Mental Health in the Legal Profession – Advice for Lawyers & Firms

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Lawyers work with extraordinary dedication, pulling off Herculean tasks for their clients. That can sometimes take its toll when it comes to mental health in the legal profession. In fact, lawyers are even more likely than most to struggle with managing stress and their mental health.

The legal profession is notoriously demanding, as indicated by no shortage of lawyers' mental health statistics. A staggering 83% of lawyers report feeling stressed some of the time, while 15% clock in more than 60 hours each week. With this in mind, it's perhaps not too surprising that research reveals around 71% of lawyers struggle with anxiety. In the UK, Lawcare, the mental health charity for the legal sector, has recently published its 2024 Impact Report. Their report disclosed:

- An increase of 13% over 2023 in those seeking mental health support. Of those:
  - 39% sought help for stress and anxiety.
  - 15% with career anxiety.
  - 10% for workplace bullying and harassment.

With mental health concerns in the legal profession on the rise, this blog examines why it's so essential to address lawyers' mental health, outlines the signs of poor mental health among lawyers, and provides a blueprint for how law firms can safeguard the mental health and well-being of all of their employees.

Download Clio's **Lawyer Mental Health guide** to identify when you're approaching burnout, discover mindfulness, and learn how to practice it daily.

Get the Guide

Why mental health for lawyers matters more than ever

The legal profession has carved out a reputation for its "knuckle down and get on with it" nature—especially among top corporate firms. Being bright might get junior solicitors in the door, but their work ethic keeps them there.

This attitude makes sense for legal professionals since the work requires them to be responsible and hardworking. Clients need their expertise to stay out of jail, formulate their wills, power of attorney and trusts, get divorced and win custody of their children, and resolve many other potentially life-changing matters.

In other words, they expect lawyers to perform highly at all times, and lawyers expect the same of themselves.

This can put lawyers under an incredible amount of pressure, which can be compounded by business needs. Like every other business, law firms want to increase profitability, which requires racking up their staff's billable hours. As a result, solicitors wage a constant battle with an ever-increasing caseload. They don't work all hours because they *want* to. They do so because they *have* to.

Challenges like these were magnified during the pandemic, showing how dangerous all work and no play can be. Working from home blurred the boundaries between our jobs and personal lives, leading some junior lawyers to work 14-hour days regularly. Daily working hours have been reduced recently as junior lawyers push back against long working hours.

Something has to give in those scenarios—often, it's an employee's well-being. In recent years, lawyer burnout and exhaustion have increased alarmingly. According to a recent survey on lawyers' mental health, the biggest culprits of poor mental health were billable hour pressures and the inability to disconnect.

What can the legal community do to counteract rising stress levels and improve mental health in law firms? Quite a bit.

The signs of poor mental health among lawyers

Law firms must address mental health issues in the legal profession. Legal firms must be observant, watching for signs of poor lawyer mental health before they become an issue. In particular, they should pay close attention to the following:

Burnout

When lawyers work too hard for too long, they burn out. They're unable to maintain their usual performance levels and may even feel distracted or demoralised. Burnout is causing many solicitors to leave the profession altogether.

So, how can firms spot when employees are on the verge of solicitor burnout (or burnout at any level of the firm)?

For one, managers should closely monitor their team's behaviour. Employees might tell you they feel fine, but actions speak louder than words.

Have you noticed a colleague or direct report has been answering emails when they should be catching up on much-needed shut-eye, for instance? If you have, you should speak with them. Do they already seem exhausted when they come into work each morning? If you notice this, encourage them to take a day off.

Don't assume employees will let you know when they're burning out. Pay attention to the warning signs and step in when your team is overburdened. Create an environment where work-life balance is encouraged and rewarded, not one where people ignore their own mental and physical health.

Anxiety or stress

A certain amount of anxiety and stress is normal—it's a part of life, after all. However, too much can have a disastrous impact on lawyers' mental health. Solicitors perform at their best when cool, calm, and collected. Stress and anxiety, on the other hand, can cloud their thinking and worsen moods.

Unfortunately, it can be difficult to spot when lawyers are suffering from anxiety or stress. These high-performing individuals are used to doing what it takes to get the job done.

That said, there are sure signs to watch out for.

For example, if you notice changes in how lawyers interact with their colleagues or clients. When usually well-tempered individuals are suddenly short and snap at others or withdraw, this could indicate they're feeling anxious or stressed out.

Managers should avoid publicly calling them out on their behaviour—as it could worsen things. Instead, pull the person aside and ask them how they're feeling. Better still, if possible, offer to relieve some of their caseload.

How firms can safeguard lawyers' mental health

It's not enough to simply identify those who are experiencing high stress or periods of adverse mental health—firms must actively work to protect their solicitors' emotional well-being. Follow these five steps to enhance mental health in your law firm.

1. Be proactive rather than reactive

As the saying goes, "prevention is better than cure". Don't wait until your staff is overburdened to take action. Ensure managers know the warning signs of mental health challenges (as discussed above), and encourage them to prioritise their team's well-being.

Here are some ways to do just that:

- **Harness technology to empower teams to work effectively.** Even though they're known to work long hours, the average lawyer only bills 2.5 hours of an eight-hour day, according to Clio's *Legal Trends Report*. With legal software solutions, lawyers can automate tedious and mundane tasks and ultimately spend more time on strategic work that increases revenue.
- **Set up comprehensive mental health initiatives**, taking a leaf from big law behemoth Baker McKenzie's book. You could even adopt Goodwin Proctor's approach and pay staff to go away on holiday. More UK law firms are also joining them with their schemes.

2. Speak about mental health openly

Create a culture that normalises speaking about mental health. Let solicitors and others in your firm know that it's perfectly natural to experience the odd low. However, highlight that it shouldn't seem like they're perpetually fighting these feelings.

As with everything else, this starts from the top. Senior management can lead by example, speaking about times when they've struggled in the past and needed to take a break for the sake of their mental health.

It takes real strength to admit when you've felt weak. If leaders are open about their own experiences with mental health in the legal profession, this attitude will filter down throughout the organisation.

3. Check in regularly

Check-ins can take many forms. You can send anonymous surveys to take your team's general pulse, while managers can check in individually with solicitors.

Most importantly, make it clear that you genuinely care about your team's mental health and show that you're willing to take swift action if they struggle.

It's not enough to simply ask *how* they're coping. Go one step further, digging into *what* they're struggling with before taking the appropriate action. As mentioned above, if your team feels overburdened, consider implementing automation-based tools to take low-value tasks off their plate.

It's also essential to help lawyers complete their work in a way that doesn't harm their mental health—and hours play a big part in that. Our *2022 Legal Trends Report* found that barely half of lawyers working non-traditional work schedules reported having good or very good mental health, compared to 74% of those who adhere to a regular work schedule.

The takeaway? Firms can help improve lawyers' mental health by encouraging them to find greater work-life balance.

4. Be willing to change

Firms should avoid trying to second-guess their team, assuming they know how solicitors feel and what they need. Instead, they should ask for their opinions and seek advice on what the firm can do better.

However, we warn you: this could be uncomfortable. It may reveal ugly truths hidden at the very core of your firm. For example, leaders might discover their management style is more harmful than helpful. Embrace the feedback as objectively as possible. Understand what needs to change and why, and then take action.

Be willing to change your firm's processes, attitudes, client base, and culture if necessary. Show employees that their mental health is a top priority.

5. Don't set it and forget it

Safeguarding your lawyers' mental health is an ongoing journey. Your firm can't simply make wholesale changes today but push mental health to the backburner tomorrow. Continually check in, ask what you can do better, and seek to improve your approach to mental health in your law firm.

You might not get your approach right the first time around. However, minor improvements here and there quickly add up.

The final word on improving mental health in law firms

Law firms are slowly realising the impact of failing to address poor mental health in the legal profession. Those who adopt a proactive approach, encourage employees to be open and implement preventative measures will improve the legal sector. Best of all, by prioritising lawyers' mental health, they'll improve the lives of their most valuable asset.

Read more on this topic from Aoife Greally, Clio's People Business Partner for EMEA and APAC: How lawyers can improve physical and mental wellbeing at work

Frequently asked questions

Can you be a lawyer with a mental illness?

With excessive hours and heavy workloads, the legal profession can be challenging on a lawyer's mental health. However, that doesn't mean that lawyers with mental illnesses can't thrive in their roles. With an open mindset and the right strategies in place, legal professionals and firms can create an environment that boosts their well-being.

Is being a solicitor stressful?

The work of a solicitor is stressful by nature. A competitive culture and long hours can lead to high levels of anxiety, burnout, and exhaustion among lawyers. Yet, these challenges can be overcome by taking a proactive approach and implementing preventative measures to improve mental health in law firms.

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