

Professionalism: Maintaining the Work/Work Balance

By James W. (Jim) Standley IV



The legal profession has long celebrated endurance, commitment and relentless advocacy. Attorneys are expected to devote themselves fully to their clients, their firms and the pursuit of justice. Success in the profession is frequently measured by productivity, availability and reputation. Lawyers pride themselves on long hours, exhaustive preparation and an unwavering willingness to outwork their opponents. These qualities undoubtedly contribute to professional excellence and personal pride. Yet, they also create a dangerous paradox: The very traits that fuel success in the legal profession often place lawyers at heightened risk for burnout, depression, substance abuse and even suicide.

The modern lawyer increasingly faces a reality in which work no longer ends at the office. Technological advances, remote access and client expectations have blurred the distinction between professional and personal life. While these developments have increased efficiency and responsiveness, they have also intensified the pressure to remain constantly connected and perpetually available. For many attorneys, the result is not simply a difficult balancing act between work and life, but rather a “work/work” balance in which professional obligations consume nearly every aspect of daily existence.

This article examines the troubling mental health trends within the legal profession, the causes and consequences of chronic overcommitment and the importance of recognizing the necessity of breaks and boundaries. It also explores practical and philosophical approaches toward developing healthier professional habits while maintaining

the high standards expected of legal practitioners.

The Mental Health Crisis in the Legal Profession

The legal profession faces a profound and well-documented mental health crisis. According to the Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program (JLAP), approximately one-third of lawyers and judges suffer from depression, which remains the leading cause of suicide. Lawyers and judges reportedly experience the highest suicide rate of any profession — approximately six times that of the general population. In addition, members of the legal profession are twice as likely as the general public to develop substance abuse disorders and other addictions.

These statistics are neither isolated nor speculative. A Johns Hopkins University study examining 105 professions found that lawyers and judges ranked highest in the incidence of major depression. Researchers have consistently identified perfectionism as a major contributing factor. Lawyers often possess an intense fear of failure and a relentless drive to avoid mistakes. While such characteristics may produce exceptional legal work, they also create fertile ground for chronic anxiety, emotional exhaustion and self-destructive thinking.

Recent studies further illustrate the scope of the problem. In an April 15, 2025 report, Bloomberg Law surveyed more than one thousand legal professionals regarding workplace habits, stress levels and career satisfaction. The findings were alarming. 97% of respondents reported regularly working outside the office, while 73% acknowledged working during at least half of their days off. On average, attorneys reported feeling burned out 42% percent of the time during 2024, with mid-level and senior associates experiencing burnout

at even higher rates.

The Bloomberg survey also highlighted a growing inability among lawyers to maintain boundaries between their professional and personal lives. More than half of respondents indicated that tracking billable hours and professional obligations had become inefficient and overwhelming. According to Mat Rotenberg, Product Strategy Director at Bloomberg Law, legal professionals are consistently subjected to long hours and intense demands that negatively impact both well-being and productivity. The implication is clear: Burnout is not merely a personal problem; it is also a systemic issue affecting the profession as a whole.

Suicide, Stress and Substance Abuse

The connection between the legal profession and suicide risk has become increasingly difficult to ignore. A June 26, 2024 article published in *Psychology Today* by Simon Sherry and Noelle Segato noted that many lawyers who contemplate suicide identify their profession as a major contributor to deteriorating mental health and increased substance abuse. Some attorneys reported considering leaving the profession entirely because of the burnout and emotional strain associated with legal practice.

The statistics are sobering. While approximately 4.3% of Americans report having contemplated suicide, studies estimate that approximately 8.5% of lawyers have experienced suicidal ideation. This disparity underscores the uniquely intense pressures placed upon attorneys.

Further insight appears in the February 2023 article, “Stressed, Lonely, and Overcommitted: Predictors of Lawyer Suicide Risk,” authored by Patrick R. Krill, Hannah M. Thomas,

Meaghyn R. Kramer, Nikki Degeneffe and Justin J. Anker. The authors observed that lawyers are particularly susceptible to anxiety, depression, alcohol abuse and drug use. Their nationwide study involving approximately 13,000 lawyers found that:

- ▶ 28% experienced depression;
- ▶ 19% suffered from anxiety;
- ▶ 21% demonstrated problematic alcohol use; and
- ▶ 11% experienced drug-related problems.

The study also emphasized the role of stress and loneliness. Lawyers often perceive their lives and workloads as unpredictable, uncontrollable and overwhelming. At the same time, many experience social isolation despite constant interaction with clients, courts and colleagues. Loneliness, particularly when combined with chronic stress, is a recognized predictor of suicidal ideation.

Importantly, the profession itself contributes to these conditions. Attorneys are routinely expected to manage complex legal matters, meet demanding deadlines, maintain impeccable professionalism and satisfy client expectations—all simultaneously. The cumulative effect frequently leads to burnout and emotional exhaustion.

The Problem of Overcommitment

One of the less discussed, yet deeply significant, contributors to lawyer burnout is overcommitment. Lawyers are often driven by a sincere desire to help clients, support colleagues and fulfill family obligations. At the same time, many attorneys possess an ingrained fear of disappointing others. This combination frequently results in taking on responsibilities beyond one's realistic capacity.



Overcommitment can initially appear admirable. Lawyers who consistently volunteer for additional cases, committees, leadership roles or professional obligations are often praised for their dedication. However, when every request receives a “yes,” personal well-being inevitably suffers.

The legal profession rewards responsiveness and reliability, but there is a significant difference between dedication and self-destruction. Chronic overcommitment leaves little room for recovery, reflection or personal fulfillment. Over time, the result may include exhaustion, irritability, deteriorating mental health, strained relationships and declining professional performance.

Moreover, work-family conflict has emerged as another significant predictor of stress and suicidal ideation. Research by Anker and Krill found that lawyers experiencing difficulty balancing professional and family responsibilities also reported elevated stress levels and increased attrition due to burnout. As attorneys become increasingly consumed by work obligations, relationships with spouses, children and friends often deteriorate. Ironically, the pursuit of professional success may ultimately damage the very personal foundations necessary to sustain long-term professional excellence.

Recognizing the Need for Breaks

Despite overwhelming evidence regarding burnout and mental fatigue, many attorneys continue to resist taking breaks. Common justifications include the belief that there is insufficient time, that clients require constant availability or that stepping away demonstrates weakness or lack of commitment.

In reality, breaks are not signs of laziness; they are essential components of sustained productivity and sound judgment. Mental fatigue affects cognitive performance in much the same way physical exhaustion affects the body. Concentration diminishes, creativity declines and emotional resilience weakens.

Often, temporarily stepping away from a stressful issue provides precisely the perspective needed to address it effectively. A brief walk, time with family, exercise, prayer, reading, music or any restorative activity may allow an attorney to return with greater clarity and focus. The mind, much like a muscle, requires periods of recovery in order to perform optimally.

Unfortunately, the culture of the legal profession has historically celebrated exhaustion as evidence of commitment. Young attorneys, in particular, may

feel pressure to demonstrate constant availability in order to establish credibility and advance professionally. However, a profession that normalizes chronic depletion risks undermining both lawyer well-being and client service.

Reframing Professional Success

The encouraging reality is that maintaining a healthier balance is possible, even within the demanding environment of legal practice. Importantly, balance does not look identical for every lawyer. Practice areas differ dramatically. Trial attorneys, transactional lawyers, solo practitioners, public defenders, prosecutors and judges all face unique demands. Likewise, personal obligations vary depending upon family circumstances, financial pressures and individual priorities.

Achieving balance is therefore less a fixed destination than an ongoing process requiring continual reassessment and adjustment. As careers evolve, so too must the strategies employed to maintain personal well-being.

A central component of this process involves mindset. Lawyers must begin viewing personal wellness not as an obstacle to professional achievement, but rather as a prerequisite for it. An attorney who is emotionally exhausted, chronically stressed or mentally depleted cannot consistently provide the highest quality representation.

Accordingly, one of the most important commitments a lawyer can make is a nonnegotiable commitment to personal well-being. This includes establishing boundaries, recognizing limitations and understanding that rest and recovery are not indulgences, but necessities.

Practical strategies may include:

- ▶ Setting designated periods during

which work communications are limited;

- ▶ Prioritizing exercise, sleep and proper nutrition;

- ▶ Developing hobbies and interests outside the practice of law;

- ▶ Seeking professional counseling or assistance when necessary;

- ▶ Utilizing lawyer assistance programs such as JLAP;

- ▶ Delegating responsibilities when appropriate; and

- ▶ Learning to decline obligations that exceed realistic capacity.

These practices are not incompatible with professionalism. To the contrary, they promote clearer thinking, greater emotional stability, improved client service and long-term career sustainability.

Conclusion

The legal profession remains one of immense purpose, intellectual challenge and public importance. Lawyers serve critical roles within society and often carry enormous responsibility on behalf of their clients. Yet, the profession must also confront the reality that the culture of constant availability and relentless overcommitment carries significant human costs.

The statistics surrounding lawyer depression, burnout, substance abuse and suicide are alarming and cannot be dismissed as isolated incidents. They reveal systemic issues that demand both institutional awareness and personal reflection.

Professionalism should not require self-destruction. Rather, true professionalism includes recognizing the importance of maintaining the mental, emotional and physical health necessary to serve clients competently and ethically. Maintaining a healthy “work/work” balance is not about avoiding hard work; lawyers will always

work hard. Instead, it is about ensuring that dedication to the profession does not come at the expense of one’s well-being, family or humanity.

Ultimately, lawyers perform at their highest level not when they are perpetually exhausted, but when they are healthy, focused and fully present. The profession benefits when its members recognize that taking care of themselves is not contrary to professionalism — it is essential to it.

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