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PUBLISHED: APR 19, 2017

# Addicted or Depressed Lawyers Need More than 'Wellness'



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## Dear Patrick:

Regarding addiction and mental health, I'm wondering what your opinion is of the increasing focus on "wellness" at many firms and even bar associations? I believe it is somewhat positive. However, I am also someone who overcame alcoholism and depression two decades ago and I know that "wellness" programs wouldn't have done a thing to help me in that endeavor. I may be

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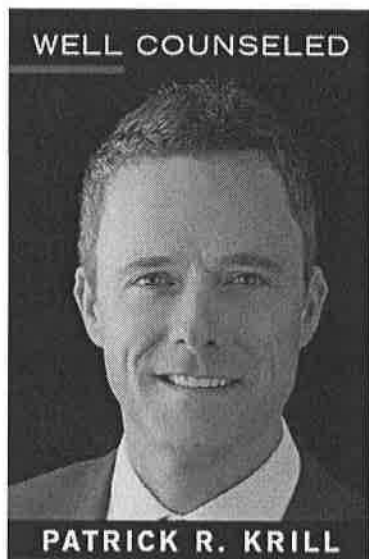


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It's a good question and, full disclosure, one that several others have asked since this column began. The short answer is that it's complicated. Neither silver bullet nor snake oil, wellness (or well-being) has the potential to be both a good and bad thing when it comes to addressing our addiction and mental health problems.



The legal profession has become, and maybe always has been, antagonistic to a state of personal well-being. We know this. The stress, long hours, lack of balance, flowing alcohol and generally unhealthy lifestyle leave many lawyers in a state of physical and psychological disrepair. Sometimes that manifests in substance abuse or mental health problems, or sometimes it is just an overall lack of feeling healthy and good about themselves or their career. So, by definition, it would seem like wellness initiatives could offer at least a partial antidote to those problems, right? Yeah, sort of.

Many wellness programs focus on or incorporate various stress management

techniques, resilience-building exercises and centering activities. Education about diet, exercise, sleep and tips for an overall healthier lifestyle are common. An emphasis on relationships, financial health, meaningfulness, personal autonomy and a sense of control are other, frequent ingredients in many thoughtfully-crafted wellness pies.

All of these concepts are positive and worth pursuing. Many of them can have an important role to play in reducing susceptibility to the onset of addiction and mental health problems or in supporting an ongoing recovery from the same. But here's the thing: They're all essentially collateral issues. They're tertiary puzzle pieces—condiments to the real meat of the matter. None of them is going to meaningfully help someone who is currently struggling with an addiction or mental health problems.

Many in the profession seem to believe that wellness is the opposite of addiction and mental health problems. It is not. The opposite of an addiction or mental health problem is recovery from that addiction or mental health problem. Wellness is part of that equation, but it is not the whole. By way of analogy, when you get a cancer diagnosis, you get treatment for and seek remission from cancer. When you're diagnosed with diabetes, you receive treatment for diabetes. Same for heart disease and so on. Point being, you address the primary illness before tackling broader lifestyle modifications and other ancillary issues. Yes, you may need to manage your stress, improve your environment, change your diet and do a host of other things, but you start with the bypass, chemo or whatever.

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education and resources about drinking and how to stop or cut back. For those grappling with severe depression, all the meaningfulness and mindfulness in the world shouldn't be trusted to keep their foot off a ledge.

Furthermore, it may surprise many to learn that it is not uncommon for lawyers struggling with an addiction or mental health problem to simultaneously be engaging in "wellness"-related activities—often to only superficial or tangential avail.

In fact, I can't tell you how many addicted lawyers I counseled who worked out regularly or otherwise maintained the outward appearance of a healthy lifestyle. Often, the reason they got up and went to the gym in the morning was to keep convincing themselves or others that they didn't really have a drinking or drug problem. Or, sometimes they may have had admitted to themselves that they had a problem, but they didn't really want to address it. Adding other elements of a healthy lifestyle were a good way to mitigate or delay the consequences of the underlying dysfunction.

By focusing too heavily on wellness as a solution to substance use and mental health problems—a practice I've heard described as "wellness-washing"—stakeholders in the profession are ultimately taking the easy way out of an uncomfortable situation. Of course, the tendency to view wellness as the more palatable (and marketable) approach to dealing with those problems is somewhat understandable. After all, it's far less challenging to get lawyers and judges to buy into—or show up for—things that don't have a stigma tacked to them.

Calling the problems what they are, and addressing them head on, is the harder, but important thing to do. It is also certain to yield better results.

Have a question? Send it to [wellcounseled@gmail.com](mailto:wellcounseled@gmail.com) (<mailto:wellcounseled@gmail.com>), and I'll see you back here in two weeks.

*Patrick R. Krill is the founder of Krill Strategies, a behavioral health consulting firm focused exclusively on the legal industry. Go to [www.prkrill.com](http://www.prkrill.com) (<http://www.prkrill.com/>) for more information.*

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