

**Professional Perspective**

# **Why Lawyers are the Most Impaired Professionals**

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# Why Lawyers are the Most Impaired Professionals

Contributed by *Corey Rabin*, Caron Treatment Centers

Lawyers are under a great deal of pressure. From the first days of law school, we are conditioned to endure difficult schedules that require working more than 70 hours a week. We traditionally receive no training about how to handle stress in healthy ways. For many, decompressing often translates into drinking afterwards to relax. Then the cycle repeats. The high level of stress and unhealthy attempts to cope become normalized—leading lawyers to accept and often minimize destructive behavior as if it does not matter.

Except it does matter. Is it so surprising that lawyers are more likely to abuse alcohol and other substances than any other profession? A recent study of nearly 13,000 practicing lawyers conducted by the American Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs and the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation presented the issue quite clearly: 36% of lawyers in the [survey](#) were classified as active problem drinkers, and between 19% and 28% were struggling with stress, anxiety, or depression. These results are far higher than those seen in other professions—including doctors, whose addiction rates top off at 15%—as well as the general public.

Generally speaking, lawyers are on a treadmill of hourly billings. Unless we are equipped with the skills to step back and create a healthy balance in our lives, the stress will eventually take its toll on our health and result in higher likelihood of substance use.

## The Pressures We Put on Ourselves

Our workload can be brutal, the competition fierce, and the work adversarial. Unlike most other professions, there are always winners and losers in the practice of law. In litigation, the stakes are high, the consequences frightening, and someone is guaranteed to suffer. These are external stressors, many of which we cannot control, but worse still is the pressure we put on ourselves. We obsess about competition, compensation, our clients, and fears of losing them. We like the intellectual challenges, but the combative demands of our work may be at odds with our own nature.

Clients depend on us, and we don't want to let them or anyone else down. Yet experience has taught us that we cannot anticipate everything. This drives many lawyers to become perfectionists, demanding the impossible of ourselves and others. No one can manage everything that happens in this world, but that doesn't stop lawyers from feeling responsible for poor outcomes. The stress and guilt can become overwhelming.

Additionally, personal values and ethics are often challenged in our work. Many times, what we do while advocating on behalf of our clients may not align with our own moral code. Harsh circumstances may demand that we compromise our personal values, which creates a significant internal struggle. We may not be able to discuss this with anyone, whether because of attorney-client privilege or our own guilty feelings. How then should we cope with those negative feelings about ourselves and our actions? Unfortunately, we may numb ourselves with alcohol or other substances to quiet the critical voices in our heads and to take the edge off.

## Hesitant to Seek Help

It is challenging to live up to the expectations of the profession. People look to us to solve complicated, life-changing problems they can't fix themselves. And we get used to doing this for our clients and our friends. As the perceived authority in so many areas, we don't want to disappoint people. We also come to feel superior because we often know more than the people asking us questions.

The practice of law is fundamentally a caregiving profession, which makes it hard for us to ask for help when we ourselves are in trouble. With our profession having conditioned us to think we know it all, reality can be a cold slap in the face.

Lawyers are especially hesitant to seek help for mental health or substance use problems. We are a risk averse lot, with a multitude of fears. In many cases these fears are quite reasonable. Some of our institutions were set up to punish us for our imperfections and vulnerabilities. Underlying these fears are concerns about harming our professional reputation or jeopardizing our licenses. We also may think we don't need anyone's help and that we can fix the problem ourselves, or we may even deny there is a problem in the first place.

## A New Culture is Emerging

The good news is that it doesn't have to be this way. We are beginning to see changes in the legal profession focused on instilling greater well-being in the profession. For example, the University of Miami established a first of its kind Mindfulness and Law Program designed to teach balancing work/life and stress in the profession. Their [webinar](#) series has been well-recognized. The Penn Law administration recently put forward [policies](#) and programs seeking to increase awareness of well-being. Morgan Lewis established its first-ever position of [Director of Employee Well-Being](#) and the American Bar Association created a [well-being pledge](#).

In the past, a stigma was associated with help-seeking actions. Fortunately, that stigma is slowly dissipating. Many states have or are considering eliminating questions on state bar applications regarding past treatment for mental health and substance use. There is a growing recognition that well-being is a critical component of capable lawyering.

## Taking Action

Balancing work and life are not easy. There comes a time when you must evaluate your priorities. What is most important—your ego, your reputation, your financial position, your health or your family life?

Asking for help is not a weakness, nor does it mean the end of our careers. My late colleague, [Link Christin](#), who was an ardent advocate for wellness in the legal profession, would often tell me that successful lawyers are the hardest to get into treatment for substance use disorders, but once in treatment, their success ratio is very high.

I encourage all lawyers to educate themselves about the signs and symptoms of substance use disorder and create a strategy for their own wellness. If a lawyer is struggling, it's important not to let fear of repercussions impair the ability to ask for support.

Lawyers and law students can get anonymous help in many ways. There are a wide variety of inpatient and outpatient substance use disorder treatment programs built specially for legal professionals to provide support in achieving wellness. These services are designed to accommodate professional needs and to minimize business disruption. Programs offer post-treatment aftercare and family support that is critical to achieving success.

Twelve step programs provide tried and true connection to others seeking to live a life of sobriety. Many lawyer assistance programs hold 12 Step meetings at their more private bar association headquarters, specifically for lawyers in recovery.

Law firms have begun to partner with lawyer assistance programs which provide confidential services to support lawyers and law students facing substance use disorders or mental health issues. Some firms have also begun mentoring and sponsorship programs and replaced boozy firm outings with yoga, meditation, and other healthy lifestyle support.

**From Impaired to Repaired** It is exciting to see our profession take these important steps, but there is still much work to do. In these especially trying times, it is more important than ever that we come together as a guild to create even more meaningful change to enrich, and in some cases save, the lives of our colleagues. We need to further prioritize education and recovery services and strive to make asking for help a badge of honor, not a stigma.