

The Lawyers Are Not Alright

Even as rhetoric about lawyers' health and well-being has shifted, the law-practice environment (culture, workload, stigma) remains largely unchanged. This gap between words and real change sets the stage for a crucial issue: how to address the persistent risks faced by male attorneys specifically.

BY JULIE BONASSO

Last month, I buried my brother.

We lost him after a lifetime of suffering with depression and alcoholism. His story is not unique, but it is deeply personal. Like many men, he kept his pain hidden, minimizing its impact even at the end of his life.

His death cracked something open in me: a reminder of how silence can shape a life. It made me think about the countless male lawyers I've spoken to in recent years who are living with psychological challenges or problematic drug and alcohol use – often alone, often unseen. In my work, I see an unending struggle with anxiety, stress, and burnout. For years, most of those conversations have been with women. But something has been shifting. I'm hearing from men more often now; men who are struggling but rarely say it out loud.

Our industry still rewards stoicism and endurance over vulnerability. And yet, people like Dan Lukasik, a lawyer and founder of "Lawyers with Depression," speak openly and courageously about their own struggles. His thought leadership reminds us how powerful it can be when someone finally speaks the truth about their pain.¹

What I hear from my clients reflects what the data has long been telling us.

Then & Now – What's Changed Since the ABA Well-Being Report

In August 2017, the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being released its landmark report, *The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change* (the Report), which followed the earlier 2016 cosponsored study by the American Bar Association and the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation.² The Report defined lawyer well-being broadly, not simply as the absence of illness but as the ability to "thrive" in each dimension of one's life: emotional, occupational, intellectual, spiritual,

physical, and social.³ It also documented troubling baseline data: among the nearly 13,000 lawyers surveyed in 2016, 28% reported symptoms of depression, 19% reported severe anxiety, and 11.4% had experienced suicidal thoughts in the previous year.⁴

What Has Improved

Since publication of the Report, the conversation around lawyer well-being has gained some positive traction.

- Awareness of lawyer well-being has increased significantly. Many jurisdictions now have standing committees or task forces on lawyer well-being.⁵ And some leaders are emphasizing that help-seeking is part of a lawyer's ethical duty of competence.⁶
- More organizations are offering mental-health benefits and training. For example, a 2024 industry survey found that 71% of legal organizations offer some form of mental health coverage.⁷



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• In my work over the last 15 years, I've seen lawyers talking about burnout and stress more openly, signaling a softening of the stigma surrounding mental health issues (albeit slowly).

Where We're Falling Short

Yet progress hasn't been evenly matched by change.

• Despite more benefits, utilization lags, and a significant number of attorneys continue to delay or avoid care. A 2024 Bloomberg Law Report showed that even though benefits are present in many organizations, only about a quarter of attorneys reported using them, and 62% said they regularly encounter colleagues whose mental-health or substance-use issues affect their work.⁸

• Substance-use issues remain stubborn. In a 2021 multistate study published in *PLOS ONE*, nearly one in three attorneys reported that their drinking had increased during the pandemic,

with over one-half screening positive for hazardous or risky drinking.⁹ The Bloomberg Law Report found that 87% of lawyers drink alcohol – far exceeding national averages – and that one-quarter drink above recommended limits.¹⁰

• The practice of law is still structured around high billable-hour pressure, heavy workloads, and little protected time for recovery – a model that continues to erode both performance and well-being.¹¹

In short, the environment (culture, workload, stigma) remains largely unchanged even as the rhetoric has shifted. This gap between words and real change sets the stage for the next critical area: how to address the persistent risks faced by male attorneys specifically.


Seeing how my brother carried his pain alone mirrors an important trend in the legal world. The research increasingly shows that male attorneys may be less likely to seek help or to speak openly about emotional or substance-use

issues, even as their rates of problematic drinking remain elevated.¹² This aligns with the norm of stoicism in law: avoid vulnerability, soldier on, minimize symptoms. Given that, it is not enough to offer support; we must normalize men using support, telling their stories, creating safe discussion spaces, and embedding structural protections (workload, time off) that make access realistic.

Where We Go from Here

The legal profession has spent the better part of a decade talking about well-being. But if the data are any indication, awareness alone is not enough. Culture shapes behavior, and structure either reinforces or challenges it. If we want to change outcomes, we must address both.

The path forward isn't about more talk; it's about shifting how we lead, work, and care for one another. Here are a few ways to begin:



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1) Shift the tradition of stoicism.

Experienced lawyers and bar leaders can model vulnerability by sharing their mental and emotional health stories in continuing legal education seminars, firm meetings, or bar publications. This signals that asking for help is not a weakness; it's leadership.¹³

2) Make support visible and easy to access. Assign well-being liaisons, circulate confidential resource lists regularly, and integrate state-run legal assistance programs (like WisLAP, the State Bar of Wisconsin's Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program) and mental health resources into new-lawyer onboarding.

3) Change the structural incentives. Pilot "unplugged time" initiatives by starting with a one-week pilot for associates. This concrete step allows leaders to see the benefits and challenges. Revising evaluation metrics to reward sustainable practices, such as making wellness time billable or credited, can further reinforce the importance of mental health and balance in the profession.¹⁴

4) Equip managers and supervisors. Require annual training for managing attorneys on recognizing distress and responding with psychological safety, including how to spot warning

signs, make appropriate referrals, and create environments where openness is possible. This ensures that leaders have clarity on the essential skills their teams will develop and apply in their daily interactions.¹⁵

5) Create space for men to speak. Launch confidential peer circles or affinity groups specifically for male attorneys to talk openly about stress, depression, and substance use. Normalizing these conversations, especially among men, chips away at one of our most entrenched barriers: silence. To ensure confidentiality, design the groups with strict privacy protocols and secure, safe meeting environments. This reassures participants and encourages open dialogue.¹⁶

This is where visible leadership matters. Stories like those shared by Lukasik remind us how powerful it can be when someone in a position of authority names what so many experience in private.

A Different Kind of Strength

When I think about my brother, I think about everything he carried alone. I think about how familiar that quiet weight feels – not just in families but in law firms, courtrooms, and conference rooms. It's a secret I hear in the voices of

lawyers over the years, especially men, who are struggling beneath the surface while the collective rewards them for holding it all together.

We don't need another awareness campaign. We need a community in which asking for help isn't a risk, where strength isn't measured by how much pain someone can carry but by whether they reach out before it's too late. Progress requires accountability. This means tracking whether our efforts are working: Are more lawyers using the resources available to them? Are fewer reporting distress or burnout? What is the demographic breakdown of those utilizing the programs? Data can't capture everything that matters, but it can help us see whether the changes we talk about are taking hold.

My brother's story is not a lawyer's story. But it could have been. And it is, in many ways, the story of this profession. If his death can leave any legacy, I hope it's this: let's break the denial, act with courage, and create an environment in which asking for help is safe and supported. Change starts with each of us. Will we continue honoring stoicism, or will we choose to build something better – together? **WL**

ENDNOTES

¹Dan Lukasik, *Lawyers with Depression*, <https://lawyerswithdepression.com> (last visited Nov. 3, 2025).

²ABA, *National Task Force on Lawyer Well Being*, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/professional_responsibility/task_force_lawyer_wellbeing/; see also *The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change*, https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/professional_responsibility/lawyer_well_being_report_final.pdf.

³*The Path to Lawyer Well-Being*, *supra* note 2.

⁴*Id.*

⁵Inst. for Well-Being in Law (IWIL), *Update on State Task Forces As of May 23, 2023*, <https://lawyerwellbeing.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/IWIL-State-Task-Force-Updates-as-of-May-23-2023.pdf>.

⁶Kristin L. Yokomoto & Kenneth T. Little, *Attorney Well-Being Is Intertwined with Legal Ethics*, Orange Cnty. B. Ass'n (Sept. 2025), <https://www.ocbar.org/All-News/News-View/ArticleId/6822/September-2025-Ethically-Speaking-Attorney-Well-Being-Is-Intertwined-With-Legal-Ethics>.

⁷Bloomberg L., *2024 Attorney Well-Being Report: The Divide Between Health & the Legal Industry*, https://assets.bhub.io/bna/sites/18/2024/09/BLAW_2024_Well-Being-Report.pdf [hereinafter *2024 Attorney Well-Being Report*].

⁸*Id.*

⁹Justin Anker & Patrick R. Krill, *Stress, Drink, Leave: An Examination of Gender-Specific Risk Factors for Mental Health Problems and Attrition Among Licensed Attorneys*. PLOS ONE, 16(5): e0250563 (May 12, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0250563>. Of

note, this study indicates that women experience higher prevalence and severity of mental health issues compared to men. One might ask whether this is because women are more open to help-seeking.

¹⁰*2024 Attorney Well-Being Report*, *supra* note 7.

¹¹Support for Lawyers, *Billable Hours* (June 4, 2024), <https://supportforlawyers.com/the-scourge-of-the-billable-hour/>.

¹²Lawyers with Depression, *Silent Struggles: Gendered Pressures on Male Lawyers Contribute to Depression* (June 29, 2025), www.lawyerswithdepression.com/articles/silent-struggles-gendered-p pressures-on-male-lawyers-contributes-to-depression/ [hereinafter *Silent Struggles*]. See also Movember, <https://us.movember.com/about/cause>, which describes itself as the "leading charity facing men's health" and focuses on a number of key areas including mental health and suicide prevention and specifically targets research and solutions tailored to men.

¹³*Silent Struggles*, *supra* note 12.

¹⁴Karen Sloan, *Law Firms Should Let Attorneys Unplug with Billable Hour Credit, ABA Proposal Says*, Reuters (Aug. 1, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/legal/litigation/law-firms-should-let-attorneys-unplug-with-billable-hour-credit-aba-proposal-2024-08-01/>.

¹⁵Am. Psych. Ass'n, *2024 Work in America Survey: Psychological Safety in the Changing Workplace* (June 2024), <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/work-in-america/2024/2024-work-in-america-report.pdf>.

¹⁶Movember, *Helping Men Starts with a Conversation*, <https://conversations.movember.com/en/> (last visited Nov. 4, 2025). **WL**