



By Patrick A. Talley, Jr.

Lawyer Wellness in the Legal Profession

We entered this year with the normal anticipation and enthusiasm for a new year, but we would be remiss to forget the unusual start that occurred with 2025. First, the city of New Orleans had the terror attack on Bourbon Street on New Year's Day, and, a few days later, we learned of another lawyer's suicide. For me, these two tragedies bring to light the impact mental health has within our profession.

The statistics which relate to depression are both staggering and sobering. In a report by the American Psychological Association (APA) released earlier this year, the legal profession has the highest percentage of burnout rates in any field citing work-related stress, physical fatigue, cognitive weariness, and emotional exhaustion among lawyers. In addition, a recent survey conducted by the American Bar Association (ABA) shows that the problem is getting worse and that these causes are clearly related to our profession. This is most likely true because we are asked to keep track of, think about, and respond to items twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

We know that lawyers face disproportionately high rates of depression and suicide compared to the general population. Findings indicate that ap-

proximately 28% of lawyers experience depression at some point in their careers, compared to about 8% of the national populace, yet in some states, little has been done to acknowledge the emotional aspects of the practice of law or take any steps to assist lawyers in handling them. Additionally, suicide is 3.6 times more likely to claim the life of lawyers than any other occupation, making it one of the leading causes of death in the profession. Negative contributions linked to this unfortunate reality are isolation and lack of social support, substance abuse issues, which often co-occur with depression (21-36% of lawyers meet criteria for alcohol use disorders), burnout and feelings of failure or inadequacy, and financial pressures and job insecurity in some segments of the profession.

Even more alarming is the fact that the demographics have changed in recent decades, as young lawyers are experiencing mental health problems more commonly than their counterpart senior lawyers. Indicators vividly show that working long hours in a high-stress environment within an adversarial and competitive field to meet billable hour requirements, having a lack of work-life balance, and experiencing the societal stigmatism surrounding mental health within the profession as factors that are

increasing these issues.

I believe that all of these points can be summarized by stating that lawyers have two personality traits, which substantially contribute to anxiety and depression in our legal realm: perfectionism and pessimism. Within the confines of perfectionism, lawyers are driven by the need to avoid failure and the inability to derive satisfaction from what might be considered average performance. Our errors are not countenanced. In conjunction, clients and our families count on us to not make any mistakes. Of course, perfection is an impossible goal which no one can achieve, yet that ideation leads to feelings of disappointment and other mental illnesses, forms of long-term suffering. Lawyers are also pessimists and trained to expect the worse-case scenario and, thereby, prepare for it. As a result, lawyers are skillful at being skeptical toward what people tell them. While this quality is helpful to our skill of cross examination, pessimism leads to stress, disillusionment, and depression.

Another obstacle we face as lawyers that affects our mental health is the blurring of life and work. As our members embrace more flexible habits – and possibly more work in general – in the post-Covid work environment, we run the risk of our work negatively

impacting our personal lives, and vice versa, which creates a state of imbalance in our lives. Today, more and more lawyers are working outside the normal business hours. Working a non-traditional schedule can lead to poorer outcomes both personally and professionally and can also be harmful to relationships with family, friends, work colleagues, and our clients, exacting emotional toil. As lawyers continue to work remotely, we need to address this imbalance in our profession and find better ways to harmonize our work with our own personal goals and commitments. Blending work and life may be inevitable for many, but it may have a less negative impact if we can avoid being distracted by work when we are off the clock or distracted by life when we are back on the clock.

Also, we have a problem with lawyer-aging. The first baby boomer turned 65 in 2011, marking the beginning of a significant demographic shift in the legal profession. According to the ABA, there were 1.3 million practicing attorneys in the United States last year, and 13% of them are 65 or older. Many of these seniors are often the most respected attorneys in the firm and responsible for a large part of the firm's business; therefore, they cannot be expected to simply

retire and walk away from the firm.

These are not just individual issues – they are systemic ones. So, what can we do? Fortunately, there are efforts underway to address this crisis. We further understand that we need to better address mental, physical, and other health concerns of lawyers in our profession who want to stay well and continue to practice law. Nationally, The National Task Force on Lawyer Wellbeing was established in 2016 to help lead a response to the challenges being faced, and, in 2017, they issued a report setting forth 44 recommendations. The ABA also has a model policy for legal employees in law firms. Across the country, state bar associations have also created special committees and task forces to work on resolutions to this problem with fellow states around them. A prime example would be the robust lawyer wellness programs in states that surround us, e.g., Texas, Florida, and Mississippi.

For the reasons set forth in this article and more, the Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program (JLAP), through its THRIVE In 2025 program, has embarked on a path to create a wellness program for Louisiana lawyers. This new initiative will exclusively focus on “wellness in the profession” to tackle the

persistent imbalance and emotional toil in our lives and livelihoods. Although JLAP was initially created to focus on alcohol and drug-related issues, it is expanding to address all physical and mental health challenges of attorneys who wish to maintain well-being. JLAP has formed a new task force to develop and implement this wellness program, helping to ensure that lawyers are better equipped to recognize and manage these challenges. The goal of the program will be to feature programming to help lawyers keep their overall well-being at the forefront of their days. We are hopeful that this program will help reduce stress and anxiety in our lives.

The conversation about mental health in the legal profession is beginning to change – but there is still much work to be done. By fostering a culture that prioritizes well-being, supports those individuals in need, and normalizes seeking help, we can begin to confront the unique issues lawyers face so that they are heard, seen, and, therefore, cared for. In time, the overall wellness bar will rise in our legal profession.

Pruitt

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