doesn't own you.

But then you remember—there's an entirely different life waiting for you at home, whatever that may be.

This is a *normal* day. One that often goes unevaluated, simply because it's familiar—it's what we know, and what we've come to accept.

I want you to laser-focus on one particular moment in this standard-issue, overwhelming, slightly depressive snapshot:

The moment you opened the urgent email.

*How did it feel to receive it?
To respond to it?*

For many lawyers I've worked with, this moment shapes far more than their calendar—it shapes their identity. It's Pavlovian. An urgent message hits your inbox, and your body responds: posture straightens, focus sharpens, fingers fly. You rise to the occasion.


Psychologically and neurologically, this is no coincidence. Over time, your brain has been trained to associate this kind of urgency with performance, purpose—even safety. Cortisol spikes. And when you fire off a rapid reply, your brain delivers a hit of dopamine—relief, satisfaction, control. The cycle repeats.

What started as a response has become a reflex. What started as competence has become compulsion.

This moment has become your value.
The one who is always available.
The one who puts others at ease.
The one who does it fast.

And one of the lawyers I spoke to admitted, “the scariest part is I feel proud of it.”

And that pride? That's part of the trap.

The background is a deep blue with a complex, low-poly geometric pattern of various shades of blue, creating a sense of depth and complexity. A hand, rendered in a simple, stylized manner with a light skin tone, emerges from the bottom left, holding a thin wooden stick. The stick supports a rectangular, off-white sign that has a slightly wavy, hand-drawn appearance. The sign contains the text 'The hidden roots of overwhelm' in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif font. The overall composition is clean and modern, with a strong visual contrast between the white sign and the blue background.

The hidden roots of overwhelm

Overwhelm is not a failure of willpower

Hidden roots of overwhelm

This performance-reward loop has been quietly reshaping commercial and legal culture since email became ubiquitous. In fact, not only did the most recent LOD Global Survey Report flag this as a major concern, but in March 2025, Law360 found that—for the first time, a majority of respondents reported *being stressed most or all of the time*. Let's explore a few reasons why.

1. **You're thrown into the deep end from day one.** Law school teaches concepts. But the job? That's trial by fire. New lawyers enter guessing—tiptoeing through high-stakes decisions with minimal feedback. Hypervigilance becomes the norm.

“Law school doesn't teach you how to be a lawyer. You're thrown in knowing nothing about how to actually do the job. You just watch, ask stupid questions, and hope you're not too annoying. It's exhausting.”

Under sustained pressure, something deeper happens. As Dr. Robert Hogan's research on personality under strain shows, stress doesn't just deplete us—it activates our derailers: the reactive traits that emerge under pressure. We become more volatile, avoidant, controlling, or cynical. At home, that's a red flag. At work, it's often business as usual.

2. **You're trained for precision and punished for error.** Your job is to de-risk. Spot flaws. See around corners. From day one, precision is your superpower—and perfection the expectation. But a conceptually brilliant argument will be critiqued for missing a comma. That early message is clear: nothing short of perfect will do.

“It's a beat down every day. No one comments about your exceptional legal thinking, only about the minor error you made on page 76.”

The result? A chronic fear of error. Your brain learns to associate mistakes with humiliation. Over time, that fear doesn't just shape how you work—it can erode your sense of worth.

- 3. Your identity is the job.** Most lawyers didn't stumble into the profession. You were pulled in—by purpose, legacy, or the belief that you could carry more than most. But law doesn't just demand excellence—it consumes identity. And identity-based work carries a hidden cost: *psychological fragility*. Without other sources of meaning or belonging, even small stumbles feel seismic. You're not just doing the work—you are the work. You thrive because you are needed.

"There weren't any fire drills over a holiday weekend—and I felt so anxious. I put my phone in the bedroom and made myself not touch it for a few hours. That's when I realised: I check it at least every 15 minutes. I was severely agitated because nothing was wrong."

- 4. You're not just practicing law. You're managing fear.** Clients—internal and external—expect urgency. What's routine for you is often novel and high-stakes for them. And when people feel threatened, they don't just ask for help—they project their anxiety outward. Their fear becomes your problem. Their derailers surface. And suddenly, you're not just the expert—you're the fixer, the shield, the scapegoat. You represent certainty, control, and sometimes, the embodiment of a problem they'd rather not face.

"I was anxious, about to blow a gasket...because literally the flood of email starts at 8 p.m. at night until I pass out at midnight," one leader told me. "This happened over four straight nights—over 150 emails, all over the weekend. Every single one was a question directed to me."

5. Technology made 'always on' the expectation. Once technology made constant connection possible, it became assumed. Turning off now requires coordination, redundancy, and the risk of being seen as unavailable. Even unlimited PTO has fine print.

"They say take a vacation, it's unlimited. But the minute I step off the plane I get an email asking for an update on a deal. I have to answer. No one else can."

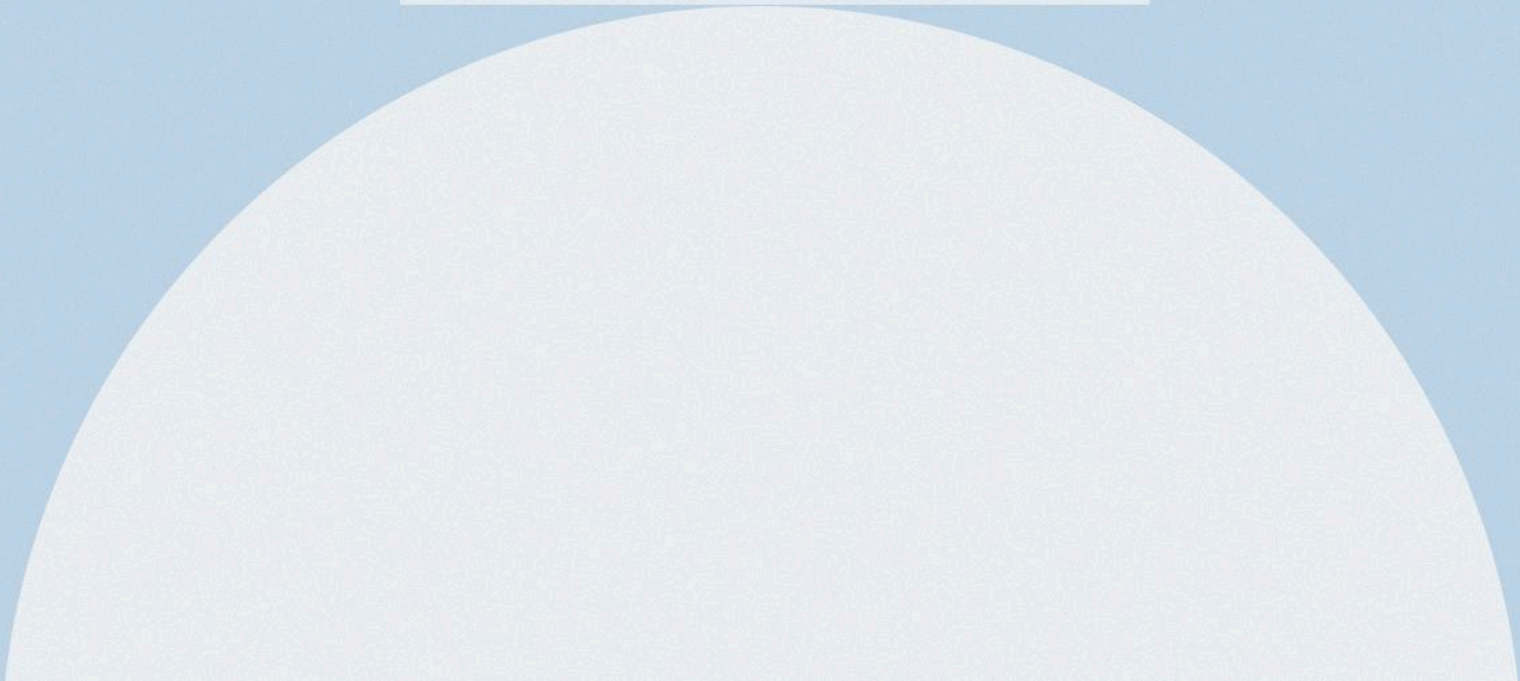
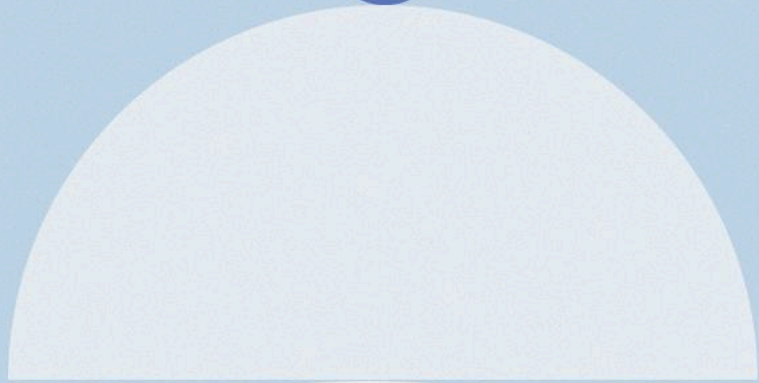
Your phone is no longer a tool—it's a limb. The same device that lets you work from anywhere has rewired your nervous system to believe you're still at work.

That's a lot of pressure. And I'm guessing you've felt it.

More than **50% of lawyers report experiencing burnout**—nearly twice the rate of the general workforce. Rates of **depression (28%)**, **anxiety (19%)**, and **problematic drinking (21%)** remain persistently high across the profession (American Bar Association, 2023; 2024).

So if we know it's a problem, why isn't anything you've tried working?

The personas overwhelm built and why they keep you stuck



The personas overwhelm built and why they keep you stuck

Most people don't set out to work this way. But in a system that rewards speed, availability, and stoicism over sustainability, they adapt. Over time, those adaptations calcify into patterns—ways of coping that once served a purpose but now undermine well-being.

To understand these patterns, we need to look deeper at how the brain responds to stress.

Drawing from neuroscience (Kahneman, Damasio), adult development theory (Kegan), and leadership practice (The Conscious Leadership Group), many experts describe two broad modes of operating: a reflective, intentional mode and a reactive, defensive one. For simplification, we'll borrow the language from The Conscious Leadership Group: **above the line** or **below the line**.

- When you're **above the line**, your prefrontal cortex leads. This is your executive brain—curious, creative, open to feedback. You're resourceful, self-aware, able to adapt—tools you rely on as a high-knowledge worker.
- When you're **below the line**, your brain's threat detection system (including the amygdala) is more dominant. This is your survival brain. It triggers defensiveness, control, blame, or people-pleasing—often unconsciously. You're not solving problems; you're protecting yourself.

Both states are normal. But here's the hard truth: **most of the strategies lawyers use to cope with overwhelm reinforce below-the-line behaviour.**

Working harder. Setting stricter boundaries. Staying the hero. These are logical responses—but they often **lock you into the very patterns you're trying to escape.**

Over time, I've seen three common personas emerge—each a different form of below-the-line coping in high-pressure legal environments. And to be clear, these aren't character flaws—they're adaptive patterns formed in high-pressure systems.

1. The boundary enforcer

Protecting yourself—until the walls start closing in

Let's talk about boundaries. They're essential. But also wildly over-hyped.

TikTok and burnout culture have turned boundaries into brittle ultimatums: *"This is okay. That isn't."* Rules with no room for relational negotiation.

Boundaries are a starting point. Not the fix.

They help you leave a toxic relationship with work, but they won't teach you how to build a healthy one. As one lawyer put it:

"I had to retrain my mind—I don't have to take that call or email right now. It's okay to take space. And when I do, somehow... it all works out."

But without that retraining, boundaries can get reduced to rules. When everything feels urgent, the only defense is a firm line. So you draw one. Then another. You clarify what's okay, what isn't. And for a while, it works.

It sounds like:

They don't respect my time.

I will suffer the consequences of ignoring them.

I can't always be on.

They're the problem.

But rigid boundaries in relationally complex environments often backfire. Colleagues work around you. Information goes quiet. Your world narrows. Without curiosity or flexibility, boundaries become barricades. You slip below the line—not because you're wrong to protect your time, but because you've lost the space to engage.

The culture has confused overextension with professionalism—and the rudimentary skills you've used to adapt aren't cutting it. They're cutting you out.

2. The over-deliverer

Over-optimising until you're the bottleneck

If you aren't the victim, you might be the hero. You tell yourself it will be better next week. Or next month. You read every productivity hack out there, determined to perform at even higher levels.

You will be the reliable one. The smart one. The one who can fit more in because you're that efficient. You say yes to more—and everyone notices.

If you've chosen this path, it might feel like you've got it figured out. You get praised for how much you can carry. You become the fixer, the rescuer—the one who shows up when no one else can. *And boy*, does it feel good to be that exceptional.

Except when it doesn't. As one senior litigation partner put it:

"I am always working. I get up before anyone else in the house, around 5am to run and check emails, I have breakfast, go to the office for 8-10 hours, come home for dinner and bath time, and then I work again until I go to sleep."

It sounds like:

I'm the only one who can do it right.

If I don't step in, it'll all fall apart.

If I stop, everything stops.

Listen here, teacher's pet—it takes one to know one.

While you're climbing the ladder of praise and recognition, you might be missing the moment your son invents his first dance move. You might also be crowding out the growth of the people around you.

If you're wondering why no one else can perform to your level, it's because they don't have to. You're there to do it for them. You've built a machine where you are both the hero—and the bottleneck.

You're doing it all—until there's nothing left of you to give.

3. The critic

When cynicism turns to armor

If you aren't drawing harder lines or doing more, you might be pulling back into judgment.

Instead of pushing through overwhelm, you retreat into cynicism and sharpness. You focus on everything that's wrong: the leadership, the clients, your peers. You mistake being right for being safe.

It sounds like:

No one else gets it.

Why bother?

If they listened to me, we wouldn't be in this mess.

At first, it feels strategic. You're not wasting energy on broken systems or half-baked ideas. You're the one who sees things as they really are. You find refuge in sarcasm, observation, late-night texts with the few colleagues who still "get it."

But slowly, something else can happen.

You stop offering ideas.

You stop believing anything could be different.

You stop letting yourself care.

The detachment that once made you feel smart starts to make you feel bitter—and a little bit numb.

Your eyes have rolled so far back into your head you can't see what's around you. You may find yourself cataloguing every mistake made by others—because it feels safer than being hopeful or even worse, being wrong.

As one team leader put it more gently:

"Yes, I am overwhelmed. But so is everyone else. Leadership has no real vision. I don't know where we are going. Everything has changed. I am looking at other jobs—and so is everyone else."

When you lead from critique instead of curiosity—you isolate yourself. And eventually, the only person you trust is you. And if we're being honest—you've probably become kind of shitty to be around.

**So what do the most
grounded, unflappable,
Yoda-level lawyers
actually do differently?**

Overcoming overwhelm



Overcoming overwhelm

While I have some truths to share—drawn from research, embarrassing personal experiences, and watching smart people stumble forward—what matters most here are the real stories. These are voices from the field: lawyers, leaders, and peers who are in your shoes and have developed real, everyday coping mechanisms that work.

That said, every single one of them, no matter how different their work or worldview, circled back to one shared truth. And it's one I would have recommended anyway:

To overcome overwhelm, you have to put space between stimulus and response.

That space—*the Prefrontal Pause, the Reset Window, the Connection to Your Core*—is where real leadership of your life begins. It's where patterns break, clarity returns, and choice re-enters the room.

In that tiny moment you can fit a thousand paths forward. And in it, your peers have found practices that work—ways to stay human in a system that often forgets to be.

Here are three of those stories and ideas.

Then, I've asked Simon Harper—LOD's founder and master of calm—to share his own time-tested approach to staying sane, steady, and just the right amount of rebellious.

Idea #1: Regulate before you react

Take a deep breath.
Four seconds in.
Hold for four.
Out for four.
Hold for four.
Again.

“I know this sounds basic, but I just breathe. I don’t answer the calls. I put down the phone. I go for a walk and breathe. Because it’s never as urgent as it seems.”

That’s right. A General Counsel for a multinational company just breathes. Now, don’t you dare roll your eyes or stop reading. I know your best friend and your therapist have already recommended self-care. And most of the time, it’s frankly infuriating. But here’s the thing: the lawyers I know who don’t hate their lives—are doing it. Not because they’re soft. But because they’re smart.

So instead of telling you what to do, let me explain why it matters. You can figure out the how.

The above the line and below the line concept is a way to intellectualise and outsmart your lizard brain. It’s leveraging our **Prefrontal Pause** so that you can catch up to the new evolutionary truths of modern day reality.

The world has evolved faster than we have.
Technology surpasses cognition.
Global complexity outpaces intuition.
And so we rely on our brains to compensate.

But your brain—sharp as it is—is not built to carry everything alone. And if you’ve ever noticed that thinking about your anxiety only makes it worse, you already know: **you can’t outthink biology.**

You have to embody the shift. You have to metabolize your experiences. Just like a gazelle that shakes off trauma after an escape, you need a way to discharge your overwhelm.

Cry it out.
Sweat it out.
Breathe it out.

Let’s be honest, much of what fills your day is shaped by systems that were built over time. Deadlines, expectations, contracts—they’re real, but they’re also human constructs. That doesn’t make your work meaningless, it means you have more power than you think to reshape how you relate to it.

So when the overwhelm spikes, your task isn't just to get through it. It's to signal to your body that it's ok. That you're in charge now. That the emergency has passed.

That's nervous system mastery. So whether it's yoga, meditation, gardening, running, forest bathing, or something really woo-woo—what matters is that it moves through not just your mind, but your body.

Idea #2:

Reframe the problem and your role

You, my friend, aren't just a lawyer. You are an emotional steward. A first responder to ambiguity. You are Dramamine for chaos.

Much like the best physicians, your bedside manner isn't just a bonus—it's a lever for outcomes. Studies show that a doctor's empathy and communication skills can measurably improve patient health—lowering blood pressure, easing pain, even increasing recovery rates (Kelley 2014). Why? Because people don't just respond to information; they respond to how it's delivered. Legal work is no different. How you show up changes how others respond—and that changes what gets done.

So now that you've reframed your role, let's talk about the real problems in front of you. Yes, the workload matters. But often, the strain is relational. You've got a pissed-off client who's doubting your timeline. An internal collaborator who's gone dark. An executive who's suddenly questioning a deal that closes in 48 hours.

One lawyer we spoke with had a week like this—hundreds of emails flying back and forth right before a deal was closing, chaos on every thread. And then he paused.

“Instead of getting overwhelmed, I asked myself—what if I caused this email thread with how I am responding to these questions being asked of me? What could I do differently to shape a better reaction? That moment forced me to radically simplify how I communicate.”

Or like an in-house counsel shared:

“I can actually effect change here (more than at a firm)—but the stress comes from how I have to communicate and influence. I need to say enough to stay compliant and drive the right outcomes, without worrying how I’m perceived personally. It’s a political environment, and that balance is tough.”

Another reflected on the deeper dynamics beneath it all:

“I work for a multinational company. Most of my overwhelm is actually caused by cultural issues. There is an underlying distrust. The first thing I have to do is acknowledge that the distrust exists. Then I have to make it clear: ‘It’s not me, it’s cultural.’ I’m not the one they’re reacting to—I’m just standing in the space where those past experiences are playing out. So, how can I build trust in a culturally relevant way?”

Here’s the throughline: your peers who manage stress well aren’t just solving issues, they’re shifting how they relate to them. In that space—**The Reset Window**—they pause long enough to identify root causes, reframe the dynamics, and reduce the noise.

In practice, this looks like:

- ☒ Shifting from “How do I solve this?” to “What’s the dynamic underneath this?”
- ☒ Asking, “What does the receiver think a solution looks like?”
- ☒ Moving from reactive replies to shaping communication norms (e.g., clear response windows, structured updates, standing calls)
- ☒ Choosing when to absorb ambiguity—and when to reflect it back to drive clarity

These strategies helped them to stop feeling like Legal Paid Search in human form—and start feeling like what they were hired to be: **a strategic advisor.**

Idea #3:

Reconnect to your core

You're a good lawyer. Smart, precise, persuasive. The world hasn't worn you down—you've just been stuck in survival mode. So take a moment and ask yourself: Why did you choose this profession? What are you here to protect, uphold, or change? What principles and core values actually guide your decisions? If Idea #2 is about recalibrating your role—Idea #3 is about reclaiming your why. Law trains you to think fast, argue better, and avoid vulnerability. But leadership requires the opposite: slowing down, aligning to values, and taking the long view.

The next time you get overwhelmed, go there. That **Connection to Your Core Values** is your strategy. It's the difference between reacting and leading. It won't just help you manage your workload or calendar. It will help you show up as the kind of lawyer—and person—you set out to be.

Let me introduce one of my favourite CEOs—not a lawyer, but wise as hell. He told me:

"I can't let my first reaction take over—which is usually rage or annoyance. I keep that inside. Instead, in that space, I just match my problem to a principle. Then it usually works out."

That's your edge. Your principles are your anchor. Without them, you drift into reactivity. But when you lead from your core, you gain clarity—and moral courage.

In practice, this looks like:

- ☒ Identifying 2–3 guiding values (e.g., transparency, curiosity, dignity) and asking: "What would this value do here?"
- ☒ When overwhelmed, using a personal check-in: "Am I leading from fear or from principle?"
- ☒ Holding boundaries with humility: not "I can't", but "Here's what I stand for, and why."

This isn't about being soft. It's about being *centred*. Because your best decisions don't come from panic—they come from alignment.

Conclusion

We've explored why overwhelm persists in legal work—and why even smart, committed professionals often find their best efforts to manage it falling short.

Strategies like regulating before reacting, reframing your role, and reconnecting to purpose can help. They create space for intention over reactivity. But individual tools alone aren't enough—because the conditions shaping behaviour run deeper.

Legal teams operate in systems built for precision, speed, and high-stakes decision-making. Over time, strengths like endurance, urgency, and control become defaults. And when those defaults go unexamined, they shape culture.

That culture can show up in subtle but powerful ways:

- In compensation: output over insight
- In development: pressure over mentorship
- In behaviour: silence as professionalism, vulnerability as risk

These patterns didn't emerge from failure—they emerged from necessity. But in many organisations, they've gone unchallenged long after the context changed.

This moment calls for leadership.

If you're early in your career—you're not alone in feeling stretched.

If you're further along—you've shaped systems that helped teams meet extraordinary demands. But today, those same ways of working are due for reflection.

The legal profession doesn't just interpret the justice system—it helps uphold a broader social contract. One that only works if the people carrying it are supported.

Let this be the moment we stop preserving what no longer serves—and start shaping what sustains us. Not because it's easy. But because it's time.

Now, I want to turn it over to someone who's been reshaping the legal world for decades—long before “well-being” was a buzzword. Simon Harper didn't just co-found LOD. He helped pioneer a more flexible, human-centred way of working in law. He's someone I deeply admire for his clarity, his calm, and his refusal to accept dysfunction as inevitable.

Here's Simon—sharing the strategies that helped him lead with intention, stay grounded, and build something different.

**From the
founder
who
did it
differently**



Simon's strategies

As LOD's founder, Barbara asked me to reflect on some of my favorite strategies for avoiding overwhelm in the course of my legal career. As I collected these, I encountered fears that maybe stalk lawyers more than most when thinking about reducing workloads: "Will I look lazy?", "Am I cheating?" and, more sweepingly, "Will people think less of me if they know this?". In a profession generally populated by lifelong over-achievers, this fear is real, but perhaps not so helpful. We know we work hard to make our organisations better, and so we should also know that making this work easier can't be a bad thing, whatever the unhealthy over-achiever on our shoulder may be telling us.

So, with the self-doubt now aired, here are my three go-to strategies to counter overwhelm:

1. Embrace the uncertainty

We live in an uncertain world and it seems ever more so, not just in our geopolitics but for the everyday decisions in our organisations. We can accept that uncertainty or try to control it. While clients often expect their lawyers to sit firmly on the control end of the spectrum, we do have the choice to embrace uncertainty. It's not just personally useful, it also benefits our organisations. Rigid plans rarely work in 21st-century business, which thrives on flexibility, adaptability and adjustments as we learn along the way.

We know that the last few percentage points of 'adding certainty' as a lawyer are the elements that take much of our time. We sit at our desks, slogging over them, but the ultimate benefits are questionable (beyond our inner completer-finisher feeling that we have gone all the way). We would often do better not to over-engineer, and instead accept that many matters can adapt over time as we see how they progress. We can even design in this flexibility from the start. Moreover, with the time saved, we may find that the oblique and less obvious points often come to us—elements that can make our advice or decisions uniquely useful. (If you'd like more reading: *Radical Uncertainty* - John Kay & Mervyn King)

2. Adopt a bias for simplicity

In our roles of reducing risk we tend to think that covering as many bases as possible means we're doing our jobs better. One more clause to cover a possible outcome; one more email to raise an issue with a different stakeholder; one more meeting to deal with a colleague's concerns. This can be a nuisance for our clients (taking longer, feeling harder) but it can also fail to achieve the end aims for the business. In many scenarios, reducing risk comes hand in hand with increasing complexity which brings in the law of unintended consequences. For example, well-intentioned but overly rigid risk reduction in a contract can also stifle flexibility, leading to potentially greater harm when unexpected events occur.

Keeping things simple doesn't necessarily take less time, but it does reduce cognitive overload and gives us more space in our brains to think clearly. When the interdependent components of a task are reduced, our ability to cope with this is greater. By keeping it simple, we not only reduce feelings of overwhelm but also reveal root causes and avoid blind spots. This is not, of course, about ignoring nuance, but keeping our systems manageable and reducing the sort of complexity that actually increases risk. (Again, for more reading: The Simplicity Principle - Julia Hobsbawm)

3. Consider doing nothing

When we're asked to solve a problem, our training as lawyers pre-wires us to act. The majority of us trained in law firms, where the very business model is predicated on us recording our time on acting and solving whatever problems our clients perceive. And yet we know at a business level that effective strategy is all about allocating scarce resources and making deliberate trade-offs, in other words, choosing what not to do.

Doing nothing is a legitimate strategy. The ability to decide "no," or at least "not for now," is a strategic skill which both maintains focus on key objectives and avoids burnout. It requires careful communication to anyone expecting you to "do something," but this is time well invested. It is often not just an effective strategy for overwhelm but for good decision making. Harvard Business Review research

has shown that “action bias” in organisations leave us feeling compelled to act where waiting or reflecting would yield better results. (Final suggested reading, and I particularly love this one: Four Thousand Weeks - Oliver Burkeman)

That’s my three.

But there’s a potential bonus here too. The time that this frees up should give you some cognitive space. If I was Barbara (this report’s author), I might call this becoming “separate enough to pause”. These pauses can give us time to spot the special moments in our day, our month or our year, where there’s a hazy opportunity for us to make a radically outsized difference to ourselves or our organisations. Moments where we notice a project where our involvement could forge a brand new path; moments where we could meet a new human being who becomes fundamental to the next stage of our working lives; or moments where we may have the germ of an idea that turns into our whole rest-of-career. If anything in this report reduces your own overwhelm, and I very much hope it does, that’s fantastic. But if it also gives you room to spot the rare moments of outsized opportunity, that’s where even greater magic lives.

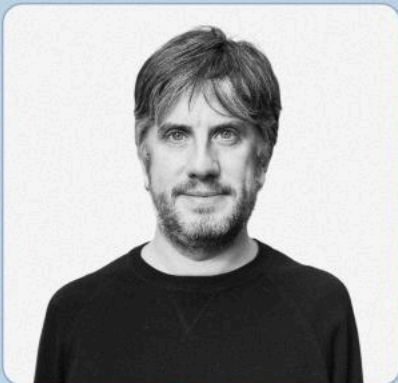


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Barbara is an organisational psychology practitioner and executive coach who helps leaders build cultures where people and performance thrive. Through her firm, Moonlight Strategy, she partners with high-growth, often private equity-backed companies navigating rapid change and leadership transitions.

Earlier in her career, Barbara worked with several Fortune 100 companies, led Talent & Organisational Development inside a Fortune 200 healthcare organisation, and served as Head of Client Strategy at Stoked. She brings deep expertise in leadership development, human-centred design, and culture transformation.



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Simon founded LOD in 2007 to provide different and better ways for lawyers and clients to work together and since then has overseen its growth to many thousands of lawyers over 10 global locations. He's been recognised by the Financial Times for "sending shockwaves through the legal industry" and by American Lawyer Magazine as a top 50 innovator of the last 50 years. Before LOD, Simon was an equity partner at BCLP specialising in media and technology law.