Lawyer Burnout and Anxiety: How to Recognize and Prevent Lawyer Burnout

Summary: Many lawyers suffer from job-related stress and anxiety, and few combat it well.

- Anxiety: It could literally kill a lawyer.
- Burnout: This also could kill a lawyer.
- So what happens if you quit, or should you even consider quitting?
- Maybe, but not until you read the alternatives offered in this article.

Law is a difficult profession. It demands nearly everything a purveyor of all things legal can give. After that, the law profession demands even more.

This is especially true of young associate lawyers, particularly those young associates who are in their first through third year of practice until then hopefully, they graduate to a more senior level of lawyer. But even at that point, the practice of law grows no easier.

40-hour workweeks are reserved for someone else’s dream job. For the typical BigLaw lawyer, 60 to 80 hours of billable time is the expected norm.

Of course, seasoned lawyers know about this. Nothing new about hard work, late hours and long hours makes them blink their deadened eyes. You could hold a gun to their head and their reaction more often than not would be the same.

Being a lawyer translates into being available. And being available means you as a lawyer are always available.

Vacations are out. Holidays are nonexistent. And relationships, such as girlfriends and boyfriends, marriage, and even parenthood are frowned upon.

Essentially, this is because you’re a lawyer now. You’re a person who has knowingly put themselves on a track that, sure, you can jump off of. Problem is, once you leave the practice of law, even for a brief period of time, your law career is pretty much vaporized.
It’ll take a miracle of recruiting, networking, rosaries rubbed and fingers crossed to be hired by another law firm, BigLaw notwithstanding.

You may as well find another line of work.

Because when you begin lawyering, you’re lawyering for life. You can stop when you’re dead.

**The Partner Track**

You might – no, you should wonder how this can happen? How can a job of such high respect and regard, a job in which you’ve prepared yourself for since undergraduate, maybe even earlier, evolve into such an utter train wreck?

Easy, it’s called the partner track.

The partner track is an inside term used from lawyer to legal recruiter and anyone else affiliated with the world of law and law firms in which an associate will do literally anything to become partner.

Of course, you’ve heard of these types of legal practitioners. They have no...

- Boyfriend, girlfriend, spouse, family
- Outside interests
- Family to speak of
- Plans for marriage – that’s a laugh
- Plans to have a family – an even bigger laugh

No, these kinds of lawyers are the terminators of the legal profession.

They are always at work, and when at work, they’re always working. They bill an obscene amount of hours each week, and produce whatever it is they produce like one-trick pony sausage factories.

Granted, it takes a special person to be this type of lawyer. They are by far suited to partner tracks in which huge amounts of billable hours and production fall from their fingertips, while their portable books of business is enough to make existing partners salivate over their Brooks Brothers solid-patterned ties.

But what about the rest of us who aren’t necessarily partner track material? What if we don’t want to make partner? What if what we’re doing as far as the practice of law goes, is for the greater good of fairness within our society, not an egotistical climb up the rungs of legal aristocracy?

Well, to be honest, if we already think like this, we’re probably already fired – or if not fired, then bat-shit crazy due to what our job has done to and made of us!

**Traits to Get Anxious About**

In an article appearing on the ABA Journal, titled, “How lawyers can avoid burnout and debilitating anxiety,” it is explained that lawyers suffer from two character traits—perfectionism and pessimism.

According to Gayle Victor, who worked as a consumer debt attorney for 25 years before leaving law to become a social worker, perfectionism and pessimism are so prevalent among lawyers that the two traits can make attorneys prone to anxiety.

"Perfectionism helps lawyers succeed in practice because the profession is excessively detail-oriented," Victor explains.

Victor goes on to state that in a Johns Hopkins study, it was found that optimism outperformed pessimism—except in the legal profession, because lawyers are hired to always look out for what can go wrong. Of course, it’s not out of the ordinary that stressed-out lawyers account for 75 percent of Victor’s practice, Care for Lawyers, which is based in Evanston, Illinois.

If in the least, the article suggests that taken to the extreme, perfectionism for an attorney transforms into a feeling that nothing is good enough.

"Attorneys develop an overdeveloped sense of control, so if things don’t go as planned, they blame
themselves. They think they didn’t work hard enough or they were careless,” explains Tyger Latham, a Washington, D.C.-based psychologist who treats many lawyers and law students. “Lawyers are expected to predict the future, to anticipate threats and guard against anything that could arise. So, they learn to see problems everywhere, even when they don’t exist. And they start to perceive threats as if they’re life-or-death matters. That’s the very definition of anxiety.”

The article explains that what can then happen is that looking for risk and problems moves beyond just being a job or a profession and becomes the way lawyers approach their lives.

“It’s like coming home with four A’s and a B and only focusing on the B. Mistakes are not tolerated well. Plus, the atmosphere of law offers minimal support amidst the high pressure,” says Alan Levin, who spent 34 years as a labor and employment lawyer before co-founding the Care for Lawyers therapy practice with Victor.

Levin goes on to say this contributes to a profound sense of isolation for lawyers. As a result, every lawyer he sees has, without a doubt, anxieties greater than the average population.

Of course, mental health disorders can profoundly affect an attorney’s daily functioning.

Irritability, obsessive thoughts, feelings of inadequacy, difficulty concentrating, a sense of worry and impending danger, sleep disturbances, heart palpitations, sweating, fatigue and muscle tension are all side effects of anxiety and depression.

Some attorneys withdraw from peers, friends and family or engage in “maladaptive coping behaviors,” such as self-medicating with alcohol and other substances.

Attorney Will Meyerhofer, who became a licensed clinical social worker after benefiting tremendously from therapy himself, has seen “strange compensatory behavior” among lawyers eager to gain a sense of control over their lives is not out of the ordinary from what Meyerhofer has observed. Some of those antics include:

- Hair pulling
- Hand washing
- Food disorders
- Gym anorexia,

“I’ve seen weird stuff—lawyers who stay up all night playing video games (as well as) guys who use prostitutes.”

According to Jeena Cho, a San Francisco bankruptcy lawyer who blogs about anxiety and mindfulness, what’s notable about lawyers’ unhappiness is that there’s a sense of acceptance rather than outrage.

“Why do we accept this as the norm?” she asks. “Why do we have to accept that our jobs have to be miserable?”

**Being anxiety free**

Of course, within an industry as important as law is, the anxieties of lawyers were sooner or later destined to be addressed sooner rather than later.

The good news about addressing these issues is that healthy coping mechanisms are now available that are proven to reduce anxiety and depression among lawyers.

This treatment begins first with meditation, which is not surprising given the media attention it has received in recent years. And the practice is gaining momentum in the legal profession.

Law schools such as Yale, the University of California at Berkeley and the University of San Francisco now offer mindfulness courses, while in Northern California, Spirit Rock Meditation Center offers weekends solely for attorneys—the only profession-specific retreat offered at the center.

Cho, who in addition to her law practice, teaches meditation courses for lawyers, counsels attorneys on stress and anxiety management, and produces the Resilient Lawyer podcast.

Cho insists that a meditation practice will bring notable changes to stressed-out attorneys.
"Start a daily meditation practice. It doesn’t have to be long. It may just be a couple of minutes. It doesn’t even have to be a formal meditation practice: Just sit at your desk, close your eyes and breathe."

Even with that said, and said by someone who realizes and understands attorney-related anxieties, professionals such as attorneys can be resistant to meditation because of prevalent but erroneous stereotypes.

Criminal defense lawyer Brian Berson of San Francisco took Cho’s meditation course after experts at the Stanford Center for Sleep Sciences and Medicine suggested that he try meditation to help with his profound sleep disturbances.

"I have a high-stress business. All of my clients are desperate. I’ve had various sleep disorders, including waking in the middle of the night thinking about work," Berson says. "The meditation class was very soothing; and overall, it’s helped me with everything."

The basic idea, according to Berson, is to just be in the moment. "All of us have a tendency to think about other stuff no matter what we’re doing. But it’s counterproductive and prevents you from enjoying life if you’re doing something plerurable—or even if you’re doing something mundane that can be plerurable, like taking a shower. You should stop and really feel the water instead of thinking about what you need to do when you get out. When you’re walking down the street, enjoy it. Smell the air and look at the surroundings instead of thinking about where you’re on your way to. Mindfulness is more than just meditation. It’s a whole different way of thinking."

Berson continues to do online meditation sessions with Cho whenever he can fit it into his schedule. He likes the structure of a guided practice.

"It’s a really good thing for anyone with a stressful job," he says. "Most lawyers are under a lot of stress. We’re advocating for people who are desperate—not just criminal defense lawyers like me whose clients are in prison. Litigators, too, are warriors. We’ve got to fight people. The aggressive state of mind is hard to turn off. That’s stressful. It’s bad for your health and for your state of mind."

Even if lawyers don’t want to take a class or begin a formal meditation practice, Cho suggests they at least try adopting what’s called the STOP approach to daily tasks: Stop. Take a breath. Observe. Proceed mindfully.

"Studies have shown that people literally hold their breath when they look at emails. It triggers the fight-or-flight response," Cho says. She recommends simply taking one long inhale and exhale before opening your inbox.

Small changes like mindfulness can have huge implications, particularly for lawyers who tend to be incredibly disconnected from themselves.

As Karen Gifford, a lawyer-turned-executive coach and co-founder of Broad Ventures Leadership in San Francisco, says, "When you sit with your own mind every single day, you see what your thought patterns are. You soon realize that certain thoughts aren’t based on anything real or true—it’s just a pattern. So you learn not to take yourself so seriously, which is incredibly freeing. You learn not to always think that opposing counsel is this horrible human being set out to ruin your life. All of a sudden, negotiation with that person has so many more possibilities."

So do you still want to stay in law?

Despite the anxiousness, the stress, eventual burnout, and yes, even the potential for death that is part and parcel to the legal world, there are those lawyers out there who still love and desire the practice of law.

Without a doubt, these are the types of lawyers who should be celebrated. The ones who bill ginormous hours, have bible-sized books of business, or act as rain makers who bring in millions in work deserve their kudos.

But they’re not going through the hell that the majority of other lawyers go through on a daily basis; the hell that, as Winston Churchill intimated, “If you’re going through hell, keep going.”

This quote from one of the greatest statesmen modern society has known works conditionally with burned out and stressed lawyers. They are the true warriors of the legal profession, and simply for the fact that they may have – or are at least are working on a plan – to keep practicing deserves recognition.
While yes, the first inclination is to quit law altogether, those who stick it out with the ideal that their profession can still be a game changer for someone somewhere, have gone onto smaller law firms where there is less pressure on associates, and less of an importance on an associate making partner.

You practice law here then you go home afterward.

Or you go into a less stressful type of law; one in which billable hours are not the most important aspect of one’s legal career and albeit life.

So whether it is a lower stress form of practice, such as going in-house, or a specialty field that lacks the contentiousness of corporate law like environmental law (which can still be stressful in its own right), changes like this may be for the better.

To this end, carefully consider your options. Give yourself a second chance based on your desire to not get strung out and overworked. Pick your next law firm and practice area with your health and survival in mind.

Remember, a burned out, stressed out, or even dead lawyer is about as bad as having no lawyer at all.

**The Perfectionist Redux**

Levin states, that the perfectionist and competitive ideals are so entrenched in the profession that lawyers may be unaware of those questionable values and how damaging they are

"It’s great to make $1 million a year but when all your competitors are making $1.1 million or $1.2 million, that’s hugely anxiety-producing," he says. "What’s missing from all of this is the notion of quality of life, of feeling a connection and belonging in a common enterprise." What’s needed is, essentially, a profound attitude shift, he says.

Undoubtedly, a lawyer who changes the culture of their profession can curb the epidemic of lawyer anxiety and depression, according to Levin. With that said, it’s time stressed-out lawyers litigate with themselves, and in that come up with a compromise that doesn’t necessarily end their legal career. They need a chance to extend their legal career, and do so without ending their life.

**For more information, look into these articles:**

- Quitting In Droves
- Lawyers And Their “Me” Time: You Have To Keep Them Separated
- Top 11 Non-Legal Careers For Former Lawyers