

In February 2024, Forbes released an article indicating over 20% of Americans struggle with mental health, with 6% having experienced serious mental health conditions, such as bipolar and severe anxiety. [1]

In the legal community, mental health has been a major concern even before the pandemic. In 2016, the ABA conducted a study of over 12,000 lawyers, finding 28% of those responding attorneys experience depression, while 19% experience anxiety, and 23% experience stress. [2] These averages are higher than any other profession in the United States. Id.

These statistics have become increasingly concerning among young attorneys and associates. The following are ways to defend against the negative impact of mental health

#1. LEARNING TO SAY NO

It is imperative to our mental health. With only 24 hours in a day, we cannot attend every professional and social outing. Yet, we constantly agree to do so. Managing these outings and working 15-hour days leads to quick burnout and significant stressors as an attorney. Here are a few tips:

Determine how many events you would like to attend a week:

Pick your number of events and stick to it. Once you exceed that number, politely decline and ask for a save the date reminder so you can possibly attend next year. Having a set number of events will eliminate your anxiety and stress and allow you time to recharge your social battery. It is better to politely decline to attend than RSVP and not to show up.

Determine your capacity for the assignment before agreeing to the assignment:

Capacity and ability are different factors to consider as an attorney. Ability is the intelligence and work ethic to complete the assignment, whereas capacity is having the time to complete it. A lack of capacity does not mean a lack of ability. Often, we agree to take assignments only to realize we have no time to complete the assignment, even if giving it our best efforts. To help eliminate stress, anxiety, and protect our mental health, we must get organized and practical about what tasks we can, or cannot, take on.

Therefore, when the partner assigns work, ask questions to help you determine your role in the case. Based on the answers, you can determine whether you have the capacity to complete it. This allows you to maintain a sense of control, organization, and allows the partner insight into your time management skills. Again, it is better to decline the assignment than accept it and ultimately turn in poor work product because you lacked the capacity to get it done.

Ask for assistance:

To gain the respect of your colleagues, take ownership of your decisions when you realize you may have taken on more than you can handle. Do not be afraid to tell your partner, division head, chief of court if you need assistance. While these types of conversations often present anxiety and stress as we generally do not know the outcome, they are conversations that need to happen immediately. No partner prefers an associate to struggle and not complete an assignment when the associate could have asked for help. While challenging, these conversations are beneficial and often lead to a less stressful work environment. They allow you to showcase your professional maturity to ask for help when you recognize you cannot meet the assignment requirements. Ultimately, you will eliminate the repeated mental stress you experience after you agreed to do a hundred assignments but later realize you cannot handle it all. Supervisors and partners can only help if they know you need it. Be okay with saying "I am at capacity right now." and "I need help."

#2. LEARNING TO CLOSE YOUR LAPTOP

In the words of Kenny Rogers, "You got to know when to hold him, when to fold him, and when to walk away." When I was in law school, my friends would always laugh at me because my study schedule concluded at 7pm every night. Over the years of self-reflection, I learned studying past 7 pm was not beneficial for me because I was not retaining the information. There will be days when you must work long hours, but you must set boundaries. Often, we work twelve-to-fifteen-hour shifts with nothing to really show for it. We lose sleep and time with our families and pets, all to never unplug from our laptops. We should ask, "How has this helped me?" Remember, all of those "to dos" will be there when you return to the office.



JORDAN A. CARTER
ASSOCIATE
STEWART LAW GROUP PLLC

#3. LEARNING IT IS OKAY NOT TO BE OKAY

Often, we are scared to admit we have a problem, or we need help because of the stigma around mental health, specifically in the legal profession. You are a vital part of your team. When you are not working at your best, others around you cannot operate as their best. Your light encourages others to shine. So, when a problem arises and you need help, ask for it. You will be healthier and stronger for doing so long term.

The beautiful thing about being a lawyer is the American Bar Association has excellent resources available to lawyers and law students concerning mental health. These resources are one away, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/profession_wide_anti_stigma_campaign/ To close, protecting your mental health is a strength, not a weakness. Remember, you are the only person with you 24/7. You are responsible for you.

[1] See Duszynski-Goodman, Lizzie. Mental Health Facts and Statistics. February 21, 2024, Forbes, www.forbes.com/health/mind/mental-health-statistics/.

[2] Krill, Patrick R. JD, LL.M.; Johnson, Ryan MA; Albert, Linda MSSW. The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys, Journal of Addiction Medicine 10(1): p 46-52, January/February 2016. | DOI: 10.1097/ADM.000000000000182.

NEED TO HUDDLE?

Contact me at
jcarter@stewartlawgrp.com