Lawyer Burnout: Stopping it Before it Starts

Written by Sharon Miki

Lawyer burnout is a serious problem. While legal work can be incredibly fulfilling, it can also, by nature, be stressful and downright exhausting. Industry wide, ultra-competitive professional cultures and excessive hours are leading to overworked lawyers and widespread wellness and mental health struggles.

Lawyer burnout, however, isn't inevitable—especially if you can manage it before it wears you too far down.

To help, we've taken a close look at how to diagnose and overcome lawyer burnout, the causes, signs, and consequences of lawyer burnout—and how you can take steps to avoid becoming another burned out lawyer. Guided by a combination of our research and the expert advice of professional lawyer coaches, **Allison Wolf** and **Terry DeMeo**, this blog post will outline why lawyer burnout and lawyer stress levels are such serious issues within the industry, as well as how to prevent burnout, or how to deal with it once you have it.

What is lawyer burnout?

Burnout is real, and it's more serious than just being tired at the end of a hectic day. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), burnout is an occupational hazard—"a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed."

The WHO outlines several signs of burnout, including:

- Feelings of exhaustion
- Pulling away mentally from a job
- Work-related cynicism

While anyone in any profession can absolutely experience burnout, lawyers are particularly prone to suffering from it.

"You can be drawn into the practice of law for really good reasons, and it can be an appropriate career choice for you, and yet circumstances in your law firm and in your practice can lead you to burnout—even in a situation where it was something that you enjoyed," Allison, a Professional Certified Coach who was interviewed along with Terry at ClioCon, noted.

In extreme cases, the impact of burnout for lawyers is vast, significant, and serious. As Terry, a Master Certified Coach, said, "The last information I saw indicated that lawyers had the highest alcoholism rates, the highest depression rates, the highest suicide rates. There's a lot of dissatisfaction in the profession."

Lawyer burnout statistics

Consider the following lawyer burnout statistics:

- Attorney's surveyed for Bloomberg Law's Attorney Workload and Hours survey in the fourth quarter of 2021 reported experiencing burnout more than half the time, and an increasing number of attorneys were experiencing a decline in wellbeing.
- A survey of Massachusetts lawyers conducted in the first four months of 2022 found that more than three quarters of lawyers in the state are experiencing burnout, with almost half having thought about leaving their job or the legal profession in recent years.
- ALM's Mental Health and Substance Abuse Survey, published in 2020, found that 31.2% of the more than 3,800 respondents feel they are depressed, 64% feel they have anxiety, 10.1% feel they have an alcohol problem and 2.8% feel they have a drug problem.

The phenomenon of work-from-home burnout is not exclusive to the legal field. A report by the American Psychological Association released in January 2022 shows that burnout rates have risen everywhere, citing work-related stress among 79% of employees. From the same report, 44% reported physical fatigue, while approximately one-third of respondents reported cognitive weariness and emotional exhaustion.

Why are lawyers so stressed?

While most people experience stress in their lives, lawyers and people in the legal profession face a unique conundrum. For many, the drive and dedication that make them successful as a lawyer is also what's causing stress and burning them out.

Many careers are high stress—so why are lawyers at a higher risk of burnout than many other working professionals? Why do lawyer stress statistics show that lawyers are experiencing greater stress levels than their counterparts in other professions?

Usually, a combination of factors, like the ones listed below, work together over time to create overworked, stressed-out, burned out lawyers:

Personality type

In order to become a lawyer, a person generally has a high-achieving personality—once practicing law, that intensity and ambitious drive can lead to stress that, eventually, builds towards burnout.

Perfectionism

Many lawyers are perfectionists—a trait that serves them well when dealing with a complex legal case, but that can lead to greater lows and disappointment with failures (or perceived failures).

Excessive hours

Lawyers tend to work—a lot. The*2022 Legal Trends Report* surveyed lawyers to learn about their working hours, and found that, overall, it is much more common for lawyers to work irregular hours than not.

For example, 86% of lawyers work outside of the typical workday (beginning between 8 and 9 a.m. and ending between 5 and 6 p.m.), and 73% work outside of regular business days (Monday to Friday).

These results were not limited to only lawyers of a certain age. With only slight variation, lawyers of all ages work outside of regular business hours, suggesting that there isn't a generational factor (e.g., being newly graduated, starting a career, or sunsetting a career) driving lawyers to work irregular hours..

These statistics alone make it clear why lawyers are burned out.

Professional culture

Law firms can be competitive environments, built on a tradition of overwork as a badge of honor. Because the law is rooted in ideas that tend to value overworked lawyers, attitudes of strength, and "toughing it out," it can be difficult for lawyers to ask for help when they need it.

Lack of support

Similarly, when some law firms are hyper-focused on generating profits and billable hours, they might overlook lawyer wellness. By not taking breaks or having stress-relieving resources readily accessible, lawyer stress can build towards burnout.

Lawyers may not be getting support to care for their mental health, or it may not appear to be a priority: In the same ALM study above, **more than 35% of survey respondents didn't know whether their firms offered mental health support and benefits.**

What are the signs of lawyer burnout?

Lawyer burnout doesn't happen overnight—it builds up gradually over time. In order to deal with (and hopefully avoid) lawyer burnout, it's critical to know the signs so you can recognize when you might be on the verge. A large part of that is **paying attention to how you're feeling**.

"A lot of the early signs come from, 'I used to feel kind of happy or excited when I got into the office or I felt enthusiastic about my day, and I'm noticing that I don't feel that way at all and it's starting to become a real drag,'" Allison explained, "that is a very, very big warning sign."

For Terry, her own experience of lawyer burnout impacted multiple aspects of her life.

> "The stress level got so high that I didn't want to get up in the morning and go to work most of the time," she explained. "Even though there were aspects of my work I loved, the stress levels were so high that it was impacting my relationship with my children, my personal relationships, and it felt very close to what depression feels like—like you're just slogging through molasses and don't want to do it anymore."

Detecting lawyer burnout can be tricky—there's no medical diagnosis for burnout, and many signs can be caused by other ailments (which is why it's a good idea to consult with a doctor if you're feeling burned out, but aren't sure).

With that said, while there's no one experience of lawyer burnout, there are several common signs to be mindful of. Here are some of the common signs that you're getting close to burning out:

1. You're exhausted

Extreme fatigue, even when you get adequate sleep, could be a sign that you're more than just sleep deprived after several long days at the law office.

2. You feel detached

Was there once a time where you couldn't wait to get to the office, but now you find it hard to muster the energy to pretend to care? Becoming disengaged from work and cynical (or, worse, completely dreading the day-to-day practice of the career you once loved) are classic signs of burnout.

3. You can't concentrate

A lack of attention to detail could be a sign of burnout—and can impact more than just you if you're accidentally overlooking details on cases.

4. You're self medicating

As Brian Cuban explored through research and his own experience in *The Addicted Lawyer*, the legal profession is, unfortunately, an industry that suffers from addiction issues. Turning to alcohol and other substances to push through your day is a sign that something is off.

5. You have no work-life balance

Working so much that you're missing out on your family and personal time erodes your wellness. Feeling chronically imbalanced and feeling stressed or guilty about it can signal incoming burnout.

6. Your relationships are in trouble

As Terry explained, people on the verge of burnout can exhibit irritability when they actually do have a moment of home time. "I think relationships, personal relationships, start to deteriorate. People get crabby with their partners, they get crabby with their children."

7. You're feeling "stuck"

When you're burned out, you might be working day and night—but still feel like you aren't getting anywhere or making any progress. The self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy that come with this hard-work-no-results experience can be hard to handle.

8. You're always stressed

Chronic stress (and the physical signs of stress like sweating and heart palpitations) could signal impending burnout.

How to avoid lawyer burnout

For overworked lawyers on the verge of burnout **it's important to act quickly.** You'll be far better off slowing down for a bit and recovering than if you push yourself to the point of total mental and physical exhaustion.

If you think you're at risk of burnout:

1. Step back
2. Assess your situation
3. Seek ways to curtail lawyer burnout

Here are a few tactics we recommend to take care of your mental health and keep lawyer burnout at bay.

Recharge your batteries

First and foremost, if you don't want to be burned out, you need to sleep. Rest, and prioritize taking care of your body and mind as human, as opposed to focusing on yourself just as a lawyer.

As Terry said, the precursors for lawyers burning out are often simple things like "not having any personal time, not having any time to exercise, to take a yoga class, to feel like you can walk outside and get a breath of fresh air."

Do things that make you happy—outside of being a lawyer

Make a conscious effort to integrate non-work-related activities and hobbies into your day. Your billable hours can be more productive if you're refreshed and energized.

"It's interesting, but engagement and activities that engage us are highly rejuvenating," Allison noted. "It doesn't have to just be meditation or downtime—other things can also be highly rejuvenating."

Set boundaries

If you don't want to be burned out, you need to know (and respect) your limits. Learn to say no, and let go of the belief that you can handle more than you actually can.

For Terry, **creating a new relationship with time is key to success**.

"When you talk to lawyers about what is bothering them so much, that will consistently tell you there's not enough time, which is a lie," she said. "That's not a fact, it's a belief. And when we ask ourselves, 'Is that belief true?' we find out that 'there's not enough time' is really not a truthful belief. We can't work 36 hours in a 24-hour day, and we can't even work 24 hours in a 24-hour day. At some point we stop. So it's really coming to terms with the limitations of being a human in a human body, and honoring that."

Be true to your values

If you're working in a way that doesn't work for you, continuing down an unsustainable path is like a roadmap to lawyer burnout. Instead, Allison recommended taking a look at where you are, and deciding what kind of firm you want to practice at.

"What's important is finding your own truth, and finding out what's going to work for you, and not an unhealthy model that you're necessarily being forced into," she said. "You need not be forced. There are options. There are always options. You have a choice."

Automate aspects of your legal practice

Tech that streamlines workflows, saves time, and makes work easier can support a better work-life balance. Here are a few examples:

- Clio's Mobile App gives you the flexibility to be productive when (and where) you want to be—so you can disconnect when you need to.
- Payment plans and automated reminders with Clio Payments make collections a breeze.
- Task lists in Clio Manage make it easy to assign the tasks you need for a given type of matter in a single step, ensuring nothing falls through the cracks.
- Being able to easily find and auto-fill forms can save you time digging for documents and manually inputting information with Clio Draft.

Lawyers aren't alone; read our post on paralegal burnout and how to avoid it.

How to recover from lawyer burnout

When faced with burnout, it's best to take steps to manage the situation as soon as possible. Otherwise, you may need to take extreme action such as a long term hiatus or a career change.

If you're coping with lawyer burnout currently, know that there is hope. Here are some tactics that can help you recover:

1. Acknowledge the situation

The first step to managing lawyer burnout is acknowledging the situation for what it is. This can be tough for lawyers who've been conditioned to have an image of themselves as superhuman. But, realizing when you're doing too much will help you take better care of yourself and your clients long-term.

2. Ask for help

"Don't go it alone," Allison said. When you notice a change or shift in yourself, "talk to someone, talk to your mentor, talk to an advisor from one of the lawyer assistance programs. Talk to a coach, but talk to someone in confidence about what's going on, because at this point there needs to be a bit of an analysis."

"Sometimes you just have to admit you need support," Terry explained. "Coaches like Allison and I support attorneys and help them explore options and realize they're not really as trapped as they think they are."

3. Look at what needs to change to fix the situation

Once you've found a support system to talk to, ask questions to unpack the situation. Allison advises looking at questions like, "what are the hours looking like? What's causing the heaviness? What needs to happen? What can be brought in or introduced? What's going to help rejuvenate? What can be an energizing piece to add in?"

4. Take a break

Of course, it sounds obvious to take a break if you're overworked. This can sometimes be easier said than done. But a break could be the best solution for an overworked lawyer. This could look like a vacation (without constantly checking your email), or it might mean taking a temporary leave of absence.

5. Reconnect with your why

Remember when you were fresh on the job, and how exciting it felt to be a lawyer? If you don't, you should.

"Nobody goes to law school because they want to be miserable, "Terry said. "Many lawyers go for really good reasons. They want to help other people, change the world, and do important work. So, I think it's critically important to get back in touch with what your initial goals were in the first place, admitting that you've really separated from that, and finding your way back to your initial motivations."

6. Make a plan

Just as your law firm has a business plan to help it succeed, Allison recommends making a personal plan for thriving to help guide you away from burnout.

"What are the things that give you energy and what are the things that engage you on a deep level? And how can you make sure that these are part of every single day, and that they're a bigger part than the energy drains and the energy sucks? And structure this, build a plan around it, make this [plan]."

Jobs for burned out lawyers

If you're burned out completely and looking to leave the legal profession, there *are* less stressful jobs for burned out lawyers out there. This could look like switching practice areas, practicing law part-time, or on a freelance or contract basis, or something outside of law altogether.

But the answer might not lie in leaving the career you've invested in over many years. What do the least stressed out attorneys in a stressed out profession have in common? We can't say for sure, but we strongly suspect they follow many of Terry and Allison's tips above. Set boundaries, get clear about your "why," and prioritize doing things you love when you're not at work. This way, you'll be on your way to the work-life balance you crave.

Final thoughts on lawyer burnout

If you're feeling like you might be a burned out lawyer, you're not alone. But burnout doesn't have to be forever. Successful lawyering doesn't mean pulling all-nighters non-stop. In fact, by not working to the point of burn out, you can be *more* productive and effective during your working hours—and enjoy your life more outside of work. It's possible to thrive, as a lawyer and as a human being.

Positive change to curb burnout is possible on a personal level. It's also starting to happen at more and more firms. "I am seeing a real shift in a lot of firms towards wellness," Allison said. "There are different firms with different cultures emerging, and we are seeing a shift. 100% it's not everywhere, but it is towards a healthier way of practicing."

Want to learn more about avoiding burnout and thriving in your legal career? Register now to join us at this year's ClioCon!

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