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Resilience in Real Time: How to Stay Centred When Everything Feels Urgent

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In every corner of the legal profession, urgency has become the default setting. Deadlines tighten, clients demand instant updates, and information multiplies faster than anyone can process. The modern legal practitioner is not only managing complex matters but also navigating a constant sense of acceleration.

This environment rewards responsiveness but punishes reflection. When everything feels urgent, the ability to think clearly and act deliberately begins to erode. The result is a state of cognitive overload where attention fragments, fatigue deepens, and even skilled professionals start to lose perspective.

The challenge is not simply to manage time better but to manage *mental state* under pressure. Real resilience is not built in quiet moments after the storm; it is built *in motion*, in the middle of competing demands, when the stakes feel high and clarity feels far away.

The Modern Pressure Loop

The legal system was never designed for the level of speed and saturation it now demands. When its structures of deadlines, deliverables, and accountability were first developed, the profession operated in a slower, more deliberate world. Practitioners handled fewer matters, correspondence moved at a measured pace, and reflection was built naturally into the rhythm of practice.

Today, however, technology has accelerated every process. Practitioners are managing dozens of matters at once, constantly reachable across multiple platforms, and expected to respond within minutes rather than days. The result is a continuous feedback loop of urgency that blurs the boundary between what is immediate and what is truly important.

The brain, however, is not wired for perpetual reactivity. Neuroscience shows that chronic urgency triggers the amygdala, the brain's threat centre, which diverts blood flow away from the prefrontal cortex, the part responsible for reasoning, empathy, and complex decision-making. Under this physiological pattern, professionals become faster but less reflective, efficient but emotionally depleted.

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The danger of this state is subtle. It does not always appear as burnout or collapse. More often, it looks like emotional flatness, irritability, and a quiet loss of satisfaction. The profession's hallmark qualities, judgment, patience and composure begin to fade.

To stay centred in this environment, legal professionals need practical tools that restore balance while the pace continues. This is the essence of *resilience in real time*.

A Three-Step Framework for Real-Time Resilience

Resilience in real time is about learning to regulate, refocus, and re-engage, even when there is no time to stop. It involves three small but powerful practices that help professionals reclaim mental space during the most demanding moments.

1. Regulate the Body Before the Mind

When urgency spikes, the body reacts first. The heart rate quickens, breathing shortens, and muscles tense. These physiological responses narrow perception and make complex reasoning difficult. The fastest way to regain clarity is to work through the body.

Try this practice the next time you feel the pressure rise:

- Sit back in your chair or stand with both feet grounded.
- Take a slow breath in through the nose for four counts, hold for two, and exhale through the mouth for six.
- Repeat for one minute.

This brief act activates the parasympathetic nervous system, calming the threat response and restoring access to higher reasoning. Many high-performance professions from emergency medicine to aviation teach similar techniques because they allow individuals to reset under stress without stepping away from their task.

The key insight is simple: **you cannot think your way out of a stress response; you must physiologically shift out of it first.**

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2. Refocus on What You Can Influence

Urgency feeds on uncertainty. In moments of overwhelm, the mind fixates on variables beyond control for instance, clients' negative emotions, others' delays, or systemic inefficiencies. This creates a sense of helplessness that further drains energy.

Refocusing involves narrowing your attention to what can be influenced in the next hour. Ask yourself three questions:

1. What requires action right now?
2. What can wait until later today?
3. What is outside my control entirely?

Writing these down creates cognitive distance. The act of sorting helps the brain transition from emotional reaction to executive thinking. Once clarity returns, decisions become proportionate rather than reactive.

This small exercise, done consistently, rewires mental habits. Over time, practitioners become less defined by external pressure and more guided by internal focus.

3. Re-engage with Intention, Not Speed

Once regulation and refocus occur, the next step is to re-engage deliberately. This does not mean slowing the pace of work, but reintroducing *presence* to the process.

Take thirty seconds before your next client call, drafting session, or meeting to ask:

- What is the purpose of this task?
- How do I want to show up in this interaction?

This brief pause transforms the mindset from "react and respond" to "choose and act." It restores agency and aligns performance with professional values. In a field where integrity and judgment are paramount, this intentionality is both protective and empowering.

The Neuroscience of Centre

What these steps achieve collectively is a rebalancing of the brain's two key systems: the reactive (threat) system and the reflective (executive) system. When practitioners regulate breathing, refocus

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attention, and re-engage intentionally, they are effectively shifting control back to the prefrontal cortex.

This part of the brain governs decision-making, ethical reasoning, and empathy, the very qualities most essential to effective legal practice. Training the brain to make this shift repeatedly builds neural resilience, meaning it becomes easier to recover from stress over time.

Resilience, therefore, is not a fixed trait but a *trainable response pattern*. Each time you pause to regulate, refocus, and re-engage, you are strengthening this circuit.

Integrating Real-Time Resilience into Practice

To turn these tools into habits, consistency is key. The most effective professionals build resilience rituals into their routines rather than relying on occasional recovery. Consider these simple structures:

- **Start-of-day intention:** Take one minute to visualise how you want to approach your day; calm, clear, or collaborative. This primes the brain's goal-setting systems.
- **Midday reset:** Schedule a ten-minute pause between tasks to walk, breathe, or disengage from screens. This allows your brain's attention circuits to recharge.
- **End-of-day review:** Before logging off, identify one thing that went well, and one lesson learned. This creates closure and reduces mental carry-over into personal time.

These practices do not add hours to the day; they add *quality* to the hours you already have. They also signal to teams that sustainable performance is a professional value, not a personal indulgence.

Beyond Survival: The Professional Case for Calm

In an environment that prizes speed and precision, calmness can seem like a luxury. Yet the evidence tells a different story. Calm practitioners make better decisions, communicate more effectively, and recover more quickly from errors. Their presence stabilises clients and colleagues alike.

Resilience in real time is therefore not only a wellbeing practice; it is a professional advantage. It protects judgment, preserves empathy, and sustains performance across the long arc of a career.

The legal profession does not need to slow down to become healthier. It needs to become more deliberate within its pace. That shift begins with one breath, one pause, one conscious return to centre.

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A Call to Reflection

When everything feels urgent, the real skill is learning what deserves urgency and what deserves calm. The capacity to hold steady amid pressure is not innate; it is cultivated through awareness and small, consistent acts of regulation.

Resilience in real time is not about escaping the demands of the profession but about remaining fully present within them. It is the quiet strength that allows practitioners to think clearly, act wisely, and lead with steadiness, even when the environment refuses to slow down.

For more resources and cognitive training tools that support resilience in law, visit www.pmri.co.za.

About the Authors:

Sonja Cilliers is an advocate of the High Court of South Africa. She was admitted as an attorney of the High Court in 2001 and, after practicing as an attorney for several years, did pupillage and became a member of the Pretoria Society of Advocates in 2005. Sonja has been in practice, as attorney and advocate for an aggregate of 24 years, and obtained extensive experience in litigation in various fields of the law; including contractual law, banking law and litigation, corporate law, family law, insurance law and personal injury law. Sonja completed her B(Proc) (1998), LLB (1999) and LLM (contractual law) (2003) degrees at the University of Pretoria. She is qualified as an AFSA trained Arbitrator and Mediator and obtained the one-year diploma from AFSA in Arbitration and Mediation in 2003.

Maryke Groenewald is a transformation coach with a passion for facilitating personal and professional growth. She holds an Honours in Psychology, a BCom in Behavioral Sciences, and certifications in Master Transformation Coaching, NLP Practitioner, and Neuro-Coaching. Maryke combines her diverse skill set and experience to help individuals unlock their full potential. Maryke has been coaching and training individuals for over 10 years. She frequently does group training and coaching for corporate teams and universities.