

Navigating Professional Burnout: Practical Strategies for Legal Professionals

Introduction

Burnout seems to be a necessary part of a lawyer's life – a rite of passage from the world of late nights, early mornings, and weekends at the office with too much caffeine. However, the damage caused by this lifestyle and attitude is more than just fatigue and missing out on a social life. Not only is burnout the leading cause of mid-level career drop out for lawyers in Singapore, legal professionals suffer from clinical depression at four times the rate than the average occupation.¹ The attributes associated with effective lawyers combined with the distinct environment of the legal profession results in a perfect storm for professional burnout.

Attributes that Contribute to Burnout

Lawyers tend to be high achieving, competitive, extroverted, and domineering in their personalities.² They also have the tendency to be argumentative and aggressive – some may argue this makes for a great lawyer. However, emotional concerns and interpersonal matters are often low priority for lawyers, and there is a higher incidence of substance abuse and psychological distress in legal professionals in general.

Environmental Factors that Contribute to Burnout

Whether in a small private practice or a large corporate firm, legal environments tend to demand very long hours, unrelenting deadlines, constant judgment on performance, competition for clients, and general concern for job security.³ In addition, lawyers are often dealing with their clients' emotions that can include stress, anger, frustration, irritability and trauma. Legal professionals often feel burdened with a responsibility over their clients' financial, emotional, and physical well-being, and there can be

Dr. Munidasa Winslow*
Promises Healthcare



Leeran Gold*
Promises Healthcare
E-mail: leeran@promises.com.sg



a significant gap between the “ideal” and “reality” for early career lawyers. Many lawyers also feel there is a gap between their need for intellectual stimulation and the less challenging elements to legal work such as administration and paperwork.

Although understanding why burnout happens seems relatively straightforward, many lawyers report feeling powerless in preventing burnout as it requires cultural shifts in their workplace. However, there are many ways to address and prevent burnout on an individual level, and this can effect change in company and professional culture over time. The first step is identifying burnout, knowing how to alleviate burnout, and then creating an action plan to prevent burnout.

Identifying and Managing Burnout

Every person has a different threshold for burnout. Practising ongoing self-reflection will help lawyers to notice patterns that lead to burnout, and the specific “red flags” that apply to them. There are six key areas to consider when identifying and managing burnout.

Sleep and Energy

Difficulties falling asleep and staying asleep can indicate burnout. Many burnout professionals wake up fatigued and never feel well rested. Some resort to taking sleep medication at night, and high levels of caffeine during the day. This can create a dangerous cycle of stimulants (“uppers”) and depressants (“downers”) that leave a person heavily reliant on medications, which have detrimental effects on their ability to work and lead a healthy life.

Common complaints from lawyers with burnout include:

1. “I have always slept three to four hours per night. I thought it was normal. I even asked my colleagues and they sleep four hours a night as well.”
2. “I struggle to get out of bed in the mornings. I need a triple shot of coffee to function.”
3. “No matter how many hours I sleep, I still wake up tired and struggle to get through the day.”

Creating healthy sleep routines, learning to switch off after office hours, and saying “no” to your boss and colleagues can help to reduce the detrimental impact of poor sleep and low energy from burnout.

Mood

Changes in mood can indicate burnout. This includes unexplained mood swings, unexpected or extreme

emotional reactions to everyday events, and/or feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and fearful. Some people with severe burnout may find that they feel numb and have little or no emotional reactions to events in their lives.

Common complaints from lawyers with burnout include:

1. “Stressed is my default mode. It is normal in my profession.”
2. “I used to enjoy challenging cases. Now it is just too much.”
3. “I have very little patience and will lose my temper at the smallest things. Once I am angry it takes a long time for me to calm down. I used to be able to handle these things but now feel overwhelmed by the daily stress.”

Practising mindfulness and meditation, learning how to express feelings in a healthy way, and talking to loved ones or a friend can help reduce stress and feelings of being overwhelmed. Many lawyers find talking to a qualified psychological therapist or counsellor can also help them manage their feelings and increase their productivity.

Cognition and Attitude towards Self, Others, the World

Listening in to our internal voice and noticing our thoughts and attitudes can help identify burnout. Burnt out professionals tend to be overly pessimistic and negative towards themselves and others, and feel that the world is a hostile or depressing place.

Common complaints from lawyers with burnout include:

1. “I used to go the extra mile for my clients or my boss, but now I just do the bare minimum to get by. I just don’t care anymore.”
2. “There is no way this can improve.”
3. “What’s the point?”

Tuning in to your inner voice and adjusting negative cognitions and attitudes can help reduce symptoms of burnout. Using positive affirmations and reducing critical self-judgment can also help to realign your cognitions and attitudes to improve mental health. Contact a psychologist or counsellor to talk about specific strategies and exercises.

Relationships

Relationships are usually the canary in the coalmine. Partners, family, and friends may be able to notice burnout well before a person notices it in themselves, especially if they tend to be high performing and have high expectations

of themselves. Burnout can lead to increased conflict in relationships, and people tend to feel distant from their partners and isolated from their friends and family.

Common complaints from lawyers with burnout include:

1. "I have not had dinner with my kids in three months. My wife is not happy about it."
2. "We used to go on dates but now I am too tired. Our sex life isn't great either."
3. "My dad is getting more and more forgetful and I feel guilty for not spending enough time with him. My mum is hassling me about it and my siblings are really disappointed in me. I just can't take time off work."

Prioritizing relationships and friendships is key to maintaining good mental health. Creating pause and taking perspective can help to alleviate guilt and refocus priorities to the areas that are most aligned with one's values. Leading a value-driven life will help to prevent burnout long-term.

Physical Health

Many people will feel the physical symptoms of burnout before they notice the mental symptoms. This can include things like poor immunity, regular headaches, gastrointestinal issues, high blood pressure, weight gain or loss, acne or breakouts, and chest pains.

Common complaints from lawyers with burnout include:

1. "I keep getting a tight chest. I went to the doctor about it, and he said there is nothing physically wrong with me – it must be stress."
2. "Sometimes I can feel my heart racing and I haven't done any physical activity. It is really unsettling."
3. "High cholesterol, high blood sugar, fatty liver, overweight ... My doctor said I need to reduce stress in my life."

Maintaining regular exercise, increasing incidental exercise, and making healthy nutrition choices can help to prevent and manage burnout. Some workplaces encourage employees to increase their physical activity by providing incentives and challenges to also enhance workplace well-being and team cohesion. This can lead to significant reduction in burnout within law firms and increase overall productivity.

Coping Mechanisms

Another key indicator of burnout is a person's tendency to rely on unhealthy coping mechanisms to get through their

daily life. This can include excessive alcohol or substance use, binge-eating, problematic pornography use, and gambling.

Common complaints from lawyers with burnout include:

1. "I need a few drinks at the end of the day to relax otherwise I will have trouble winding down and sleeping."
2. "I used to watch pornography for a bit of fun, but now it's a way to relieve stress every day. It is becoming a problem."
3. "After a really stressful day I find myself bingeing on sweets and fatty foods. It's not a good habit but I don't have the energy for self-control."

Engaging in multiple healthy coping strategies can help to reduce and manage burnout, and prevent burnout in the longer-term. This can include spending time with loved ones and friends, engaging with your religious or cultural community, doing volunteer work, and seeing a mental health professional.

Burnout and Mental Health

Burnout can lead to a host of mental health conditions, and also tends to exacerbate underlying conditions. This includes conditions such as Persistent Depressive Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Substance Use Disorders, and Behavioral Addictions such as sex, pornography use, and gambling. Many legal professionals seek psychological and psychiatric support when their problems become unmanageable and they have already felt the consequences of burnout in their professional and personal lives. Prevent burnout by engaging in self-care, seeking professional psychiatric and psychological support, and encouraging systemic change in your organisation.

** Dr. Winslow is the Executive Director and Consultant Psychiatrist of Promises Healthcare. He specializes in treating substance use and impulse control disorders, and has been treating working professionals for many years. Mrs. Gold is a psychologist with Promises Healthcare and has expertise in forensic mental health.*

For a confidential enquiry contact Promises Healthcare on 6397 7309.

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Notes

- 1 <<http://www.wolfmotivation.com/articles/burnout-a-necessary-part-of-lawyers-lives>>
- 2 Lawyer, Know Thyself: a Psychological Analysis of Personality Strengths and Weaknesses, 2004, pp. 40-41.
- 3 Stress: What Is It?" in Julie Tamminen, ed., Living with the Law: Strategies to Avoid Burnout and Create Balance, 1997, pp. 1-2.