

It's no secret that lawyers face stressors that can—and often do—negatively affect mental health. In today's fast-paced, high-pressure legal industry, law firms big and small are facing a mental health crisis. Change starts within.

CULTIVATE A HEALTHY LAW FIRM

By || **RACHAEL FLANAGAN**

We lawyers are known for our intellectual rigor, tireless work ethic, and commitment to clients. Yet, behind these virtues lies a harsh reality: The legal profession is one of the most mentally taxing fields and is filled with lawyers facing chronic stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression.

Anyone who works in law will tell you that we are beholden to our calendars, face deadlines largely outside of our control, and are inundated with constant emails, messages, and phone calls all demanding our attention. The work doesn't end at the office door, either. Many of us live in a constant state of priority reconfiguration as we strive to stay abreast of technology, serve on boards and committees, and make time for our families. This often results in long hours, working weekends, and inadequate or interrupted sleep. It is time for us to acknowledge the untenable nature of this model and make mental health and wellness a top priority.

The legal profession is no stranger to stress, and, for many of us, the demands of the job are a defining characteristic of our work. High-stakes litigation and the demands of trial practice create a culture of overwork that leaves little room for self-care. Research shows that the rates of mental health disorders among lawyers



are alarmingly high compared with other professions.¹

Depression and anxiety. According to a 2016 study that the American Bar Association (ABA) and the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation conducted, nearly 28% of licensed and practicing attorneys suffer from depression and 19% struggle with anxiety.² These rates are significantly higher than the general population, which suggests that the nature of legal work contributes directly to poor mental health outcomes.³

Substance abuse. Another alarming statistic from the ABA-Hazelden study revealed that 18% of lawyers qualify as problem drinkers, with many turning to alcohol or other substances as a coping mechanism for work-related stress.⁴

Sleep deprivation. Even one night of poor sleep can reduce memory performance by up to 40%,⁵ particularly in tasks requiring complex problem-solving or learning. Chronic sleep deprivation has even more severe effects, leading to long-term cognitive deficits.⁶

Burnout. Characterized by emotional exhaustion, detachment from work, and a lack of personal accomplishment,⁷ burnout is a widespread issue in law firms. A 2021 Bloomberg Law survey found that lawyers reported experiencing burnout 52% of the time.⁸

These statistics paint a sobering picture of lawyers' mental health, and although the causes are complex, there is one undeniable conclusion: The culture of law firms needs to change.

Why Are Lawyers at Risk?

The mental health challenges that lawyers face stem from a combination of environmental, cultural, and structural factors inherent to our profession.

Dedication. Long hours and work overload top the list. Firms often expect us to be available far outside traditional business hours, leaving little time for rest or recuperation. The pressure to meet

court deadlines, client expectations, and generate business supports a culture of overwork and exhaustion.

We assume the responsibility of guiding our clients through some of the most difficult and stressful challenges imaginable. The pressure to achieve justice on their behalf while managing their expectations can take a heavy emotional toll.

Diligence. Our perfectionism can result in unrealistic expectations and self-criticism. Fear of a bad outcome contributes to chronic stress and can exacerbate anxiety and depression.

Divisiveness. Then, there is the adversarial nature of our work, which can cause tension and frustration. Acrimonious interactions with opposing counsel can leave us mentally and emotionally drained.

Devotion. The demanding nature of our work often comes at the expense of personal needs. Many of us sacrifice family time, hobbies, and social activities to meet the demands of our jobs. We might work through weekends, holidays, and during vacation. This nonstop work environment can lead to feelings of isolation and burnout.

Detachment. Finally, despite a growing awareness of mental health issues, particularly post-COVID, the legal profession remains steeped in a culture of stoicism and toughness. Our profession often views admitting to mental health struggles as a sign of weakness or an inability to handle the demands of the job. And, although mental health may be a trending topic among the bar, many lawyers avoid seeking help for fear of hurting their career advancement within their firms.

Neuroscience Behind Well-Being

We lawyers are in the business of thinking, reasoning, and strategizing. This makes our brains—and the brains

of our colleagues and staff—our firms' biggest asset. Proper mental health is essential for us to remain at peak performance. Mental health directly impacts cognitive function, focus, and decision-making abilities.⁹

Lawyers who are mentally and emotionally well are better able to handle the complexities of their work, think clearly, and make sound legal judgments. Conversely, chronic stress and mental health struggles impair productivity, leading to mistakes and poor performance.¹⁰

The concept of mental wellness is better understood through the lens of neuroscience. Neurotransmitters like dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin play key roles in mental health.¹¹ They regulate mood and motivation and directly affect our ability to focus and derive a continued sense of satisfaction in our work. All three neurotransmitters work in a delicate balance that is highly susceptible to overwork, stress, and inadequate sleep.¹²

Long work hours can lead to mental and physical fatigue, which diminishes the brain's ability to produce or respond to dopamine.¹³ This can cause sluggishness and difficulty staying alert or focused. Long hours at the office often impact our exposure to sunlight, which our brains need for serotonin production and regulation.¹⁴

Long days filled with chronic high stress can lead to overstimulation and the prolonged release of norepinephrine.¹⁵ Over time, this can create a state of hyperarousal, making it hard for the brain to switch off after work, leading to emotional exhaustion as well as burnout.¹⁶

Stress has a profound impact on the brain and can affect both short- and long-term mental and physical health. When the brain perceives a threat or stressor, it releases cortisol, the body's

primary stress hormone.¹⁷ In emergency situations, this helps the body respond by increasing alertness and energy. However, chronic stress leads to excessive cortisol production, which can impair important brain structures.¹⁸

High cortisol levels shrink the hippocampus, the region responsible for memory and learning, while enlarging the amygdala, the brain's fear center.¹⁹ This makes a person more prone to anxiety and emotional reactivity.²⁰ Chronic stress also reduces neuroplasticity, limiting the brain's ability to form new neural connections, which is vital for adapting to new challenges.²¹

Additionally, stress impairs the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for functions like decision-making and emotional regulation, reducing cognitive control and increasing impulsivity.²² Over time, these changes can contribute to mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, further emphasizing the need for effective stress management strategies.

Sleep deprivation significantly affects memory.²³ It disrupts key processes involved in encoding, consolidating, and retrieving information. The brain relies on sleep to process and store memories. During sleep, the hippocampus (which is crucial for short-term memory) communicates with the neocortex (which is involved in long-term memory storage) to consolidate newly learned information.²⁴ Inadequate sleep impairs these processes.

Sleep-deprived individuals struggle with memory encoding, making it difficult to absorb new information effectively.²⁵ Sleep deprivation also disrupts memory consolidation, where short-term memories are transformed into stable, long-term memories.²⁶ This affects both declarative memory (facts and knowledge) and procedural memory



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(skills and tasks).²⁷ Sleep-deprived people often experience impaired retrieval, meaning they struggle to access stored memories or recall information. Sufficient sleep is essential for maintaining cognitive health and optimal memory function.²⁸

Mental Health and Wellness in Law Firms

Given the mounting evidence of the mental health crisis in the legal profession, we must take proactive steps at the firm level to address these issues.

Prioritizing mental health and wellness is not just a moral obligation but a cost-effective strategy that benefits both employees and the firm as a whole.

Studies show that every dollar spent on mental health accommodations leads to significant benefits:²⁹

- it reduces absenteeism;
- boosts employee productivity;
- saves on healthcare costs; and
- improves employee retention.³⁰

Improved retention and job satisfaction. Law firms face significant turnover rates, with many lawyers leaving the profession due to burnout and dissatisfaction.³¹ Additionally, generational changes among associate lawyers have dramatically reshaped the legal profession, with younger generations advocating for different values and work cultures compared with their predecessors.³²

According to a 2019 survey, nearly 75% of millennial lawyers cited work-life balance as a top priority, significantly higher than previous generations.³³ And a 2022 Thomson Reuters report found that 25% of younger lawyers are likely to leave their firms within the first five years if their mental health or work-life balance needs are not met.³⁴

Technology has also played a critical role, with millennial and Gen Z lawyers placing a high value on flexible, tech-driven work environments.³⁵ In order to remain competitive for top talent among these generational shifts, firms must evolve and offer more supportive, flexible, and value-driven workplace environments.³⁶

By promoting a culture of wellness, law firms can reduce burnout, improve job satisfaction, and retain talented lawyers. Employees who feel supported and valued are more likely to stay with the firm and perform at their best. And, let's face it, happy, healthy lawyers are more likely to provide excellent service to their clients. Law firms that prioritize

The demands of a trial practice create a culture of overwork that leaves little room for self-care.

employee wellness are better equipped to deliver high-quality legal services, leading to improved client satisfaction and a stronger reputation in their communities.

Providing Support

Addressing mental health in law firms requires more than lip service. It demands a comprehensive and sustained commitment to creating a healthier work environment. These practical steps can help law firms promote mental health and wellness:

Reduce the stigma. Senior partners should lead by example. Allow colleagues to truly disconnect while on vacation. Reduce the expectation of lawyers being available outside business hours. Take time off. Allocate reasonable workloads.

Normalize the use of mental health resources. Work to break down the stigma surrounding mental health by creating an environment where employees feel comfortable using the resources offered and seeking accommodations without fear of career repercussions.

Establish mental health programs and provide resources. Implement mental health programs that provide employees with access to counseling, therapy, and support services. This could include employee assistance programs, which offer confidential counseling and mental health resources. Firms can also partner with mental health

professionals to provide workshops and seminars on stress management, resilience, and mindfulness.

Promote a healthy work-life balance. This is essential for preventing burnout and nurturing wellness. Establish policies that limit excessive work hours, and encourage lawyers to take time off when needed. Offer flexible work arrangements to accommodate employees' personal needs, such as remote work options, flexible hours, or reduced schedules.

Encourage use of vacation time. Lawyers need time to recharge, both physically and mentally. Offering a generous vacation policy does little good if a firm's culture of overwork makes it impractical to use the time. Research shows that taking time away from work improves mental health and boosts productivity upon return, so encourage employees to use their vacation days.

Offer stress management and resilience training. Provide programs that teach lawyers how to manage stress effectively. This could include workshops on time management and relaxation techniques. Training in emotional intelligence and resilience can help lawyers better cope with the emotional demands of their work and maintain a healthier mindset.

Fine-tune workload expectations. Review lawyers' workloads periodically to ensure that they are manageable and not contributing to excessive stress. Keep expectations realistic, and take steps to ensure that lawyers have enough time to complete their work without sacrificing their well-being. Reducing excessive workloads and delegating tasks more evenly can help prevent burnout and improve overall job satisfaction.

Provide opportunities for wellness. Offer wellness programs that promote physical and mental well-being, such as gym memberships, yoga classes,

meditation sessions, and nutrition counseling. Physical health is closely linked to mental health, and promoting wellness helps lawyers manage stress more effectively.

A Call to Action

The legal profession is at a crossroads. The need for mental health initiatives has never been more urgent. By addressing mental health head-on, law firms have an opportunity to create a more sustainable and productive work environment while enjoying a return on investment.

Done right, firm-wide mental health initiatives are a strategic move for law firms to recruit and retain the next generation's top talent, improve client satisfaction, and safeguard the firm's biggest assets: its people. 



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NOTES

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