



## COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

### **All in the Family:** **How Stress Affects Attorneys and Those They Love**

**By Guest Authors: Jessica Warren & Zach Warren**

We all know that the practice of law can exact a toll in terms of stress, anxiety and overall quality of life. For decades, these challenges were considered occupational hazards — side effects of committing to such a career. More recently, however, there has been a growing chorus within the legal field that seeks to combat this notion by considering meaningful ways to support attorneys and other legal professionals. Larger firms and legal organizations are implementing meaningful employee wellness initiatives; bar associations and other trade groups provide support programs for their respective members; and traditional models of compensation are shifting toward a system that rewards quality over quantity. While these are positive developments, life as an attorney still has its challenges, and the potential consequences can extend to families as well.

In order to address the many challenges attendant to practicing law, we must first examine them from individual and systemic perspectives. This means marshalling the courage to share when we are struggling as practitioners and also shining a bright light in the dark corners of our industry to make manifest the prevalence of substance abuse, feelings of isolation and suicidal thoughts. By acknowledging these issues, we can send a clear and unequivocal message: No one is immune to the stress of practicing law, and we are prepared to advocate for ourselves and our community.

Many of the articles detailing the hardships of practicing law suggest that all lawyers face similar challenges in terms of stress and the rigors of maintaining a high-quality practice, regardless of individual circumstances. But this characterization flies in the face of the on-the-ground realities of practicing law in very different contexts. To be sure, there are some issues that seem nearly universal to the practice of law, the effects of which may extend to law partners, friends, associates and family members. But not all practices are built the same and many have unique challenges. For instance, in a BigLaw context, many lawyers point to the tyranny of the billable hour as the primary source of stress. For the sole practitioner, balancing practice management, business development and legal practice can feel overwhelming. Plaintiff-side lawyers similarly face the prospect of feast-or-famine business cycles and the difficult decision to walk away from a meritorious but “low-value” case due to financial realities within the firm.

The culture within the legal profession necessarily holds practitioners to a high standard. Representing another's interest within the legal system is an honor and a privilege, and something worth safeguarding at all costs. Nevertheless, lawyers are human too! Mistakes happen; deadlines are missed; and meaningful opportunities to advance a client's interest are squandered. The consequences are real — and so is the pressure. As a result, it can sometimes feel as though every second you're not tending to your law practice, you're failing your client(s) and increasing the risk of professional liability. Yet focusing exclusively on one's practice and neglecting the very things which support wellness and wholeness is perhaps the ultimate personal risk. In the zero-sum game of time management, this feeling is familiar to most of us, and it has surely scuttled more than one law practice.

Within the family system, these issues can play out in ways that are fundamentally damaging to intimate partner relationships and the early attachment needs of young children. When it comes to coping with stress, attorneys often find themselves in a catch-22 situation: Stress at work leads to long hours, which takes the place of healthy coping strategies (e.g., exercise, connecting with friends, good sleep hygiene and nutrition), which then leads to greater stress and increased unhealthy coping strategies (e.g., substance abuse, poor diet and lack of sleep). This negative feedback loop can have an outsized impact on important relationships and fuel undesirable behaviors, such as irritability, argumentativeness, disconnection and detachment.

Chronic stress can also result in clinical depression if left unaddressed or untreated. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University found that lawyers suffer from major depression at a rate of 3.6 times higher than other employed persons. As we all know, there is a difference between being physically present and being emotionally present, or truly engaged and attuned to those around us. When stress and anxiety occupy a lot of emotional space, partners can be left feeling abandoned, alone and disconnected from their attorney-partner. Similarly, children may feel as though their own social, emotional or psychological needs are secondary to the pressures of an attorney-parent's career, despite the best intentions of attorney-parents.

The long-term effects of disconnection can leave lawyers at an increased risk for divorce, infidelity and a fragmented family life. Recent studies have estimated that the divorce rate among attorneys is at least 25 percent. Similarly, workplace pressures often seem incompatible with the realities of maintaining a healthy home life, especially with respect to childcare. According to the National Association of Law Placement Foundation, two-thirds of female associates will leave their firms within five years. Many attorney-parents feel like the only viable option is to leave the field altogether. In short, where the organizational culture requires a full commitment in terms of time, attention and talent, it is easy to abandon other important things in life in the pursuit of a successful legal career.

There is good news, however, and not all is lost! There are many healthy, proactive ways of managing stress and its impact on our relationships — from counseling and meditation to exercise and volunteering. One of the most effective ways of addressing stress and anxiety is slowing down to increase our personal awareness of it in the first place. This could be as simple as implementing a daily body scan. Pay attention to where you're holding stress in your body. Start at the top of your head and slowly move down your body to identify areas that feel tense, tight, heavy or painful. With each area of your body, acknowledge the sensation and release it, softening that specific area while taking a deep breath before moving on. This small practice might run counter to fast-paced workplace environments, which is precisely the point that it is important to slow down.

Within the family system, creating small rituals of connection — tucking children into bed, recurring date nights, reading a book together, walking the dog and journaling — can be immediate steps of reaching out to your children or your partner. Creating space and intention to focus just on the couple's relationship is vital, especially when children are present. Family therapists will often encourage couples to focus intently on the partner relationship first, including suggesting specific activities like creating vision statements for their relationship, identifying what each person wants for themselves and what they want to give the relationship, and sharing them together. If these activities are too overwhelming, family therapy can also be a safe space for couples or families to navigate themes of disconnection, misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Another protective factor for attorneys and others facing demanding professional expectations is creating a strong sense of community. The benefits of building and maintaining strong relationships with other attorneys extend far beyond business development or networking opportunities: They create a sense of belonging. We all know that sharing our experiences and relating to our peers can feel cathartic. But research also demonstrates that surrounding ourselves with people who can truly empathize with our challenges and celebrate our successes is key to our sense of wholeness. And when we feel “seen” in our personal and professional lives, the quality of our work improves, and we are more able to invest in the things that provide lasting meaning and contentment in our lives.

There is tremendous strength and courage in first acknowledging that practicing law is a privilege — but one that comes with a cost. It is up to attorneys and others in the legal services industry to advocate for ourselves in the way that we advocate for our clients. When attorneys take care of themselves and one another, they continue providing excellent services to their clients. Attorneys owe it to their community, colleagues, friends, partners and children to be the best version of themselves possible at a given moment in time. But more than anything else, they owe it to themselves. If you are struggling (or know another attorney who may be

struggling), please lean on the resources at the Colorado Lawyer’s Assistance Program and other attorneys in the community as well.

## About the Authors



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