# Lawyer Mental Health and Wellness: Changing the Conversation

Written by Sam Rosenthal

For many in the legal profession, the term “lawyer mental health” may seem contradictory. The demanding hours and stressful work environments at many law firms often have detrimental effects on legal professionals, who struggle to balance severe stress and self-care.Mental health issues among lawyers are notoriously prevalent, as aresubstance abuse and addiction.

For these reasons, lawyer mental health and wellness, also referred to as legal wellness or lawyer well-being, needs to be an essential consideration for law firms, law schools, bar associations, and legal professionals. And although there are many “wellness” resources and programs available online, many do not focus on the legal industry’s unique challenges. Most of the available resources also tend to take a bird’s-eye view of the legal wellness landscape.

This blog post will provide a broad overview of lawyer mental health and wellness.

## Why lawyer mental health and wellness matters

The legal industry is, to put it bluntly, unwell. The stats speak for themselves:

A 2020 study featuring participants such as the California Lawyers Association and the D.C. Bar found “Roughly half of practicing attorneys are experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety, with approximately 30% of those falling in the mild range and nearly 20% falling in the moderate/severe range..”

A2014 article by the ABA notes that “at least 25 percent of attorneys who face formal disciplinary charges from their state bar are identified as suffering from addiction or other mental illness,” and that substance abuse plays a role in “60 percent of all disciplinary cases ... 60 percent of all malpractice claims and 85 percent of all trust fund violation cases.”

Additionally, according to the Dave Nee Foundation, new law school students exhibit rates of depression around 8-9%—but after three years in law school,40% of students are depressed.

And, lawyers are among the top ten professions for highest suicide rate.

To combat these troubling statistics, legal professionals need to adopt new practices to improve work-life balance,reduce stress, and increase overall well-being.

But this goes beyond simple self-help strategies; this is about an industry-wide shift. And it starts with gaining an understanding of what legal wellness is—and isn't.

# Defining lawyer mental health and wellness

A quick scan of Google—or the self-help section of your local library—will give you an overabundance of information related to wellness and mental health. This can make it hard to sift through which information has value, especially for members of the legal profession who aren't very familiar with these topics.

Here's how you can tell which wellness advice is worth your time.

## What lawyer mental health and well-being is

In its purest form, wellness involves doing whatever you need to do to feel better and be healthier daily. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to achieving a general sense of well-being and overall health, and anyone who claims otherwise is selling you something.

For our purposes, lawyer well-being incorporates anything that:

- Improves yourwork-life balance
- Helps you manage stress better
- Fosters a more positive mindset
- Promotes habits of consistent self-care

These barometers of wellness apply to almost anyone, but they're particularly important for legal professionals. This is because of the alarming statistics mentioned at the beginning of this article. Many lawyers work in environments that make wellness difficult to achieve. For example, taking care of yourself is hard when as a lawyer, you have to manage stress, stay positive, and care for yourself when you also need to help clients through the most difficult times of their lives. Not to mention you may also be working 60-80 hours per week and trying to take care of your family.

Effective lawyer wellness strategies help you navigate work and life complexities more healthily.

## What lawyer mental health and well-being isn't

Legal wellness or lawyer mental health *is not*:

- Drinking kale smoothies.
- Keeping a yoga mat under your desk.
- Swearing off alcohol forever.
- Re-reading your copy of *The Power of Now* until its pages start fraying.

Of course, wellness CAN mean doing those things—for many people, consuming superfoods,practicing yoga, cutting down on alcohol, and reading spiritual books is an excellent path towards wellness. But for others, the recipe for success looks far different.

You may have to try several strategies and practices until you find the ones you like. If yoga isn't your thing, maybe kickboxing is.

What matters is discovering the path that works **for you**. Instead of looking for a quick fix, go with a practical, multi-tooled approach that helps you grow over time.

# Key lawyer mental health and wellness terms

Our approach isn't to look at attorney mental health from a happy-go-lucky perspective—instead, think about the real issues in legal professionals' lives and what well-being means within that context.

Under that mindset, here are some concepts and terms worth exploring.

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness, awareness, presence, stillness, meditation—all these words indicate more or less the same idea: By learning to consistently calm your mind, relax your body, and center your attention, you can become better at living in the present moment. In short, practicing mindfulness supports lawyer mental health.

Mindfulness can be an especially powerful tool for legal professionals like yourself, because you can use it to break the routine of tiring, stressful days. Mindfulness won't make thedifficult situations in your job and life disappear, but it will give you the space to step back, analyze, and handle those situations more effectively.

## Mental illness

There is a difference between wellness resources and programs for people who want to have a better sense of balance in their lives, and people who for one reason or another need professional help.

The term “mental illness” covers a broad range of conditions, from depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), eating disorders, and substance abuse and addiction.

For legal professionals with mental illness, normal wellness practices on their own are likely not enough. If you or someone you know is exhibiting signs of a mental disorder or substance dependency, seeking professional medical help is the right thing to do.

# Approaches to lawyer mental health and wellness

The goal with wellness is to figure out a set of habit-building practices you can implement in your own life—things that work for you.

Your approach to wellness should be a *holistic* one. That is to say, wellness isn’t about making one giant change and suddenly transforming your life—it’s about continually working to improve various aspects of your life, so you can build a more sustainable lifestyle and career.

And while no single wellness strategy works for all legal professionals, *most* worthwhile wellness strategies will incorporate the following elements:

## Self-reflection

You could meditate, practice yoga, or sit down for a few minutes to take a break and collect your thoughts. Regardless of your preferred self-reflection method, checking in with yourself to see how you’re thinking—how you’re feeling, how you’re doing—isan invaluable practice for positive lawyer mental health.

As Jeena Cho, author of *The Anxious Lawyer*, says, “Every lawyer should be practicing mindfulness.”

For those newer to mindfulness practice, one of our favorite strategies is to download an app likeHeadspace orCalm. Theseapps have guided meditations and other helpful resources.

Again, this isn't about chanting "Om" in a circle with incense burning. If that's your thing, go for it, but if that's not your thing, don't worry. What matters here is creating a routine habit of pausing during your day, taking some deep breaths, and being aware of your inner state at that moment. It sounds simple, but just taking a pause every day can make quite an impact you mental well-being over time.

## Nutrition

Because legal professionals are so busy and may often have little time to cook meals at home, eating healthy can be a major challenge.

Although choosing what to eat is a deeply personal choice, it is worth taking stock of your eating habits and identifying proactive strategies for improvement can help you create the kinds of lasting habits that are needed to change your eating patterns.

If you were to set healthy eating goals for yourself, what would they be? What type of dietary changes do you think you could realistically implement—and stick to? What kinds of support networks and incentives can you create to stay motivated and on target? What would happen if you changedthe way you think about food?

Re-imagining nutrition can help you eat healthier and perhaps indirectly support lawyer mental health. To change up your eating habits, working with a nutritionist, subscribing to a meal delivery service, and learning to prepare meals can all be helpful strategies. Learning about what kinds of foods are healthiest, and which foods and eating habits don't work for you is also important.

## Exercise and personal care for lawyer mental health

Any list of wellness practices for lawyers needs to include physical activity and rest—because everybody needs both.

As for what constitutes rest and exercise for you, the trick, once more, is to find activities that you enjoy (or at least don't hate) doing. Choose sustainable activities you can do for weeks, months, years without getting bored or giving up.

"Exercise," in this context, could be as simple as taking a 30-minute walk three-to-five times a week—or it could mean running a marathon.

"Rest" or "self-care" could mean visiting a massage therapist regularly, sleeping in one day each weekend, stretching for five minutes in between client calls, or taking more vacation time than you're used to.

You're looking for that sweet spot where your body feels good, you have energy each day, and you're breaking up the sedentary lifestyle of long office hours.

The most important thing here is to be honest with yourself. Are your current exercise and rest strategies working for you, or would you feel better if you made some improvements? This is where the holistic approach to wellness comes together—if you're engaging in consistent self-reflection, you'll be able to determine whether your exercise and self-care routines need an upgrade.

# Lawyer mental health stigma

This gets its own category because it really is different from "routine" wellness. Mental health issues are serious, require professional medical attention, and are extremely prevalent among legal professionals.

Theymay not teach you about this in law school—but they should.

## Invulnerability and stigma surrounding lawyer mental health

One of the main reasons mental illness and substance abuse persist at such high levels in the legal community is that legal professionals don't feel they can talk openly about these topics.

As Brian Cuban, author of *The Addicted Lawyer*, puts it, "The issue isn't so much 'why lawyers get addicted'—lawyers are just as likely to experience the environmental issues that trigger addiction as anyone else. The question is 'why are lawyers so afraid of seeking help?'"

The answer is: for a lot of reasons. Among them are long-held beliefs that lawyers should just "suck it up," that reaching out for help shows weakness, that asking for help could be detrimental to one's career, and so on.

This is why it's vital to change the industry-wide conversation around lawyer mental health and —legal professionals deserve to feel more comfortable coming forward about these issues, and legal organizations should constantly be looking for better ways to care for their constituents' well-being.

# Three steps to improve lawyer mental health

Allison Wolf and Terry DeMeo, two expert legal coaches, have wise advice for legal professionals struggling with their mental well-being.

"What's important to know is that in many cases, you are not helpless," they write, "and indeed mental wellness is something you can influence and change for the better."

For improving mental wellness, here are three of Allison and Terry's recommended steps to take:

1. Talk to someone you trust about the difficult things you're experiencing, so you can feel that you're not on your own with lawyer mental health issues.
2. Learn to recognize, in the moment, when you're getting caught up in speculative, negative thoughts—and how to interrupt those thoughts and analyze them from an impartial standpoint.
3. Execute tasks one at a time instead of trying to do multiple things at once, because studies show that people actually function better when they focus their attention on one action instead of multi-tasking.

For more detailed insight, read the full article,5 Simple Steps Every Lawyer Can Take to Improve Mental Wellness.

## How to get help with lawyer mental health

There are many lawyer mental health resources available to legal professionals who are dealing with mental illness, substance abuse, or addiction. Among them are:

- Support and recovery groups such as theLawyers Depression Project.
- State and localLawyer Assistance Programs.
- Crisishotlines and call centers.
- Primary care physicians and other medical professionals.

# Final notes on lawyer mental health and wellness

Legal wellness is about individuals finding ways to create more overall well-being in their lives. However, on a broader scale, mental health and wellness is about the legal industry as a whole re-thinking andre-creating the way law schools, law firms, and legal associations treat attorney well-being.

To truly change the stigma towards mental illness and substance abuse, and to prevent burnout and the formation of toxic work environments, we have a long way to go.

On a personal level, you can start making lawyer mental health a priority by:

- Implementing mindfulness practice as part of your daily or weekly routine.

- Studying your personal nutrition habits and eating food that makes you feel energized.
- Committing to give your body the regular exercise, rest, and care it needs.
- Experimenting with various wellness strategies and practices to see what works for you.
- Reaching out for professional help if you or someone you know is struggling with mental illness or substance abuse.

On an industry-wide level, we can make a difference by encouraging open and honest conversations about wellness within the legal industry.

Let's get to work.

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