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### **Harnessing the Pressure of the Witness Stand**

There are probably few stressors greater than taking the witness stand. For most people, testifying in court under oath is a very stressful, emotional, and anxiety-provoking experience. And this stress is multiplied exponentially when you are faced with an aggressive attorney whose very objective is to intimidate and discredit you.

However, to be fearful and nervous is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it is natural. From an evolutionary perspective, anxiety plays an innate and vital role in our survival. That is, anxiety will bring about a heightened state of awareness that prepares us to react to the environment, i.e., the fight or flight response. Therefore, some stress actually helps us cope with inherent stressors by helping us stay alert and focused. As long as witnesses are able to keep stress within a manageable threshold, not only will it fail to become debilitating or interfere with the effectiveness of their testimony, it may even help a witness increase focus and be less prone to mistakes.

Before we discuss how to manage stress, let's take a look at the most common causes of witness stress. First, there is the simple fear of public speaking. Most of us grapple with this our entire lives, and somehow it never gets any easier. Our teacher calls on us in front of the class, we need to speak at an event or reception or make a short presentation at work – and we immediately go into sheer panic mode. Given that public speaking remains a top phobia in the United States, ahead of death even, imagine what it feels like to be questioned in public by a hostile attorney and a panel of jurors judging your every word. Forget about trying to explain your story and defend your credibility. In the primitive part of your brain, your very survival is at stake.

A second major cause of stress on the witness stand is the fear of personal exposure or embarrassment. Some witnesses even fear that they will lose composure or inadvertently be “tricked” into making misleading statements that negatively impact the case. This fear is exacerbated when witnesses come to the stand with the belief that the entire case rests on their testimony. Unfortunately, this type of fear and pressure often creates a scenario where the witness's own worst fears are materialized.

Finally, there is the stress and uncertainty created by the sheer novelty of the experience. Most people never enter a courtroom, let alone testify in one. And a nervous and stressed out witness who is not properly prepared and acquainted with the procedures and roles of the various players within the courtroom will almost certainly be distracted and may even negatively impact the credibility and believability of their own testimony.



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Clearly, taking the witness stand is an inherently stressful experience. But it is important for witnesses and attorneys alike to understand and embrace the fact that stress and fear in this situation are normal and manageable. And the energy provided can actually be harnessed to help improve performance!

**Use these tips to harness stress and use it to your advantage in the courtroom:**

1. Acknowledge the inherent stress and fear of public speaking. Take comfort in the fact that this response is perfectly normal and acceptable. Once you acknowledge and recognize your fear, you will be better equipped to keep it within manageable levels and use it to your advantage!
2. Rather than trying to eliminate stress, utilize the adrenaline it provides to sharpen your focus and bring forth confidence in your speech and tone.
3. Acclimate yourself to the courtroom setting and its processes. Understand who the key parties are, and what role they play (e.g., judge, bailiff, attorneys, etc.) so you do not get distracted.
4. Remain clear and focused on the appropriate boundaries of your testimony and remember that your testimony is but one of a number of factors that goes into a verdict decision.
5. Finally, remain true to who you are! We all have verbal and nonverbal communication strengths and limitations. Authenticity and acceptance of yourself and the situation will be your very best weapon of defense against overwhelming stress.

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