

COMMONWEALTH LAWYERS ASSOCIATION • CLE PRESENTATION

Law and Health

Mental, Physical and Social Health in Lawyers

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WHAT WE ARE GOING TO COVER



01

How unhealthy are we?



02

Why are we unhealthy?



03

Mental, physical and social health



04

Consequences of being unhealthy



05

Improving the situation



06

Small steps now, big dividends later

QUALIFICATIONS



Where the data comes from

Most of the statistics cited in this presentation relate to the United States and Canada. There are no PNG statistics focusing on lawyer health.



Who is in the room

Many of the lawyers here today are not private practice lawyers, but rather judges, government lawyers, corporate lawyers and law students.



Severity differs by role

Although the same health issues are relevant across the profession, the severity may differ depending on the particular legal occupations concerned.



PNG is a different setting

Finally, PNG is arguably a more benign environment for lawyers than many other places.

INTRODUCTION

1

What I saw

2

What I experienced

3

Why I decided to do something about it

4

What taking corrective action now can do for you



LAW- THE MOST UNHEALTHY PROFESSION

Every profession has an origin myth about its own suffering — doctors cite sleep deprivation, soldiers cite trauma, academics cite low pay. Lawyers have generated an unusually large and consistent body of research confirming their complaints go well beyond folklore.

A landmark 1990 Johns Hopkins University study comparing 104 occupations found lawyers had the highest rate of depression of any profession studied — a finding later research has not overturned.

Traits that make good lawyers — competitiveness, scepticism, perfectionism, an appetite for conflict — are the same traits research links to vulnerability to depression.



Methodological caution is warranted: studies vary in sample, country, era, and instrument, and few researchers have benchmarked every profession on identical measures at once.

3x

the depression rate of
other professions

2x

the rate of substance
abuse

Top 5

career for suicide risk

MENTAL HEALTH — DEPRESSION & SUICIDE

Survey data from the American Bar Association and the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation found that roughly 28% of licensed attorneys reported depression, nearly twice the general population rate. Anxiety rates were even higher, around 19%, compared to 5 to 7 percent in the general working population at the time.



17.5%

of surveyed lawyers met symptom criteria equivalent to a major depressive disorder diagnosis — with elevated odds across every severity band of depressive symptoms measured.

Occupation	Estimated depression rate	General population baseline	Relative risk increase	Primary data source
Food service / hospitality	14–17%	8–16%	~1.5–2×	SAMHSA National Survey on Drug Use and Health
Healthcare workers	20–28%	8–16%	~2–3×	JAMA meta-analysis (Rotenstein et al.)
Legal professionals	~28%	8–16%	~2–3×	ABA / Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation study
Social service workers	15–20%	8–16%	~1.5–2×	BMC Public Health systematic review
Creative professionals	15–25%	8–16%	~1.5–2.5×	Multiple epidemiological surveys

BY THE NUMBERS



ABA – Hazelden Betty Ford study

≈ 13,000 U.S. attorneys surveyed

≈ 1 in 5

qualified as problem drinkers

≈ 1 in 4

reported mild or serious depression

3 in 4

declined to answer an anonymous drug-use question



Canadian Bar Association survey

1,180 members surveyed

58%

reported significant stress and burnout

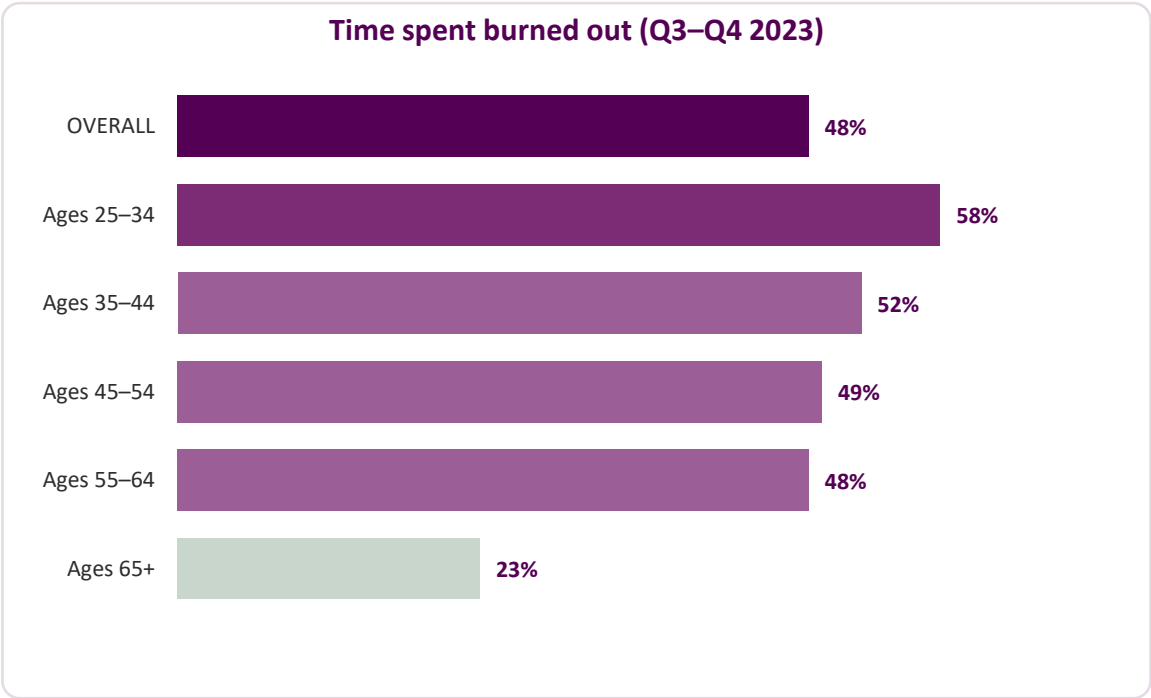
48%

reported anxiety

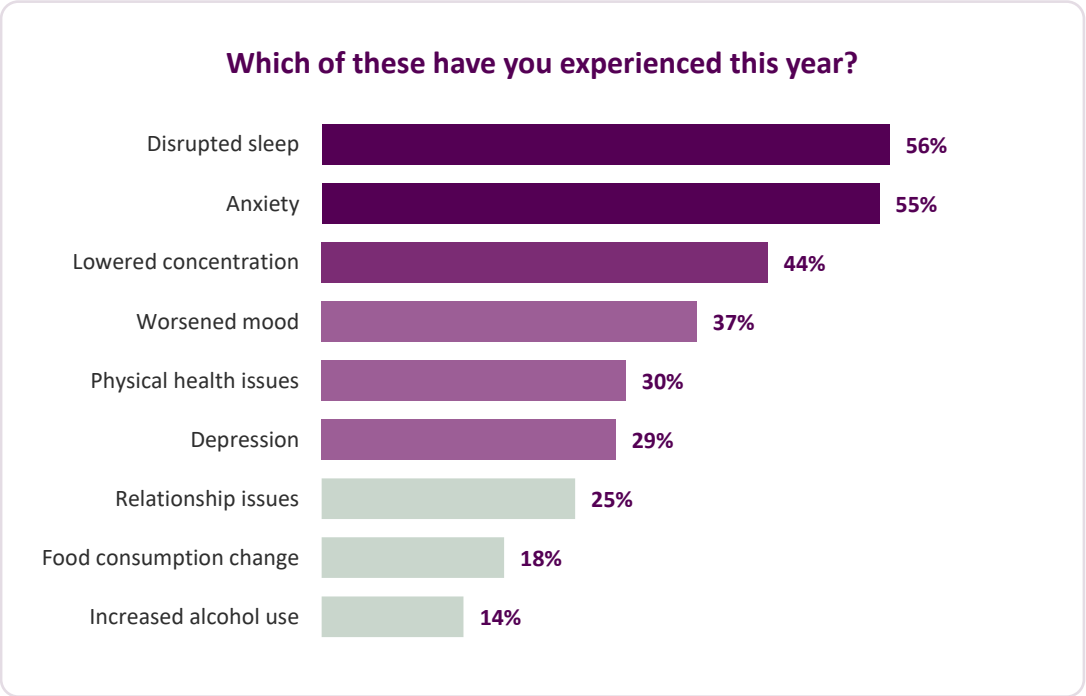
25%

reported depression

BLOOMBERG LAW WELL-BEING DATA



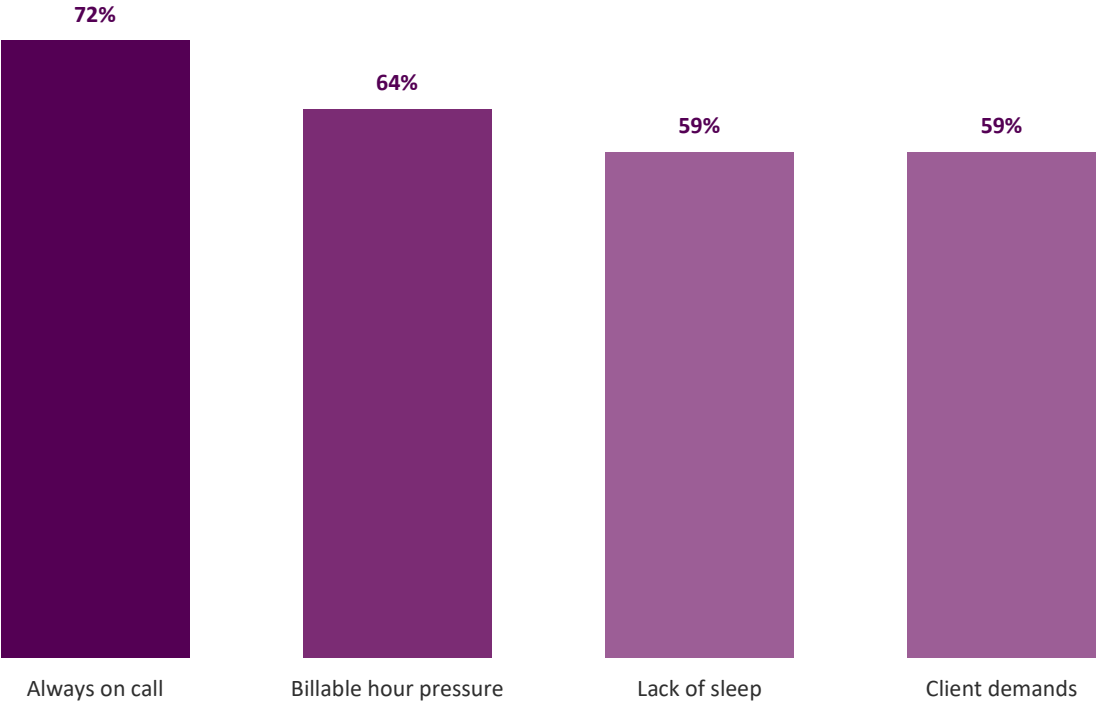
Attorneys experiencing significantly worsening well-being reported being burned out 77% of the time. Burnout may be linked to poor work–life boundaries: although attorneys took an average of nine days off in late 2023, more than three-quarters worked on at least half of their days off.



Most attorneys experienced disrupted sleep and anxiety in 2024, with these issues affecting both wellbeing and work performance. Among those reporting anxiety or depression, 40% had a medical diagnosis — rising to 60% of mid-level associates, but falling to 30% of partners.

THE SECOND MOST SLEEP-DEPRIVED OCCUPATION

Most commonly cited workplace problems



Law has been described as the United States' second most sleep-deprived occupation — a ranking researchers link directly to elevated risk of anxiety, depression, and impaired professional performance.



More than 70% of managing partners and general counsel surveyed admitted their firms did not push back on unreasonable client demands for constant availability.



Lawyers who bill by the hour are professionally rewarded for the very behaviour — staying up late finishing “one more thing” — that most reliably damages the cognitive faculties their work depends upon.

ISOLATION

Lawyers spend their days negotiating, arguing, and advising — yet research on lawyer suicide risk identifies loneliness and overcommitment as significant predictors of suicidal ideation, independent of workload alone.

1 in 5

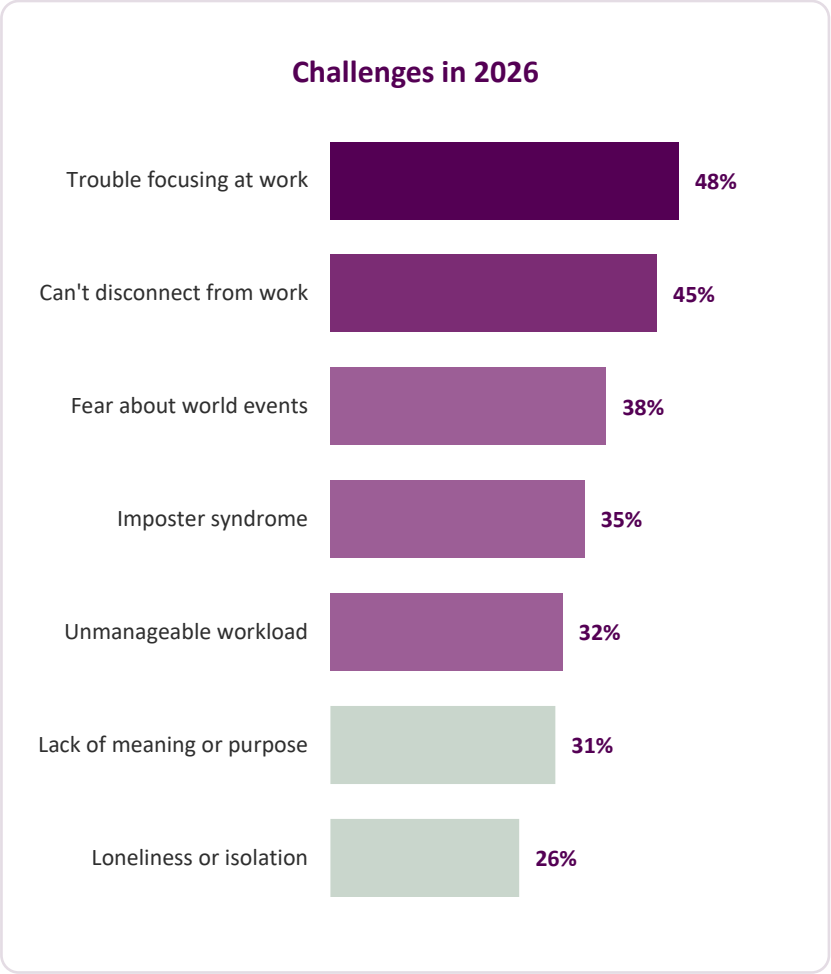
legal professionals had experienced bullying, harassment, or discrimination at work (LawCare)

2 in 3

respondents said their work had caused personal relationships to suffer

≈ 3 in 4

said working conditions were directly contributing to their own anxiety, depression, or substance use



Source: LawCare wellbeing research; Justin Anker et al. (2023) Int'l J Environmental Research and Public Health; 2024 Attorney Well-Being Survey.

WHY ARE LAWYERS UNHEALTHY?

The reasons differ depending on the individuals concerned and the particular category of health issue (mental, physical and social) that is being addressed.

Nevertheless, there seem to be a number of common threads:



Personality



Job structure



Nature of the profession



Sedentary



Diet and lack of exercise



Isolation

Some of these we will explore in greater detail.

WHO CHOOSES LAW, AND WHAT IT DOES TO THEM



Personality

Legal work selects for and rewards competitiveness, pessimism, and perfectionism — traits the wider psychology literature links to depressive vulnerability.

Martin Seligman's research on lawyer unhappiness argued pessimism is a professional asset — it sharpens the ability to foresee what can go wrong for a client — but becomes psychologically corrosive when carried home.



Job structure

Occupational health research shows jobs combining high demand with low decision latitude — limited control over how, when, and in what order tasks happen — are especially damaging to mental health.

Litigation deadlines, court timetables, billing targets, and client demands leave many lawyers with enormous responsibility but little control over their own time — a textbook risk factor for anxiety and depression.

SLOWER RISKS, COMPOUNDING OVER A CAREER

Beyond acute fatigue, legal work carries the slower physical risks common to any desk-bound, high-hours profession.



Sedentary work

General medical guidance from the Mayo Clinic notes prolonged sitting is associated with obesity, metabolic syndrome, and elevated cardiovascular and cancer mortality risk — independent of exercise undertaken outside working hours.



Substance use

36.4%

of lawyers screened positive for hazardous drinking or alcohol dependence, compared with 15% among physicians — despite both professions working comparably long, high-stakes hours.

RELUCTANT TO ADMIT THEY ARE SUFFERING

Law students and professionals do not like to admit when they are struggling — and the data on disclosure bears that out.



75%

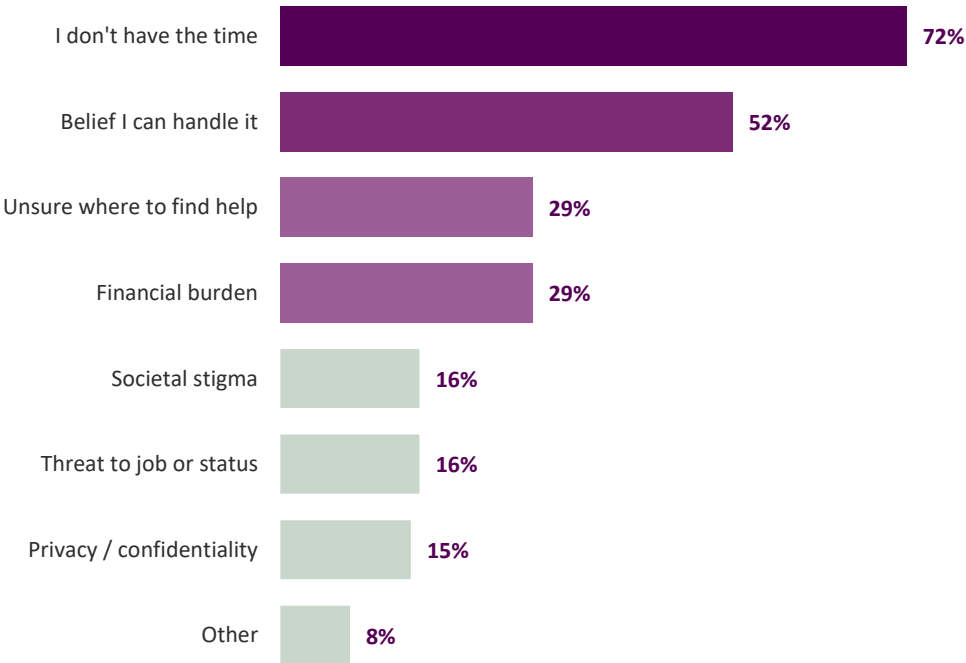
of ABA–Hazelden respondents declined to answer even an anonymous question about drug use — attributed to stigma and fear of professional consequence.



56%

of legal professionals who had experienced mental ill-health in the past year had discussed it at work, per LawCare's large-scale wellbeing research.

Why are you delaying seeking treatment?



WHAT CAN BE DONE



For individual lawyers

- Treat sleep as a professional asset, not a luxury — it directly affects concentration, judgment, and mood regulation
- Monitor alcohol and substance use honestly, since hazardous drinking rates among lawyers substantially exceed comparable professions
- Seek support early — stigma and delay are consistently linked to worse long-term outcomes
- Protect time for relationships outside work as a buffer against isolation and loneliness
- Exercise regularly and eat well — the simplest interventions are the ones that compound over a career



For law firms and other employers

- Review billing and availability expectations that reward constant accessibility over sustainable performance
- Train supervisors to recognise early distress and respond supportively, given the link between poor supervisory support and burnout
- Build confidential, genuinely used support pathways — stigma, not lack of provision, is the primary barrier to disclosure

SUMMARY

- As lawyers we need to be very conscious of the risks which this profession poses to our health.
- The good news is that it is possible to be a lawyer and still be healthy.
- Managing the two, however, is not easy and requires hard work and discipline.
- Spend the time required to maintain a healthy lifestyle.
- Avoid the pitfalls of too much sitting down, bad diet, excessive alcohol and substance use, and lack of regular exercise.

We only get one shot at this life. Make sure that you live long enough to enjoy the fruits of your hard work.



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