

Putting Lawyers First

A Call to Transform Wellness in the Legal Profession and Change the Culture that Breeds Unwellness

By Jeralyn Lawrence
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The legal profession is built on dedication, high performance, and an unwavering commitment to serve. Yet beneath the prestige and purpose of the law lies an undeniable truth: lawyers are struggling. Across the country, we face an alarming rise in mental health challenges, suicidal ideations, burnout, addiction, and depression.

We are a profession in crisis.

To be a good lawyer, one must first be a healthy lawyer.

The Crisis We Can No Longer Ignore

During my presidency of the New Jersey State Bar Association in 2022–23, I launched the *Putting Lawyers First Task Force* to confront this growing epidemic. Our statewide survey, which drew responses from 1,643 legal professionals, revealed stark realities:

1. 10% have experienced suicidal ideation—that's 164 lawyers
2. 49% report burnout—twice the rate of other professions
3. 68% experience anxiety—five times the national average
4. 23% have significant depressive symptoms
5. 56% engage in high-risk drinking behaviors
6. 28% have considered leaving the profession entirely



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These are not just statistics—they represent colleagues, friends, and, for many, personal truth. And when lawyers suffer, the consequences ripple outward:

- Clients receive diminished counsel
- Firms experience turnover and morale decline
- The justice system loses both its humanity and effectiveness

Judges, too, report rising fatigue, concentration difficulties, sleep disruption, and emotional distress—yet the culture still discourages vulnerability.

What’s Driving the Decline?

Unrealistic Expectations and Structural Strain

The traditional model of legal practice demands that lawyers perform at peak capacity at all times, often under artificial deadlines and intense scrutiny. Yet this expectation disregards the human cost of constant conflict and high-stakes outcomes. The result? A profession that rewards *busyness over balance* and measures value by endurance rather than excellence.

The “Never-Off” Culture

Technology has erased the boundaries that once allowed recovery. While digital communication offers convenience—and, in some cases, enhances wellness—it has also created an expectation of perpetual availability. More than half of surveyed attorneys reported needing to respond after hours, and nearly three-

quarters work weekends. This constant vigilance places the body in a state of chronic stress, leading to exhaustion, irritability, impaired judgment, and burnout.

Importance of Remote Work

Remote practice has brought welcome flexibility and reduced commuting stress—60% of respondents said more virtual options would improve their well-being. Yet this same flexibility can deepen disconnection. After the pandemic, many lawyers reported heightened feelings of isolation and diminished community engagement.

The solution is not a return to rigid in-person models, nor complete virtual detachment. We need a *balanced hybrid approach* that preserves human connection, allows for relationship building and networking without sacrificing flexibility.

Economic Pressures and Productivity Demands

Law school debt, billable hour quotas, and staff reductions have left many lawyers overworked and under-resourced. Attorneys lacking adequate support are nearly three times more likely to experience depression or burnout. Compounding this pressure is the uncomfortable dual role of being both advocate and collector—providing legal services while ensuring clients pay for them—a hidden source of daily stress rarely acknowledged but widely felt.

A Culture of Adversarial Conflict

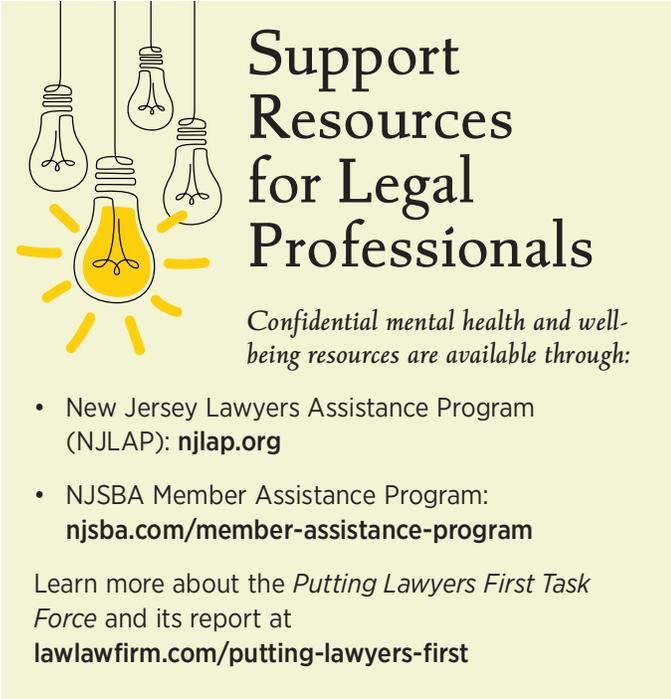
Lawyers are taught that toughness is essential and vulnerability is a liability. Incivility is too often mistaken for zealous advocacy. This mindset breeds environments of chronic stress and emotional suppression, where empathy is undervalued and burnout normalized. To survive, many lawyers feel compelled to armor up—even among peers.

Unaddressed Trauma Exposure

Attorneys regularly handle cases involving domestic violence, child abuse, catastrophic injury, and family breakdown. Such exposure can cause *secondary trauma*, yet few lawyers are trained in trauma-informed practice. Without proper support, these emotional burdens accumulate, often with serious mental health consequences.

The Stigma of Seeking Help

Perhaps the most damaging factor is silence. Many lawyers fear that admitting distress could jeopardize their careers, confidentiality, or standing before the bar. Although progress has been made—including revising Character & Fitness application



The graphic features a light green background with several lightbulbs hanging from the top. One lightbulb in the center is illuminated with a yellow glow and radiating lines. To the right of the lightbulbs, the text reads: "Support Resources for Legal Professionals" in a large, bold, serif font. Below this, in a smaller, italicized serif font, it says: "Confidential mental health and well-being resources are available through:". At the bottom, there is a bulleted list of two resources: "New Jersey Lawyers Assistance Program (NJLAP): njlap.org" and "NJSBA Member Assistance Program: njsba.com/member-assistance-program". Below the list, it says: "Learn more about the *Putting Lawyers First Task Force* and its report at lawlawfirm.com/putting-lawyers-first".

Question 12B—stigma remains a powerful deterrent. Too many suffer in silence until crisis strikes.

A System Ready for Change

The *Putting Lawyers First Task Force*—a 44-member body divided into six subcommittees—was created to examine structural causes and propose reform. We have already seen meaningful progress:

- Formation of the Supreme Court Committee on Wellness in the Law
- Expanded access to mental health care through the New Jersey Lawyers Assistance Program as well as a new NJSBA partnership with Charles Nechtem & Associates
- Revision of Character & Fitness Question 12B, reducing barriers to treatment
- CLE programming centered on wellness
- Statewide listening sessions conducted by the Supreme Court Committee on Wellness in the Law

These are significant advancements—proof that reform is possible.

Culture Change is Essential

Policy alone cannot heal a broken culture. We must redefine what success means in law:

- Wellness is not indulgence—it's foundational
- Rest is not weakness—it's essential for advocacy
- Connection is not optional—it sustains performance
- Balance is not a luxury—it's a prerequisite for justice

We must move from glorifying exhaustion to glorifying sustainability. The best lawyers are not those who endure the most—but those who lead with balance, empathy, and resilience.

Where We Go From Here

Courts can lead the way by embedding flexibility, humanity, and compassion into the structure of practice—through reasonable scheduling, granting adjournments with understanding, designating “no-court” weeks for catch-up, and reevaluating aggressive case completion mandates that strain both lawyers and judges. Judicial wellness must also be prioritized; healthy judges are essential to a healthy justice system.

Law firms and employers must recognize that mental health is not just a moral imperative—it's a business advantage. Adequate staffing, fair workloads, mentorship, and community-building all

drive retention and performance. Reducing reliance on alcohol-centric networking and normalizing the use of personal and mental health days can further strengthen workplace culture.

Finally, **individual lawyers** must reclaim ownership over their own well-being. Setting boundaries, cultivating supportive relationships, seeking therapy without fear, and staying connected to one's purpose are acts of professional courage—not indulgence. When lawyers honor their values, they sustain not only themselves but the integrity of the profession they serve.

The Health of Lawyers Determines the Health of Justice

The legal profession stands at a crossroads. If we continue on our current trajectory, we risk losing extraordinary lawyers—not for lack of skill or passion, but because the system itself and the pace of the practice is unsustainable.

No one is coming to save us. We must save ourselves—and each other.

Putting lawyers first is not selfish. It is strategic, necessary, and the only way the legal system can truly thrive. ■