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THERAPY • COACHING • CONSULTANCY •

Dr Catherine Sykes

Staying SANE as a Lawyer

Psychologist and Coach, London, UK



Claire



“I know this isn’t sustainable,
but maybe that’s just the price
of success.”

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SLIDE 2

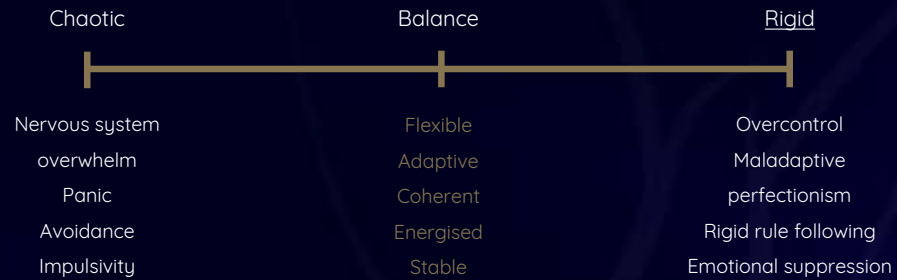
“It’s Just the Price of Success”:
The Myth That Keeps People Trapped.

- It’s a justification not to change
- It’s a barrier to change - fear disguised as logic.
- It feeds a deeper belief - *I’m not good enough.*

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SLIDE 3

The Never-ending Expectations To Be More Than Lead to a State of Rigidity



Source: Siegel, D. J. (2012). *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.

SLIDE 4

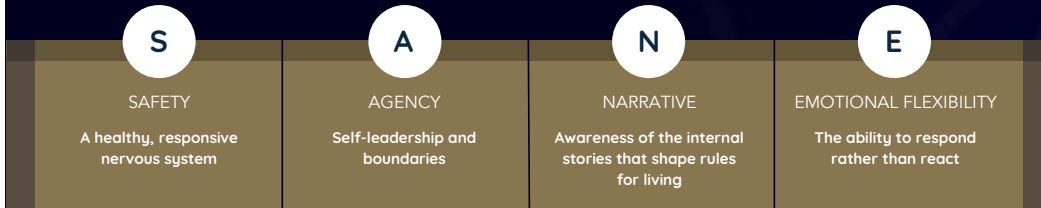
Chaos

'F*** it'
'I don't care.'
'What's the point?'
'Why should I?'



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SANE Lawyer



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SLIDE 6

Safety



Adapted from Deb Dana's Polyvagal work

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How the Nervous System Protects You

Being better than others made Claire feel safe



VENTRAL VEGAL

ANXIETY

DEPRESSION

PANIC
Sympathetic nervous system

BALANCE
• Equilibrium
• Safe
• Alive
• Connected
• Open to growth & possibilities
• Take the risk of living

SHUTDOWN
Dorsal vagal

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SLIDE 8

How the Nervous System Protects You

Over-eating became a quick way to shut down the fear state felt in the day



VENTRAL VEGAL

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How to Create a Safe Nervous System

- Safety is not just thinking “I’m okay”
- It’s the ability to access calm, connection, and regulation
- It’s the foundation for agency, perspective, and change
- Four steps to move back toward ***Balance***.
 - Notice
 - Action to regulate
 - Understand and reframe
 - New focus of attention

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Agency – The Power to Lead Yourself!



“Sorry I got stuck in a meeting.”

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Agency

- Capacity to make intentional choices
- Awareness
- Protected by routines and boundaries
- Strengthened through values-based decision making

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The Ability to Say 'No' – Crucial for Agency

Lawyers often fear saying 'no':

- Fear it will damage relationships
- Reputation risk
- Feeling selfish
- Conditioned to over function
- The opportunity might never come back

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The Positive 'No'.

'Yes' to your values ("I want to do quality work.")

'No' to the request ("So I can't take this on right now.")

'Yes' to a new option or solution ("But I'm happy to help you find another solution.")

Source: The Power of a Positive No. William Ury.

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The Positive 'No' – I've tried to say not but it didn't work!

Said 'no' too late – which might disempower the other person, leading to conflict.

The 'no' hasn't been clear. Solution "If you really did me to I will."

Angry tone which does not respect the right to ask - "I want to do quality work, so I can't take this on right now, but I'm happy to help you find another solution."

Source: The Power of a Positive No. William Ury.

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Narrative: The Story You're Telling Yourself

- Our stories shape our internal rules of how to do life
- Common rules shaped by stories:
If I'm successful then I'll be worthy.
If I avoid conflict then I'll be liked.
If I fail then I'm weak.



"If I'm perfect I'll be liked."

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Narratives shape our experience



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Narrative: "If I'm perfect then

- If I'm perfect, I'll be respected.
- If I'm perfect, I won't be criticised.
- If I'm perfect, I'll feel secure.
- If I'm perfect, I'll deserve to be here.



"If I'm perfect I'll be liked."

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Why does the *If I'm perfect then...* narrative develop in lawyers.

1. Temperament and Cognitive Style

Some people are naturally more inclined toward perfectionism. **Genetic influences** contribute to traits such as conscientiousness, sensitivity to mistakes, and anxiety.

Many lawyers have what Simon Baron-Cohen describes as a **high systemising brain**:

- Strong drive to identify patterns, rules, and inconsistencies
- Preference for precision and certainty
- Discomfort with ambiguity

This cognitive style often overlaps with a tendency to **maximise**:

- Searching for the best possible answer rather than a good-enough solution
- Difficulty stopping once work meets a high standard

Source: Curran, 2023; Flett & Hewitt, 2002.

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Why does the *If I'm perfect then...* narrative develop in lawyers.

2. Early Experiences

Perfectionism often develops as an adaptive strategy.

Conditional approval

Praise and attention linked to achievement or behaviour

Emotional neglect

Emotional needs overlooked, leading to a stronger reliance on achievement for security
Children may learn:

- "I am valued when I perform well."
- "Mistakes threaten connection or approval."

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Why does the *If I'm perfect then...* narrative develop in lawyers.

3. Fragile Self-Worth

Over time, self-esteem becomes contingent on performance.

Core belief:

"If I perform perfectly, I will be accepted, respected, and safe."

This creates:

- Approval-seeking
- Fear of criticism
- Over-preparation
- Difficulty resting
- Chronic self-monitoring often in the form of a **harsh inner critic**

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Why does the *If I'm perfect then...* narrative develop in lawyers.

4. Why Does Law Reinforces It

- The legal profession rewards many perfectionistic tendencies.
- Precision and attention to detail are highly valued.
- Errors can have significant consequences.
- Feedback often focuses on what is missing or wrong.
- Progress depends on external evaluation.

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Why does the *If I'm perfect then...* narrative develop in lawyers.

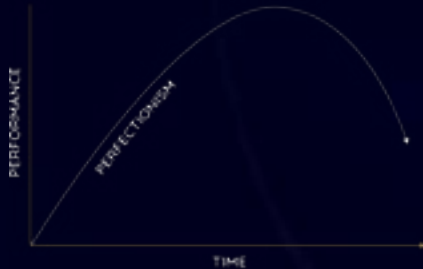
If Perfectionism = Genetic predisposition × Early experiences × Environment reinforcement
then interventions must be biopsychosocial.

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Challenge the Misconceptions about Perfectionism – Diminishing Returns

Perfectionism Has Diminishing Returns Over Time



Imposter Syndrome
Burnout
Low investment in replenishing activities
Relationship damage

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Perfectionism – Imposter Syndrome

Credit success to perfectionism – loose touch with yourself

Over-reliant on contingent 'stick-like' rewards – *If I do this, I won't be a loser*, rather than non-contingent rewards 'Now that, I've done well on this piece of work, I'll celebrate by...'

Non-contingent rewards – more likely to encode success memories to the autobiographic memory *"I've done this before, I'm not starting from scratch."*

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PERFECTIONISM – PRACTICAL

Encode a Success Experience

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PERFECTIONISM – PRACTICAL

Bring-to-mind a time when you felt you handled something well

- A difficult client conversation.
- A negotiation that went well.
- A hearing or presentation.
- Leading a team through pressure.
- Receiving genuine appreciation from a client or colleague.
- Managing a challenging situation more calmly than usual.

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PERFECTIONISM – PRACTICAL

Re-Experience the Moment.

Close your eyes if comfortable or stare at the floor.
Bring the memory to mind.

Ask yourself:

- Where was I?
- What was happening?
- What did I do?
- What did I say?
- What was the outcome?

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PERFECTIONISM – PRACTICAL

Notice What You Felt.

What did I feel in that moment?
What did I know about myself?
What was different about how I
was operating?

Perhaps you felt:

Clear
Grounded
Decisive
Calm
Resourceful
Confident?

**Even a subtle sense of
competence matters.**

What did I say?
What was the outcome?

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PERFECTIONISM – PRACTICAL

Encode the memory

Take a moment to mentally link:

- The event.
- The strengths you used.
- The outcome you created.

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Create a Non-Contingent Reward

Choose a reward that is not dependent on being flawless.

Examples:

- Taking an evening off without guilt.
- Going for a walk.
- Buying yourself something small.
- Booking time with family or friends.
- Simply acknowledging: "That was enough."

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Set a Strength-Expansion Goal

Now think about one strength that was evident in your success memory.

Ask yourself:

"How could I intentionally expand this strength over the next few weeks?"

The aim is not to prove yourself.

The aim is to give an existing strength more room to operate.

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PERFECTIONISM – PRACTICAL

Link goal to non-contingent reward

Choose a reward that is linked to the act of practising the strength not to achieving a flawless outcome.

The strength I want to expand is _____.

Over the next two weeks, I will develop this strength by _____.”

“Now that I’ve taken this step, it is time for _____.”

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Narrative: “If I’m perfect then

Perfectionism keeps you focused on what is missing.
This exercise shifts your attention to what is already present.

It challenges the misconception that our successes are just
luck and hard work.

The next stage of growth is not about becoming someone
different.

It is about recognising the capabilities you already possess
and using them more deliberately and keep expanding them.

Then narrative then becomes *“If I trust myself then I will be
successful and likeable”.*



“If I’m perfect I’ll be liked.”

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Emotional Flexibility

Emotions carry information – not danger

Notice, Name and Understand

Move from reactivity to a wise response

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Emotional Flexibility

Why High-Performing Lawyers Suppress Emotion

Success is often built on:

- Staying composed
 - Minimising vulnerability
 - Focusing on facts
 - Pushing through discomfort
- This can create an internal rule:
“If I feel it, I might lose control”

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Emotional Flexibility

The Emotions Lawyers Most Commonly Suppress

Guilt – “I should be doing more.”

Shame – “I am not enough.”

Fear – “What if I get this wrong?”

Disappointment – “This is not how I wanted it to be.”

Anger – “A boundary has been crossed”

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Emotional Flexibility

What Happens When Emotions Are Suppressed

Unprocessed emotions often show up as:

- Overthinking
- Irritability
- Perfectionism
- Procrastination
- Over-preparation
- Difficulty delegating
- Emotional exhaustion

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Emotional Flexibility

Emotional Flexibility Creates Choice

Emotional Flexibility Process

- Notice what you are feeling.
- Name the emotion.
- Ask what it may be telling you.
- Decide how you want to respond.

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Emotional Flexibility

Reflection Question

- Which emotion do you most often override?
- Guilt?
- Shame?
- Fear?
- Anger?
- Disappointment?

What might change if you treated that emotion as information rather than as a problem?

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Conclusion – Well-being and Success Starts Inside

- Safety, Agency, Narrative, and Emotional Flexibility are core capacities that need attention.
- Sustainable well-being and success comes from knowing what has moved you out of a state *Balance* and to have the skills to return to a state of *Balance*.
- Poor well-being is not the price of success, good well-being is the foundation of success and continued growth.

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The nervous system of a leader becomes the climate of a team.



Which is why protecting your own Safety, Agency, Narrative and Emotional Flexibility is not indulgent.
It is part of responsible leadership.

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When leaders stay SANE, teams are better able to play to win.



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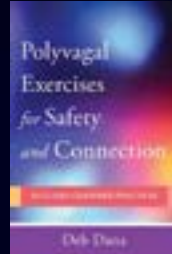
Recommended Reading



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Recommended Reading



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