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Everything You Need to Know About Wellness in the Legal Community

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Wellness is not an adjective often used to describe the legal community. Studies show that mental, emotional, and physical health issues have become more common among legal professionals as they struggle to deal with the demands of their chosen careers.

In 2019, The ABA and Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation conducted a national [study](#) on attorney substance abuse disorders. The project, which included 15,000 attorneys from 19 states, highlighted some shocking statistics among licensed, employed attorneys:

- 21% are problem drinkers
- 28% suffer from some level of depression
- 19% reported anxiety issues

In comparison to other professions, lawyers are [reportedly](#) three times more likely to suffer from depression, according to the American Psychological Association. Additionally, the legal industry has the 11th-highest incidence of suicide among professions.

Why is Wellness a Problem Among Legal Professionals?

Legal professionals typically deal with numerous demands on any given day. The myriad of cases, clients, deadlines, and expectations seemingly never end.

When working in a stressful law firm environment, some attorneys feel they need to sacrifice their own self-care in order to succeed in their professions. This decision can have detrimental effects on legal professionals, potentially leading to mental health challenges and substance abuse.

The entire legal industry is notorious for unhealthy work habits. It's no secret that attorneys commonly clock 70-to-80-hour work weeks and these practices may extend to operations and support professionals like legal secretaries and paralegals. Working this many hours leaves little room for personal time, family, physical activity, or even sleeping. It also contributes to a pattern of poor eating choices and elevated stress levels.

Studies show that the stress of working too many hours raises cortisone levels within the body, increasing the risk of stroke, diabetes, and cancer. According to a [study](#) done by The University College London, the risk of heart disease increases by 67% for people who work long hours compared to people who work a standard eight-hour day.

Another report, published in the American Journal of Epidemiology, suggests that long work hours can lead to long-term brain damage or dementia. Researchers found that middle-aged workers who clock more than 55 hours a week develop diminished mental skills at a higher rate. These deficiencies show up as short-term memory loss and the reduced ability to recall words when compared to those working a standard 40-hour week.

The ABA has started to recognize how problematic the lack of attention to individual wellness has become. In 2017, the ABA House of Delegates approved Resolution 106 which amended the ABA Model Rule for Continuing Legal Education (CLE) to include at least one hour of mental health and substance abuse credit every three years. Several states have followed suit with mandatory mental health or substance abuse CLE courses.

Achieving Wellness Within the Legal Community

Wellness is not a one-size-fits-all concept because different people need different strategies to help them feel healthy and at their best. Wellness includes an improved work-life balance, better stress management, and a positive mindset that prioritizes self-care. Unfortunately, many law firm environments make it difficult for legal professionals to achieve a level of wellness. Demands for billable hours coupled with demands from numerous clients can make a work-life balance impossible.

The Individual Approach

For the individual, the path to wellness is a very personal journey. You may have to practice different strategies before finding a routine that builds positive habits within your life. There is no magic pill or secret recipe. Wellness requires a holistic approach that touches various aspects of your life to craft a more sustainable and healthy work-life balance. This may include some of the following elements:

- **Nutrition** – Working long hours often means a lot of fast and convenient food, which can equate to unhealthy eating habits. By taking steps like preparing healthy meals at home, you can greatly improve your health. If you find cooking to be too time-consuming, healthier take-out options or a meal delivery service can also be helpful.
- **Mindfulness** – Taking time each day for self-reflection is an important strategy for overall wellness. Whether it's meditation, yoga, or prayer, quieting the mind is a powerful tool that brings relaxation and calmness into your daily routine. The tech world is filled with apps to help with mindfulness using guided meditations or calming sounds. Taking a pause to check in with yourself each day proves highly impactful for wellness.
- **Physical Activity** – Wellness must include some aspect of physical activity. Studies show that sitting at a desk day after day increases the risk for heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and high blood pressure. Whether you spend your lunch break taking a walk or shut your office door for an impromptu afternoon dance break, any level of physical activity is better than a sedentary lifestyle. It improves physical health while also strengthening mental wellness, promoting a sharper memory, better sleep, and improvement of your overall mood.
- **Mental Health** – With so many daily demands, legal professionals need mental health resources and support. Unfortunately, this is an industry where vulnerability is seen as weakness instead of a natural part of life. Attorneys do not feel safe seeking assistance or talking about their feelings out of fear that it could have a detrimental effect on their careers. So, instead, they suffer in silence. This is why an industry-wide conversation about wellness is so necessary. With open and

honest conversations, individuals feel more empowered and secure about reaching out for the help they need.

The Law Firm Approach

Many law firms fail to classify employee well-being as integral to the firm's existence, but the legal industry has a responsibility to promote wellness among its members and employees. Lack of transparency about wellness promotes the stigma that exists around attorney mental health. Firms are uniquely situated to address these issues by making wellness an aspect of their overall firm culture.

Wellness policies have become a common expectation among job seekers, so firms can better situate themselves competitively to attract new talent with these policies in place. They also promote a more enjoyable workplace, which can improve the firm culture.

Law firms need policies in place that include some of the following provisions:

- **Encourage time off and leave** – Attorneys often give up their paid time off in exchange for more working hours. Law firms can discourage this type of behavior by addressing policies that punish attorneys for taking time off. Firms can also allow sabbaticals for associates and partners every few years as an opportunity to recharge.
- **Promote acts of service** – Attorneys can become unfulfilled by feelings of cynicism and burnout, making them question their choice of professions. You can help fight against these feelings by encouraging your professionals to take on acts of service like pro bono cases or volunteering at legal clinics. These small actions can make attorneys feel more fulfilled and counter feelings of depression.
- **Provide wellness education** – Develop a firmwide program that provides education and encourages conversation about health and wellness. This could come in the form of monthly forums or regular fitness challenges. Lunchtime conversations about nutrition, healthy habits, and employee resources also prove useful. Firm members need awareness about the mental health services and benefits that are available to them so that they know how to quickly access them in times of need.

10 Quick Strategies to Promote Wellness

- Talk to someone you trust to alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- Recognize when you are overwhelmed by negative thoughts and feelings.
- Trade in the stress of constant multi-tasking for the focus of working on one task at a time.
- Park further from your building and get your steps in walking to the office.
- Practice mindfulness for at least 10 minutes each day.
- Download a health app that helps track physical activity, sleep, and water intake.
- Spend some time outdoors each day.
- Declutter your surroundings.
- Pay it forward with volunteer or pro bono work.
- Stand up while working.

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