

How the Profession I Love Took a Toll on My Health



Being a lawyer is stressful in the best of times. Rates of mental illness, fatigue, substance use and other health issues are higher for those in the law than in any other profession.

I recognize this firsthand, as the profession has exacted a physical toll on me. I am a Type 2 diabetic who takes insulin. Prior to practicing law, I was a young, energetic athlete playing ice hockey right through college and law school, and continuing during my early years as an attorney. But in the second half of life came the pressures of working long hours and balancing time for my family and other responsibilities. Over time, my health began to suffer as a result.

With the grind of billable hours, it was no surprise that at 8 p.m. most of my colleagues and I were still at the office. There were rewards that came with this sacrifice, and I'm proud of what I have achieved on behalf of clients and through bar association work. But it is still important to be mindful of striking the right work-life balance to keep our minds and bodies healthy.

Studies dating back decades have shown that lawyers are more prone to depression than are members of other professions and are at greater risk of committing suicide. Lawyers are more susceptible to stress-related illnesses like heart disease and high blood pressure. Alcohol and other substance use are also higher among lawyers than in other professions.

Perhaps the most alarming study comes from the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation and the American Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs, which revealed that of the more than 15,000 lawyers surveyed across 19 states, 21% of licensed, employed

attorneys qualify as problem drinkers, 28% struggle with some level of depression and 19% demonstrate symptoms of anxiety.

The study found that younger attorneys in the first 10 years of practice exhibit the highest incidence of these problems. The study also concluded that the stigma surrounding mental and emotional support has long been a factor in preventing attorneys from seeking the help they need.

When statistically significant portions of our profession are not personally and collectively well, the public trust is at risk. This is deeply troubling, and we must make every effort to reverse this trend.

Add to the mix the stress and unpredictability of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic that is impacting all of us, and it is clear that the legal profession is facing a wellness crisis of significant proportions.

The New York State Bar Association has long offered support and services for members struggling with attorney wellness issues after they have begun to take their toll.

Now, however, is the time to be proactive. Maintaining mental and physical health takes focus and effort, but it is far easier than regaining health after years of neglect. What is needed now is a holistic approach that takes into consideration the entirety of an attorney's health from law school through retirement.

That is why it was a priority for me as president to launch a Task Force on Attorney Well-Being, which is being ably co-chaired by the Honorable Karen Peters of Woodstock, a former presiding justice of the Appellate Division,

Third Department, and Libby Coreno, a practicing lawyer from Saratoga Springs.

Coreno and Peters bring a wealth of experience, understanding and knowledge, having worked for years on issues related to attorney wellness. Under their leadership, the task force will be taking a holistic approach, studying mental and physical well-being strategies and formulating recommendations for their implementation throughout New York's legal community.

Throughout the pandemic, Coreno has been co-moderating a unique effort to provide support through confidential Zoom sessions for lawyers, judges and law students. These sessions have provided immense comfort to those who were isolated and struggling due to the impact of the unprecedented public health crisis, which closed courtrooms and law offices.

This all-encompassing task force features nine working groups, each focused on a specific area related to wellness and the entire continuum of the legal profession – from law school to retirement. The nine working group concentrations are: Emotional Well-Being, Physical Well-Being, Substance Use and Addiction, Law Culture and Employment, Law Education, Bar Associations, Judiciary and the Courts, Public Trust and Ethics and Continuing Legal Education.

The work of this new task force is well underway. The working groups are meeting and gathering resources. The task force aims to have a final report to present to NYSBA's Executive Committee and House of Delegates next spring.

While we recognize the enormity of this effort, we are convinced of its timeliness and importance at this unprecedented moment when the legal profession – and society at large – finds itself at a crossroads and in need of big changes going forward.

My hope is that this effort will result in recommendations that will be beneficial not only to the legal community, but to other professions as we all seek to navigate the new normal wrought by the pandemic.

Overall, we must eliminate the stigma associated with mental health treatment and make it easier for all lawyers to seek out the help that they need. We all must recognize that the mental and physical well-being of attorneys is critical to the effective practice of law, protection of the public trust and the vibrancy of our profession.

SCOTT KARSON can be reached at skarson@nysba.org



COMMITTEES

Committee on Attorney Professionalism

Award for Attorney Professionalism

This award honors a member of the NYSBA for outstanding professionalism – a lawyer dedicated to providing service to clients and committed to promoting respect for the legal system in pursuit of justice and the public good. This professional should be characterized by exemplary ethical conduct, competence, good judgment, integrity and civility.

The Committee has been conferring this award for many years, and would like the results of its search to reflect the breadth of the profession in New York. NYSBA members, especially those who have not thought of participating in this process, are strongly encouraged to consider nominating attorneys who best exemplify the ideals to which we aspire.

Nomination Deadline: **October 30, 2020**

Nomination Forms: **[NYSBA.ORG/ATTORNEYPROFESSIONALISM](https://www.nysba.org/attorneyprofessionalism)**