

THE ENEMY OF THE GOOD: PERFECTIONISM, SELF-DOUBT AND MENTAL HEALTH IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

By Brook Greenberg¹

Introduction

Recently, I have made a number of presentations to a variety of audiences about mental health and substance use issues in the legal profession. In my presentations I generally discuss the statistics that illustrate the disconcerting prevalence of these issues and the potential remedial measures we can implement to try to better address them.

The underlying questions that inevitably arise during these presentations are, “Why?” “Why us?” “Why lawyers?” “Why are our outcomes so much worse than others?”

I have been reluctant to try to answer the “why” questions, primarily because there is a lack of reliable evidence on which to base any conclusions. Applying an evidenced based approach is particularly important in dealing with mental health and substance use issues in order to avoid making stigmatizing and unwarranted assumptions.

Notwithstanding the absence of objective evidence, a significant theme has emerged from the subjective, anecdotal accounts of individual lawyers and the struggles they have faced. That theme is the surprising extent to which perfectionism, self-criticism, impostor syndrome and other manifestations of self-doubt negatively affects so many lawyers.

Based on these accounts, it is not an overstatement to say that self-doubt is killing lawyers. Better understanding the consequences and significance of internal sources of distress may be key to achieving improved mental health in the legal profession.

This is not to say that self-doubt is the only cause of poor mental health outcomes among lawyers. Obviously, practicing law is stressful. The demands of dealing with clients, whether as in-house or external counsel, time pressures, the substantial cost of legal services, and the high stakes involved, all make a career in law challenging.

While these external stressors undoubtedly have a significant effect on the mental health of many lawyers, less attention has been paid to the internal pressures many of us place on ourselves, and the dire consequences that can result. Self-doubt appears to be particularly pernicious within the legal profession. For this reason my focus is on the effect of internal pressures, not because external pressures do not matter to mental health, but because self-doubt is both a hidden and especially toxic source of lawyer distress.

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**All of the views expressed here are my own, and are not provided on behalf of either my law firm, Fasken Martineau DuMoulin LLP, or the Law Society of British Columbia.

Scope of the Issues

Regardless of the underlying causes, the scale of mental health and substance use issues in the legal profession is troubling.

According to the landmark study, *The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys* published in the *Journal of Addiction Medicine*, the responses provided by almost 13,000 American lawyer participants were consistent with the respondents experiencing mental health and substance use issues at the following rates²:

Depression:	28%
Anxiety:	19%
Problematic Alcohol Use:	20.6%
Hazardous drinking/alcohol dependence:	36.4%
Suicidal thoughts:	11.5%

The study results are notable not only for the extent to which lawyers experience these issues, but also for the significantly lower rates encountered by other professions. For example, according to the study, the equivalent rate for hazardous drinking/alcohol dependence among physicians is 15%, as compared to 36.4% among lawyers.

A recent Canadian study has indicated that the legal profession is anomalous in that lawyers who have achieved the traditional hallmarks of career success are *most* at risk of experiencing mental health issues.³ One article described the study and its results this way:

New Canadian research suggests lawyers are more likely to experience mental health struggles the more successful they are in their field.

The study from the University of Toronto, slated for publication in the *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, compares two national surveys of thousands of lawyers in both Canada and the United States.

In both countries, researchers found a strong correlation between signs of depression and traditional markers of career success.

Lawyers holding down jobs at large firms in the private sector, widely considered to be the most prestigious roles, were most likely to experience depressive symptoms.

Researchers say the findings buck trends found in the general population, where career success is typically equated with fewer mental health risks.⁴

²https://journals.lww.com/journaladdictionmedicine/fulltext/2016/02000/The_Prevalence_of_Substance_Use_and_Other_Mental.8.aspx

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29373053>

⁴ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/successful-lawyers-mental-health-problems-1.4366675>

Assuming the results of these studies are correct, and around a third of lawyers may be dealing with some form of significant mental health or substance use issue, then even if you are fortunate enough not to be experiencing such issues yourself, someone you know and care about in the profession likely is.

Distinguishing Features of Life in Law

Other professions are also highly stressful. So, why are lawyers seemingly more susceptible to mental health and substance use issues than others working in similarly challenging careers? Some answers may be found in the nature of the profession itself. Other clues may lie in who among us chooses a life in law.

Being a lawyer means working in a profession that is adversarial in nature. Moreover, the rewards and affirmations law provides are frequently somewhat detached from the quality of one's work. Finally, the rigours of law school and practice both seem to select for those who are perfectionists and who are more pessimistic than the general population. All of these features combine to create fertile ground for mental health and substance use issues for lawyers.

An Adversarial Profession

Regardless of where one practices, lawyers virtually always have a party “on the other side”, adverse in interest and seeking to better their position at your client's expense. The *other side* is constantly watching and waiting to exploit any weakness, mistake, or problem.

All professionals dread making mistakes. But, lawyers' fears of making errors are amplified by the prospect that a mistake will be seized on and treated as an advantage by the *other side*.

The adversarial process can throw a spotlight on any misstep a lawyer makes, even where there are no substantive consequences. As a profession, law seems uniquely capable of making very intelligent people feel foolish, and highly talented people feel inadequate.

Wil Miller, a lawyer in Washington state, described the reality of practicing in an adversarial profession this way:

Yes, there are other stressful professions... Being a surgeon is stressful, for instance — but not in the same way. It would be like having another surgeon across the table from you trying to undo your operation. In law, you are financially rewarded for being hostile.⁵

Working in an adversarial atmosphere both increases stresses for lawyers, while simultaneously discouraging them from acknowledging to anyone that they are experiencing such pressures. The impulse to avoid any indication of weakness is overriding for many lawyers.

An article about lawyers and mental health issues described this dichotomy as follows:

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/business/lawyers-addiction-mental-health.html>

[R]aw vulnerability doesn't match the general impression society has of lawyers as tough and ambitious.

But research suggests that they are at much higher risk of depression, anxiety and substance abuse issues than people in the broader population — and may even be more susceptible than those in other high-stress professions, such as medicine.⁶

The adversarial nature of our profession concurrently aggravates the stresses of practice, while encouraging lawyers to keep any and all suffering under a cloak of secrecy rather than addressing them in a healthier manner.

What Law Rewards

Perfectionism and self-doubt drive many lawyers to crave affirmation in order to combat unfounded feelings of inadequacy. Yet, the compensation from a career in law often rewards things that are less meaningful to many lawyers, creates unhelpful incentives, and does not provide the sense of worth many seek.

The reality for most lawyers is that the quality of their work and the degree of their effort is not necessarily reflected in the outcomes achieved. For litigators, one can do an amazing job conducting a case and still lose. A business deal may collapse irrespective of the value of a solicitor's work. Yet, frequently, the measure of a lawyer's success is cast in terms of the very outcomes that are beyond our control, rather than how good a job one has done on a matter.

Similarly, lawyers in private practice are largely, though not exclusively, compensated for how much they work, rather than how good or valuable their work is.

These types of rewards are unconnected to what many lawyers truly desire, which is to perform challenging and meaningful work, to do a creditable job, to help their clients solve their problems, and to be considered “good counsel”.

Lawrence Krieger and Kennon Sheldon's study, cited in Eilene Zimmerman's New York Times article, *The Lawyer, the Addict*, asserts that the potential for dissatisfaction with the rewards that law provides begins for many in law school:

The psychological factors seen to erode during law school are the very factors most important for the well-being of lawyers... [T]he factors most emphasized in law schools — grades, honors and potential career income — have nil to modest bearing on lawyer well-being.”⁷

⁶ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/lawyers-mental-health-addiction-problems-1.3865545>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/business/lawyers-addiction-mental-health.html>

Krieger and Sheldon's research also shows that law students generally start out as healthy or healthier than other students and the general population.⁸ Zimmerman described the conclusions of this study as follows:

Some research shows that before they start law school, law students are actually healthier than the general population, both physically and mentally.

...

After students began law school they experienced "a marked increase in depression, negative mood and physical symptoms, with corresponding decreases in positive affect and life satisfaction," the professors wrote.

Students also shed some of their idealism. Within the first year of law school, students' motivation for studying law and becoming lawyers shifted from "helping and community-oriented values to extrinsic, rewards-based values."⁹

An emphasis on rewards that are not truly fulfilling to many law students continues and increases in practice. For many lawyers monetary compensation becomes a primary, and yet unsatisfying recognition of their work.

One of the consequences of a profession that does not reward what many lawyers truly value is that those who experience extreme self-doubt have less material with which to challenge their over-critical inner voices.

Selecting for Pessimistic Perfectionists

Law school is not just a place where students' values begin to change, but it also selects for traits that may make lawyers more susceptible to mental health and substance use issues.

Research shows that lawyers are not only generally more pessimistic than the general population, but that law school and practice encourage and reward pessimism as an attribute.

Debra Cassens Weiss writes in the *ABA Journal*:

Lawyers are often the exception to the rule. It's no different, researchers are finding, in studies of optimists.

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⁸ Krieger L.S. & Sheldon K.M., "Does Legal Education Have Undermining Effects on Law Students? Evaluating Changes in Motivation, Values and Well-Being" 2004 22(2) Behav. Sc. Law 261, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/7a44/193ddb81613e4457767c585744100083d5a3.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/business/lawyers-addiction-mental-health.html>

Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, who studies positive psychology, says most optimists do better in life than merited by their talents alone.

But with lawyers, the opposite is true.

Seligman's survey of law students at the University of Virginia found that pessimists got better grades, were more likely to make law review and got better job offers.

"In law," he told the newspaper, "pessimism is considered prudence."¹⁰

It is little surprise that law rewards those most able to identify worst-case scenarios and guard against them.

There is no similar research yet gauging the level of perfectionism among law students and lawyers, but perfectionism appears to run rampant within our profession.

Does this increased degree of pessimism and perfectionism leave lawyers more susceptible to mental health and substance use issues?

Self-Doubt as a Common Factor Among Lawyers in Distress

The role of perfectionism and toxic self-doubt in contributing to mental health and substance use issues among lawyers is currently best evidenced by the personal stories that lawyers and their families have told.

Joanna Litt recently wrote the powerful and poignant article, *Big Law Killed My Husband* in *The American Lawyer*.¹¹ In this piece, Litt recounts the suicide death of her husband, Gabe MacConaill, a well-regarded partner at Sidley Austin, and describes her attempts to understand how Gabe came to take his own life.

Litt identified a number of the traditional markers of a successful career which Gabe had achieved, including that he had:

- graduated third in his law school class;
- achieved partnership in the Los Angeles office of a large US law firm;
- become a leader of his practice group;
- chaired the firm's summer associate program; and
- won honors and recognition for his work.

¹⁰ http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/pessimistic_lawyers_more_successful_study_finds/

¹¹ <https://www.law.com/2018/11/12/big-law-killed-my-husband-an-open-letter-from-a-sidley-partners-widow/>

Despite these accomplishments, Gabe was burdened with self-doubt and a disorder referred to as “maladaptive perfectionism”. As described by Litt:

Though it’s only the beginning stages of trying to figure out why this happened, I came across a concept, *maladaptive perfectionism, that combines unrealistic standards of achievement with hypercriticism of failing to meet them.*

Gabe displayed most if not all of the characteristics. Simply put, he would rather die than live with the consequences of people thinking he was a failure.

Looking back on the things Gabe confided in me, I now know I missed a lot of signs. He told me he felt like he was doing the work of three people—and I think that’s being generous. He told me the deal to resolve the bankruptcy kept changing. He also felt that while a senior partner in Chicago was heading the case, a lot of pressure fell directly on him.

We spoke a handful of times about how he should just try to care less about the work, but knowing the kind of person my husband was, that was never going to happen. He said *he felt like a phony who had everyone fooled about his abilities as a lawyer, and thought after this case was over, he was going to be fired—despite having won honors for his work.*¹²

(emphasis added)

Perfectionism necessarily meant having standards that could never be satisfied, notwithstanding the external validation Gabe received for the quality of his work.

Litt also set out her understanding of how Gabe’s maladaptive perfectionism led him to feel he had no other path to relief from his inner pain other than death:

I feel like I lost my husband so quickly—within the course of a month—but *I’m now starting to realize how hard he must have been on himself all the time.* The constant striving to be perfect at work, to be the perfect husband, son, uncle, brother and friend. And then *living with this deep unbearable shame that he wasn’t performing to the impossibly high standards he set for himself. He said a few times how he couldn’t turn off his head, but again, I didn’t understand the severity of that statement.*¹³

(emphasis added)

¹² <https://www.law.com/2018/11/12/big-law-killed-my-husband-an-open-letter-from-a-sidley-partners-widow/>

¹³ <https://www.law.com/2018/11/12/big-law-killed-my-husband-an-open-letter-from-a-sidley-partners-widow/>

Litt alluded to the disconnect between what lawyers like Gabe value, versus the rewards the profession provides:

He wasn't focused on the bottom line or lining his pockets with more money. He cared about his clients and the hundreds and thousands of people impacted by a corporation filing bankruptcy. Not to mention, he was really good at what he did.¹⁴

Many have difficulty comprehending how those who seem to have everything going for them still feel there is no release from their pain other than to end their own lives. For maladaptive perfectionists, external markers of success help mask from others the internal suffering caused by unrelenting and unwarranted self-criticism.

Sometimes internal pain drives lawyers to contemplate suicide, while others look to self-medicate through substance use. The latter circumstances were described in a moving article that circulated widely among lawyers, Eilene Zimmerman's *The Lawyer, the Addict* (referred to above), published in the *New York Times*.¹⁵ The article recounts the death of the author's ex-husband, a partner at the Silicon Valley law firm of Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, due to complications related to intravenous drug use.

Describing her ex-husband's experiences in law, which she closely connects to his drug dependency, Zimmerman wrote:

Peter himself lived in a state of heavy stress. He obsessed about the competition, about his compensation, about the clients, their demands and his fear of losing them. He loved the intellectual challenge of his work but hated the combative nature of the profession, because it was at odds with his own nature.

...

"I can't do this forever," Peter often told me. "I can't keep going like this for the next 20 years."¹⁶

While Zimmerman did not expressly describe her ex-husband as a perfectionist, other allusions to the inner pressures he placed on himself are evident in the article:

He was intelligent, ambitious and most of all hard-working, perhaps because his decision to go to law school was such an enormous commitment — financially, logistically and emotionally — that he could justify it only by being the very best.

And he was. In law school he was editor of the law review and No. 1 in his class. He gave the speech at graduation.¹⁷

¹⁴ <https://www.law.com/2018/11/12/big-law-killed-my-husband-an-open-letter-from-a-sidley-partners-widow/>

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/business/lawyers-addiction-mental-health.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/business/lawyers-addiction-mental-health.html>

Whatever the causes of his inner turmoil, Peter sought the anesthetic effect of the intravenous drug use, which ultimately caused his death.

Recently, a friend gave me the book *Getting Off*, by Veronique Perrier Mandal. In it, Mandal tells the true story of Don Tait, Q.C., a well-respected criminal lawyer in Windsor, Ontario, whose life spiralled out of control, in part, as a result of extreme substance use and dependency. Passages from the book quoting Tait indicated that his mental health and substance use issues appeared to be rooted significantly in toxic self-doubt:

No one knew that every triumph he was to experience was accompanied by an acute wave of fear of failure. This type of scenario would become all too common, even in later years when he was at the top of his profession:

As he downed his first vodka and savoured victory, the “fat boy with a pitchfork” would whisper “You’re a fraud, you’re not as great as you think they you are. They’ll all find out you’re a fraud.” Only the rest of a forty-ouncer would quell the psychological berating, help him focus and make him feel like he was king of the world. Now, he was in charge. The taunting devil was gone. Until next time.

(*Getting Off*, at p. 45, emphasis added)

There is a striking similarity between Tait’s self-critical thoughts, and those attributed to Gabe MacConaill. Each desperately feared being revealed as “a fraud” who had fooled the world into thinking he was actually a talented lawyer.

A startling aspect of reading each of these stories is how similar they are to comments shared by friends and colleagues. While self-critical remarks seemed relatively innocuous at the time, comments reflecting extreme self-criticism, or declarations that someone “cannot keep this up,” now clang in my ears.

Those who study these issues emphasize the importance of confronting and reframing extremely negative thoughts to keep them from metastasizing. As set out below, individual lawyers can do some of this challenging and reframing of their self-criticisms. Also, as a profession we can all do more to listen to and engage with colleagues and help them to challenge such negative statements.

Self-Doubt and Diversity

It is not lost on me that each of the stories referred to above involves a white, male partner who achieved the traditional hallmarks of success in law.

Currently there is no good data with respect to the effect perfectionism and self-doubt has on diversity, or the relative lack thereof in the profession generally, and within the partnership of

¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/business/lawyers-addiction-mental-health.html>

law firms more specifically. However, it seems manifest that toxic self-doubt compounds existing barriers to entry or advancement in the legal profession, and likely has a significant negative effect on diversity within the profession.

If those with the fewest barriers can struggle so desperately with the consequences of self-doubt, the effect on those without such advantages are probably substantially greater still. These negative effects of self-doubt are separate and likely additional to the adverse consequences that research has shown affects those who are the subject of bias and discrimination.

Further study of the inter-relation between toxic self-doubt and diversity in the profession is undoubtedly warranted and necessary.

It would also be helpful to reduce stigma and feelings of isolation, to publish stories from a more diverse cross-section of lawyers who have experienced impostor syndrome and toxic self-doubt.

Lawyers Dealing with Self-Doubt

Effectively addressing issues of self-doubt, perfectionism, and impostor syndrome is extremely difficult. The internal pressures lawyers experience are not easily detected. Stigma, shame and assumptions that lawyers should be impervious to weakness combine to keep self-doubt a deeply hidden matter.

For individual lawyers grappling with self-doubt it is necessary to understand the effects that negative thoughts are having, and confront those feelings.

Fortunately, there are strategies available to do just that. Jordana Alter Confino recently wrote in *Reining in Perfectionism* published in ***Law Practice Today***, that the key to addressing perfectionism is to increase self-compassion, and to turn self-criticism into self-coaching:

As leading expert Dr. Kristin Neff puts it, practicing self-compassion involves actively comforting ourselves in the face of failure, responding “just as we would to a dear friend in need.”

Self-compassion has been linked to enhanced life satisfaction, social connectedness, and coping strategies, as well as reduced anxiety, rumination, and depression. Unsurprisingly, it is also inversely related to perfectionism.

...

To start building self-compassion, swap your inner critic for your inner coach by replacing negative self-talk with words of encouragement the next time you encounter difficulty. Neff recommends monitoring and recording critical thoughts as they arise, and then reframing them in a more compassionate, supportive way. If you’re struggling to find a positive spin, start by imagining what you would say to a close friend in your shoes, and then direct that kindness inward.

...

For additional self-compassion exercises and meditations, check out Dr. Neff's website, Self-compassion.org.¹⁸

Given that lawyers are prone to hide their struggles, the availability of self-help strategies is particularly valuable. However, challenging self-criticism on your own can be difficult.

While confidential, professional assistance may be much more effective than leaving matters to yourself, lawyers are often resistant to seeking out such support. Lawyers frequently see themselves as problem solvers and assume they can and should be able to address any challenge -- including self-doubt. However, speaking about overcoming the challenges of depression with the assistance of a counselor, Madam Justice Hollins of the Court of Queen's Bench of Alberta observed:

My counselor was fantastic, she gave me a lot of tools to deal with that sense of panic...

If I had understood what was happening, if I'd been more knowledgeable, or more vigilant or less determined to try to fix myself on my own, I could have had my depression treated much earlier in the process and it probably wouldn't have had such a big impact on my practice.¹⁹

Lawyers, of all people, should appreciate the importance of getting independent advice from a properly qualified professional.

Many law firms and other employers have employee assistance programs that include access to confidential counselling programs or psychologists. Some jurisdictions make similar assistance programs available to all lawyers and their families. Additionally, LAP programs throughout North America also provide similar support services.

In British Columbia, the Law Society makes support resources available to lawyers and their families through both the Lawyers' Assistance Program and LifeWorks.

No one should hesitate to seek assistance in dealing with toxic self-doubt or dismiss such issues as too insignificant to address. Self-doubt can be a serious and debilitating condition leading to extremely negative, but preventable consequences.

The Legal Profession Dealing with Self-Doubt

In the report *The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys*, the authors emphasize that stigma and shame are the primary barriers preventing many lawyers from seeking support. Consequently, it is critical that we address these matters as a profession, and not simply leave it to individual lawyers to request assistance.

¹⁸ <https://www.lawpracticetoday.org/article/reining-in-perfectionism/>

¹⁹ <https://www.canadianlawyermag.com/author/tim-wilbur/confronting-the-unseen-16786/>

Eilene Zimmerman provided this assessment in *The Lawyer, the Addict*:

I firmly believe that law-firm culture, particularly at big firms, has to become more compassionate and more aware of the signs that one of their own is struggling.²⁰

Having been a member of a large firm for over 20 years, I am not sure that a lack of compassion is truly the fundamental issue. I have seen many firms, including my own, rally to support lawyers with critical illnesses or injuries, or when such circumstances have occurred in their families. What is needed is greater awareness, education, openness, and acceptance with respect to mental health issues. Lack of compassion is less the problem than the failure to appreciate the parallels between physical and mental health.

That view is reinforced by Mark S. Goldstein's recent article "*Scared. Ashamed. Crippled.*": *How One Lawyer Overcame Living with Depression in Big Law*, published in *The American Lawyer*. There, Goldstein described his experiences with depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder and anxiety, as well as the support he received from his firm, Reed Smith:

On Oct. 12, I mustered the courage to inform Reed Smith of my decision to take a leave of absence. The firm was exceedingly supportive and conveyed a clear message: take all the time you need to recover.²¹

He also offered this advice:

Don't assume that others are not sensitive to or understanding of your situation. *Perhaps the most enlightening revelation of the past year, for me, has been discovering that other attorneys with whom I work, whom I respect, and who seem so poised and polished, are also suffering mental health issues and have sought/are seeking treatment for the same.* As mental health has become a more acceptable topic of public discussion, I am glad to have seen other attorneys come out of the woodwork to share their personal journeys. *Which leads me to my final point, and this is critically important: Remember that you are NOT alone.*²²

(emphasis added)

It is important for law firms and other employers to actively work to reduce stigma and increase support for those experiencing mental health and substance use issues.

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/business/lawyers-addiction-mental-health.html>

²¹ <https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/2019/02/12/scared-ashamed-crippled-how-one-lawyer-overcame-living-with-depression-in-big-law/>

²² <https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/2019/02/12/scared-ashamed-crippled-how-one-lawyer-overcame-living-with-depression-in-big-law/>

In *A Call to Deal with Impostor Syndrome, a Hidden Source of Attorney Distress* published in the *ABA Journal*, Neha Sampat provides helpful suggestions law firms and employers can and should implement to help those dealing with impostor syndrome in particular, and self-doubt issues more generally:

That means, in part, empowering individual lawyers to identify and address impostor syndrome within themselves and others through workshops, webinars, courses and coaching (as I've seen some law firms do at the new associate and mid-career levels). It means, in equal part, training senior leaders, mentors and practice group heads on what impostor syndrome is; why they should care about it; how to identify common signs and symptoms of it in their mentees, peers and teams; how to empower their attorneys to address it, and how to create a culture in the firm or department that reduces instead of feeds it.

Additionally, legal departments and firms should provide attorneys with a more balanced view of their skillset; better value their unique perspectives; and regularly recognize their ability to grow, learn and improve. This can be tough, as we are trained to focus more on failure than we do on success.

At the end of the day, the problem isn't Gabe or the scores of lawyers who, in safe spaces where they are not judged as weak, acknowledge feeling similar anxiety and pressure. The problem is our society and our profession. Why are our standards so unreasonably and inhumanely high when it comes to so many functions of our jobs, and why are our standards so unreasonably and inhumanely low when it comes to attorney wellness?²³

Sampat's point about better informed and trained mentoring is an important one. Mentoring is frequently touted as a key aspect of lawyer learning and development. How can any organization consider that it is providing good training if those doing the mentoring are not aware of and educated to address matters that may affect every third lawyer in the office?

Similarly, Sampat's call to better value the positives individual lawyers bring to practice is a way, outside of the traditional compensation process, to provide the affirmations many lawyers seek and which they require to help combat toxic self-doubt.

With respect to compensation, firms should look at the degree to which money is used to reward only the quantity of a lawyer's work to the exclusion of quality and other aspects that lawyers value and wish to have recognized.

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http://www.abajournal.com/voice/article/a_call_to_deal_with_impostor_syndrome_a_hidden_source_of_attorney_distress

In addition to the ideas provided in Sampat's article, the ABA has created the helpful Wellbeing Toolkit for Lawyers and Legal Employers that has additional information and resources.²⁴

Conclusion

Of course, we cannot make law a stress-free career, and no one would expect that. However, there are a number of things we can do to recognize and address the role toxic self-doubt plays in the negative mental health outcomes too many lawyers experience.

As a profession we can increase our awareness and understanding of the prevalence and severity of mental health and substance use issues among lawyers. We can actively strive to make it as acceptable to seek support for mental health and substance use issues as it is for physical health issues. We can work to make it normal to talk about these issues openly. We can make mental health considerations an express part of training and mentoring. We can support each other through career and life threatening mental health conditions the same way we support each other through physical disease and injury.

In respect of those who struggle with toxic self-doubt, whether in the form of perfectionism, self-criticism, impostor syndrome, or otherwise, please work (and it will take work) to understand:

- You are far from alone. Many, if not most lawyers feel the way you do at some point. Some experience self-doubt more than others, some more often than others, but it is not at all uncommon in our profession.
- You are not to blame for feeling imperfect or inadequate, or for the effects those negative beliefs may have on you.
- Recognize how much you have already accomplished just by virtue of where you are. Very few are able to qualify for law school. That is an impressive achievement in and of itself, regardless of what happens afterward. Perfectionism may or may not have helped push you to be a good lawyer, but experiencing self-doubt definitely does not make you a bad one.
- You do not have to quit the profession because you have self-doubt, no matter how oppressive those thoughts sometimes seem. There are things you can do to mitigate the effects of toxic thoughts. Asking for support is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of strength.
- If you find it difficult to take this advice to heart, do not feel bad. These issues have been stigmatized for a very long time. Nevertheless, seek out and take comfort in the stories of those who have sought support and have come out the other side feeling and doing better.

For those fortunate enough not to experience these issues ever:

²⁴ https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/lawyer_assistance/ls_colap_well-being_toolkit_for_lawyers_legal_employers.authcheckdam.pdf

- Try to understand and empathize with those who are sometimes captive to extreme self-doubt, including by analogizing mental health issues to physical health issues. Ask yourself how you would respond to a colleague if they were having challenges as a result of physical symptoms.
- If you cannot understand why someone may feel that terminating his or her own life is the only option, seek more knowledge and understanding. People who attempt suicide feel alone, unsupported, hopeless, trapped, and worthless. Understanding and empathy will help you to combat these feelings that can besiege a colleague.
- Recognize how many stories of healing and recovery start with a caring colleague who asked with genuine interest how someone was doing and then really listened to the response. Be the person who cares enough to ask and to listen in a non-judgmental way.