The Mental State of Lawyers: Why Are They So Unhappy?

- No profession is perfect, which is especially true about the legal profession.
- But just because the practice of law has its flaws does not mean that the job has to kill you, literally.
- If you find your job as a lawyer is tearing you apart, consider these 10 tips to not only get you back into form as a lawyer, but to save you emotionally, mentally and physically.

Let’s face it: There is no perfect profession. Rarely is there a job that a person can go to and leave from five days a week with a smile on his or her face. On the contrary, most work is...well...work, and sometimes that work can be difficult to engage with.

To that end, a recent article published by Beyond Billables states what most of already know as true. That in any given situation, work included, it is difficult to tell what’s going on with another human being, even one that you feel very close to. People put on faces, hide their true feelings and disguise the state of their mental health. In a sense, they build walls to protect themselves by shutting others out. Professionals, in particular, are conditioned to put on brave faces and toughen up about their work.

While lawyers are not immune to this type of behavior, do they nonetheless still occupy a profession that has deemed them the unhappiness group of professionals in the western world?

As the Beyond Billables article cites, research from the American Bar Association states that twenty-eight percent of lawyers experience mild or higher levels of depression, 19% experience anxiety, 23% experience chronic levels of stress, and 20.6% of participants struggle with problematic self-medication, such as drinking using drugs.

Beyond Billables reached out to mental health social worker and industry authority, Robyn Bradey, for comment on this issue. Bradey explained how suicide rates within the legal profession are higher than any other (white middle-aged males being most at risk), and how the ingrained cultural/business reality can create such a toxic environment for people.

Bradey states that, “If you arrive in the legal space with any pre-existing mental health issues, you are turned into a trained ruminator, are told you can’t make mistakes and subject to extreme competition - in a lot of ways, it’s the perfect storm.”
This isn’t to say the legal profession (at least in the legacy sense) is custom designed to grind at people, but it certainly may feel that way. Within law, there’s the time commitment, the pressure to deliver, the financial pressure to meet expectations, the risk aversion and the perfectionism that get exacerbated only to put an incredible amount of torque on a lawyer’s mental and physical sanctity.

There’s also the implied pessimism that the legal practice supposedly requires, and the fact that lawyers are constantly dealing with problems. As the Beyond Billables article explains, there are the hierarchical structures without much room at the top, billing paradigms that weigh people down until lastly, there’s the ‘suck it up’ culture.

Of course, when people consider stressful professions, dentistry consistently arrives as the foremost of human-breaking jobs. Lawyers, however, aren’t far behind; they’re almost as popular as dentists in the category of depressing professions. Add it all up and it’s not hard to see how this equation has led to high attrition rates among lawyers, enormous stress, burnout, unhappiness, severe mental health issues and more than a few deaths.

This problem is well understood and documented, and for some time now, plans have been put in place to combat this depression mostly by changing the legal industry’s practices and attitudes. To that end, the Beyond Billables article suggests the following ten tips to attorneys who have just about had it with their workplace stress.

1. **Set realistic internal goals and don’t be swayed.** This should be based on your realistic capabilities and time commitments, and they should allow you to maintain your own barometer of success and not get weighed down by unreasonable asks and tasks.

2. **Get better at accepting mistakes and forgiving yourself.** Everyone is human, and mistakes are just part of that - anyone who doesn’t get that or leaves zero room for error is living in a fantasy world.

3. **Become better at prioritizing your life.** Lawyers tend to let work trump all else, and sometimes it’s got to be that way. But with a little better prioritization, you can better hold on to the things that provide balance and peace of mind in your life.

4. **Take your mental health (and that of others) seriously.** Be as serious about keeping your mental state in good condition as any other professional obligation that may be placed on you. Your mental health is tantamount to other aspects of your body and emotions.

5. **Develop more awareness of yourself.** If you find yourself being particularly affected by a case or some other stressor, find a way to offset it - this can be as drastic as removing yourself from the situation. Remember, your personal health trumps all, even important legal cases the partners hand down to you.

6. **Learn effective stress management habits.** Finding a good outlet for tension really matters. Exercise, meditate, socialize - whatever it is, do it consistently and weave it into your schedule.

7. **Accept that the practice of law is inherently stressful.** While it’s important to accept this reality, it’s not okay to succumb to it.

8. **Know how to play to your personal strengths.** People who don’t know their limitations are conceded and self-centered leading to a person who in general is miserable to be around. Don’t be this person - play your game and stick with your strengths.

9. **Maintain your balance.** No job, career or client is worth sacrificing your personal health or life. So, don’t lose sight of all the other parts of life that can get neglected as you’re sucked into the sometimes all-consuming practice of law.

10. **Follow the lead of the professionals.** Remember that true professionals know when to ask for help and delegate responsibility. This may run counter to the jocular ‘bring it on’ attitude in the legal industry, but figure out when you need help and don’t be shy in asking. Doing so is not a sign of weakness but one of wisdom.

**In conclusion**

As was said at the opening of this article, there is no perfect job. In fact, stress can in some ways lay the foundation that requires an imperfect job to be modified into something a little less imperfect. Think of yourself and your needs as you consider what you can change in your legal practice that will suit you better. This won’t eliminate the stress – nothing will. But mitigating the stress to your terms will definitely be a step in the right direction.

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

- [What’s Next After Finishing Law School?](www.lawcrossing.com)
- Are Our Days As Lawyers Numbered?
- Advocacy Jobs: What They Are And How To Get Them
- When Having Too Many Practice Areas Can Hurt You