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The First Days of Recess: Understanding the Post-Adrenaline Dip in Legal Practice

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Founders of Professional Mind Resilience Institute (PMRI)

Every year, as courts close and offices empty, legal professionals begin their recess with the same quiet expectation: that the moment work stops, the body and mind will finally relax. Many imagine that a single night of uninterrupted sleep or a slower morning will be enough to reclaim clarity and calm. Yet the reality, for most practitioners, is far more complex.

Instead of immediate relief, the first days of recess often deliver a sense of heaviness, irritability, mental fog, or unexpected emotion. Tasks that should feel simple take longer. Conversations feel draining. Some report feeling strangely flat, disconnected or restless, as if their mind has not yet caught up with the change in pace.

This is not failure. It is not a sign that you are not resting correctly. It is the natural, predictable and often misunderstood post-adrenaline dip. It is your body doing exactly what it needs to do after carrying you through a demanding legal year.

Understanding this dip changes everything about how you enter your break.

Why the Body Crashes Once You Stop

Legal practice trains the nervous system to remain alert for long periods. The constant decision-making, responsibility, risk-awareness and pace create a steady supply of adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones support performance, but they also keep the system charged, tight and vigilant.

When the pressure suddenly stops, your system does not ease down gradually. It drops. The very moment you close the file or walk out of court may be the moment your biology starts to release the effort it has been holding for months.

What you feel is not simply tiredness. It is the release of:

- suppressed fatigue
- delayed emotions
- accumulated tension

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- cognitive noise
- the weight of responsibility finally letting go

Instead of a gentle glide into rest, practitioners often experience a kind of landing where the wheels touch down harder than expected.

The First 72 Hours: A Sensitive Threshold

The first days of recess form a transitional window in which your nervous system recalibrates. What happens here profoundly influences the quality of the rest that follows.

Common experiences include:

- increased sleepiness or irritability
- difficulty switching off thoughts about matters you have completed
- emotional flatness, sadness or relief
- a sense that your mind is fuzzy or sluggish
- tension that takes longer than expected to unwind

These sensations can be unsettling if you were hoping for instant relaxation. But they are not signs that something is wrong. They are signs that your system is finally safe enough to slow down.

Many practitioners report that the hardest part of their break is the beginning, not because of external pressures, but because their internal systems are still running on the rhythm of the year they have just lived.

Letting Your System Catch Up

One of the most compassionate choices you can make is to let your body and mind arrive in recess at their own pace. You cannot force recovery. But you can create the environment in which it happens more smoothly.

Here are practices that support this early recalibration.

1. Reduce stimulation

Avoid filling the first days with errands, social gatherings or rushed travel. If possible, create a buffer of quiet time where your system can settle. Think of it as a soft landing rather than a sharp pivot.

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2. Slow your pace intentionally

Walk more slowly. Speak more slowly. Move through tasks with deliberateness. These small physical cues signal to your nervous system that the race is over.

3. Let sleep expand

The body often insists on more rest in this period. Extended or fragmented sleep is normal. This is neurological recovery, not laziness.

4. Allow fogginess without judgment

Your clarity has not vanished. It is simply recharging. Treat the fog as part of the transition, not a problem to solve.

5. Reduce decision-making

Your cognitive system needs a break from constant evaluation. Keep your plans simple and predictable.

These gentle adjustments help the mind re-establish a healthier rhythm after months of sustained pace and tension.

When Emotion Finally Catches Up

Once the initial dip subsides, many legal professionals experience emotions that were muted or postponed during busy periods. Relief, sadness, anxiety, gratitude or reflective tenderness may surface unexpectedly. This is your emotional system releasing what it held in order to keep functioning at a high level.

This emotional release is not instability. It is integration. It is your mind reclaiming the space to feel again.

Allowing these emotions to move through you can be profoundly restorative. Suppressing them only prolongs the tension.

Creating the Conditions for True Rest to Begin

Rest does not begin the moment the office door closes. It begins when the mind, body and emotional system have all slowed down enough to meet each other again. The first days of recess are the bridge between your working self and your resting self.

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Understanding the post-adrenaline dip allows you to:

- approach the transition with compassion
- stop expecting instant recovery
- honour the body's need to recalibrate
- prevent guilt or frustration from undermining your break

When you allow yourself this gentle start, the deeper rest that follows becomes far more accessible. Your clarity returns naturally, your energy begins to rebuild, and your mind regains the spaciousness it needs.

These first days are not the break itself. They are the doorway into the break. Step through with patience and the benefits of the recess unfold far more fully.

If you are interested in mental performance training for yourself or your legal team, contact the Professional Mind Resilience Institute at info@pmri.co.za or 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.