

# Mental Health and Burnout in the Legal Profession

Wellness Competence MCLE  
September 16, 2025

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ACC Southern California  
Husch Blackwell

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**James Williams serves as General Counsel at Thorn.** He provides legal and strategic guidance for the organization's mission of building technology to defend children from sexual abuse and exploitation. James navigates the unique challenges of working on child protection technology, balancing mission urgency with sustainable practices that prevent burnout in mission-critical, emotionally demanding work.

**Dr. Ilona Salmons is a Workplace Wellness, Attorney Burnout Prevention Expert.** She specializes in workplace wellness, stress management, burnout prevention, and resilience. With expertise in organizational psychology and employee well-being, Ilona helps professionals and companies improve performance, increase productivity, and build sustainable, high-performance teams.

**Mhare Mouradian is an Equity Partner at Husch Blackwell.** He is a trusted advisor and experienced litigator who brings assertiveness and strategic thinking to his handling of business disputes and other complex commercial matters. Mhare works primarily in the real estate world, dealing with commercial leasing disputes, real estate and title fraud, and breaches of contract involving construction vendors, suppliers, and manufacturers.

## MCLE OVERVIEW

Chronic stress and burnout threaten not only attorney well-being but also professional competence. In this CLE panel, distinguished in-house attorneys and a lawyer behavioral health expert will share candid insights and proven strategies for protecting your mental health while thriving in a demanding legal environment. You'll learn how to set and maintain boundaries, build meaningful support systems, and effectively advocate for yourself and your colleagues. Hosted by ACC Southern California and Husch Blackwell, the panel will discuss key burnout risk factors and warning signs and offer actionable steps for creating a sustainable, fulfilling career in the law.

## INTRODUCTION

The law is inherently demanding, characterized by long hours, high stakes, interpersonal adversity, and a culture that prioritizes productivity over personal well-being. The stresses of legal practice can be further compounded by cultural and gender expectations, workplace bias, and the persistent systemic inequities prevalent in the law. These intersecting pressures can erode physical and mental well-being, increasing vulnerability to burnout and other impairments that can compromise professional competency. This document explores the unique challenges legal professionals face in maintaining both professional excellence and personal well-being, and offers research-based, practical strategies for fostering a healthier and more sustainable career in the law.

### Recent & Landmark Studies

The fact that attorneys in the U.S. struggle with higher-than-average rates of depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation is widely documented. A landmark Johns Hopkins University study (Eaton et al., 1990) examined the rate of major depressive disorders across 104 professions and found that, even when compared with their peers in other stressful professions, lawyers had the highest incidence of depression. Additional studies have found similarly alarming trends.

- Compared with the prevalence rates of individuals in Western industrialized countries, attorneys were far more likely to suffer from depression, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse (Benjamin, Darling, & Sales, 1990).
- A University of Arizona study examined psychological distress symptoms and alcohol abuse among attorneys and found that “a large percentage of practicing lawyers are experiencing a variety of significant psychological distress symptoms well beyond that expected in a normal population” (Beck, Sales, & Benjamin, 1995).
- A 2016 ABA and Hazelden Betty Form Foundation study found that attorneys exhibit symptoms of stress, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse “at a higher rate than other professional populations” (Krill, Johnson & Alpert, 2016).
- A 2021 University of Minnesota study compared the occurrence of mental health symptoms, substance use, and attrition rates of male and female attorneys and found that the “prevalence and severity of depression, anxiety, stress, and risky/hazardous drinking were significantly higher among women” (Anker & Krill).

Attorneys are at an elevated risk of burnout due to the demanding nature of legal work. When chronic stress and burnout erode or overwhelm coping mechanisms, attorneys become more susceptible to developing depression, anxiety, and substance use issues.

## The Cost of Inequity

Inequity within the legal profession extends beyond moral considerations, directly impacting organizational performance and profitability. Disparities in opportunity and representation contribute to diminished morale, increased burnout, and substantial financial losses due to disengagement and turnover.

- Perceived inequity in the workplace can lead to decreased motivation, disengagement, and loss of productivity. Such environments foster burnout, resulting in higher absenteeism and reduced performance.
- Employees who perceive that their organization does not treat people fairly and consistently are more likely to experience burnout (Salmons, 2017). These practices contribute to increased turnover, particularly but not exclusively among marginalized groups.
- Gender-based inequities contribute to higher stress, burnout, and attrition among women attorneys (Anker & Krill, 2021).
- Women attorneys who experienced gender discrimination were more likely to report feelings of cynicism and reduced job satisfaction (Eansor & Lafreniere, 2015).
- Work-family conflict is a leading driver of attrition for women in the law. Female attorneys experiencing high levels of work-family conflict are approximately 4.6 times more likely to consider leaving the profession due to mental health concerns, stress, and burnout (Anker & Krill, 2021).
- Black attorneys are less likely to receive high-visibility or meaningful assignments (Dias, 2021; Payne-Pikus, Hagan, & Nelson, 2024) and “report significantly worse career experiences and outcomes than their white counterparts” (Woodson, 2015).
- Lawyers with disabilities report higher levels of both subtle and overt discrimination as compared to their non-disabled counterparts, including experiencing harassment or bullying and being treated unfairly in work allocation or evaluation (Blanch, Hyseni, & Altunkol Wise, 2021; Scharf & Liebenberg, 2024).
- Attorneys with “diverse and multiple minority identities” (for example, being both disabled and LGBTQ+, or LGBTQ+ and a person of color) report higher levels of bias and face additional barriers to securing workplace accommodations as compared to colleagues with only one marginalized identity (Blanck, Hyseni, & Altunkol Wise, 2021).
- Departing legal professionals take with them valuable institutional knowledge, client relationships, and specialized expertise. The time required to bring a new hire to full productivity can span several months, during which team efficiency dips and client satisfaction may suffer.

Addressing workplace bias is crucial in mitigating burnout and attrition among attorneys. By recognizing and actively combatting these biases, organizations can create a more equitable environment that supports the well-being and advancement of all legal professionals. This is essential for reducing stress, improving retention, and creating sustainable legal careers. Equity is not just a moral obligation; it’s a strategic advantage in the competitive legal landscape.

## Equity, Mental Health and Professional Efficacy

Equity is integral to ethical lawyering and sustainable legal practice. The research is clear: unfairness drives chronic stress, burnout, attrition, and ethical violations. Equitable workplaces promote psychological safety, reduce chronic stress, and help prevent burnout—all critical for maintaining the mental health, judgement, and reliability required of competent legal professionals.

- Inequity contributes to chronic stress, which impairs the prefrontal cortex—the brain’s decision-making and emotion-regulating center. A stressed out, dysregulated attorney is an ineffective attorney. Mental health is foundational to competence.
- Workplace equity strengthens team cohesion and performance, creating environments where diverse perspectives are valued and integrated into problem-solving strategies.
- A commitment to equity enhances a firm’s culture, making it more attractive to top talent. Surveys indicate that law firm culture, including diversity, inclusivity, and fair advancement practices, is a significant factor for candidates when choosing where to work (Yale Law Women+, 2024).
- Companies with more women in leadership roles see higher profitability, and benefit from enhanced collaboration, innovation, and client satisfaction (Westfahl, 2015).
- A McKinsey report on diversity found that “companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 25 percent more likely to achieve above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile” (2020).

A commitment to equity is inseparable from the duty to maintain professional competence and uphold the ethical standards of legal practice. By fostering equitable environments, employers not only support attorney well-being, but also create resilient, high-performing, and ethically sound teams.

## The State Bar of California – Rule 1.1

The State Bar of California is aware of the challenges faced by many distressed attorneys and understands the possible negative effects on an attorney’s ability and responsibility to perform their duties with competence, as outlined in Rule 1.1, revised March 2021:

- a) A lawyer shall not intentionally, recklessly, with gross negligence, or repeatedly fail to perform legal services with competence.
- b) For purposes of this rule, “competence” in any legal service shall mean to apply the (i) learning and skill, and (ii) **mental, emotional, and physical ability** necessary for the performance of such service.

By explicitly linking competence to an attorney’s mental, emotional, and physical well-being, the State Bar of California underscores that supporting attorney wellness is not optional—it is a professional obligation. Ensuring equitable, healthy work environments is therefore essential to upholding both ethical standards and the quality of legal services.



## BURNOUT OVERVIEW

The association and connection that people have with their work has long been a central topic in the research community. In the early 1900s, the subfield of industrial and organizational (IO) psychology emerged to specifically study the human experience in the workplace. This new subfield allowed researchers to examine various topics, including job satisfaction, engagement, productivity, motivation, and employee well-being.

However, the exploration into the experience of burnout—and specifically, the term itself—only entered the academic arena in the 1970s, when it was first used to describe the emotional experiences of counselors working in a free crisis-intervention clinic. Even then, it was understood that burnout was not just an individual phenomenon, but that it could also occur at the departmental or large-scale organizational level. In fact, most recent studies have confirmed this suspicion, demonstrating that it is the organizational and environmental influences—more so than the personal factors—that play the largest causal role in burnout.

### Definition

Burnout syndrome is characterized by three distinct yet interrelated dimensions—exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Each dimension represents a cluster of physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms commonly associated with burnout:

- **Exhaustion** encompasses the feelings of physical, mental, and emotional depletion that arise when chronic demands consistently outweigh available internal and external resources.
- **Cynicism** represents feeling detachment from one's work, colleagues, and clients, often expressed as irritability, withdrawal, or a loss of professional civility.
- **Inefficacy** accounts for a decrease in the quality or quantity of work product output, often manifesting in a decline in perceived competence and confidence.

Burnout occurs at the intersection of all three dimensions. While experiencing symptoms in only one or two areas does not constitute full burnout, it does signal heightened risk and should be taken seriously. Even subthreshold symptoms may impair concentration, decision-making, and professional judgment, and they are associated with higher risk of anxiety, depression, and substance misuse.

Because burnout develops gradually and can overlap with other physical and mental health conditions, consultation with a medical or mental health professional is recommended for accurate evaluation and early intervention.

### An Occupational Phenomenon

The World Health Organization has clarified that burnout is not a medical diagnosis or a catch-all term, but instead “refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.”

## Risk Factors

Burnout is a complex phenomenon, often emerging from the cumulative interaction of various risk factors across environmental, individual, interpersonal, and technological domains.

**Environmental and occupational** contributors include excessive workload, high billable hour expectations, limited autonomy, low error tolerance, and systemic inequities such as gender disparities and biased organizational practices. Exposure to difficult and demanding clients, traumatic case material, inadequate staffing, and a lack of recognition further exacerbate occupational strain.

**Individual** risk factors—including perfectionism, self-criticism, inflexibility of thought, low emotional intelligence, poor boundary management, and undiagnosed mental health conditions—can intensify the effects of external stressors.

**Relational and interpersonal** dynamics, such as adversarial interactions with opposing counsel, competitive internal hierarchies, and unsupportive supervisory relationships, further compound stress.

**Technological** demands—including the expectation of constant connectivity, virtual meeting fatigue, and the pressure to keep pace with evolving digital tools and AI—create a persistent cognitive and emotional load that accelerates the path to burnout.

## Symptoms

While burnout syndrome is not a medical diagnosis, researchers have identified a set of symptoms that are often associated with burnout. Individuals experiencing burnout commonly suffer from correlated symptoms that fall into one of three categories: physiological, psychological, and behavioral. Recognizing the symptoms in oneself or others is critical for early intervention.

- Burnout and chronic stress can manifest in a range of **physiological** symptoms, including persistent fatigue, frequent illness, and physical pain such as headaches and muscle tension. Over time, these symptoms may contribute to more serious health issues, including high blood pressure and weakened immune function.
- In addition to physical symptoms, burnout also takes a significant **psychological** toll—often leading to heightened anxiety, depression, irritability, and emotional instability. Left unaddressed, these symptoms can escalate into feelings of hopelessness or suicidal ideation, seriously impairing both personal well-being and professional competence.
- Unaddressed chronic stress can also give rise to **behavioral** changes, including increased substance use, poor sleep and eating patterns, and withdrawal from responsibilities or social supports. Over time, these behaviors can further isolate individuals and compound the effects of burnout, making recovery more difficult.

**If you are experiencing any of the above symptoms, do not self-diagnose. Please consult with a medical professional and mental health provider who can assess, diagnose, and treat your symptoms and their underlying causes.**



## TARGETED APPROACH

Because burnout is often the result of the complex interaction between unique environmental and personal factors, an effective strategy for managing and preventing burnout must be comprehensive and consider both: (a) your organization's culture and values; and (b) the individual needs of each employee or team. While there is no one-size-fits-all model, the most successful strategies for managing burnout and improving wellness implement a three-tier approach: (i) prevention; (ii) early detection; and (iii) rehabilitation.

### Prevention

Burnout is the cumulative result of unresolved, chronic stress experienced over time. Because the process is so gradual, the incremental changes are virtually undetectable. By the time most people notice that something is wrong, they are likely experiencing the more moderate or severe symptoms of burnout, that are debilitating to the individual, disruptive of their life, and more resistant to short-term treatment.

Because burnout is difficult to detect and treat, the most strategic approach should center on prevention, with an emphasis on education and collaboration. Educating attorneys and organizational leaders about mental health is a critical component of prevention and early intervention. Wellness initiatives, such as in-office presentations, confidential resources, informational conversations, and leadership-led well-being efforts, help normalize mental health dialogue and reduce stigma. When firms prioritize mental health education and equip leaders with the tools to support their teams, they create a culture where seeking help is accepted and supported.

Although research shows that environmental factors are the primary drivers of burnout, the responsibility for managing workplace stress is often placed on individuals. A more effective and sustainable solution requires a collaborative approach—one that engages both organizations and individuals in shaping a healthier work environment. This dual strategy includes top-down efforts, where leaders model and create supportive, inclusive systems, and bottom-up efforts, where individuals build resilience through self-awareness, skill development, and boundary-setting. Together, these approaches promote a culture of shared accountability for well-being and performance.

### Early Detection

Early detection of chronic stress and burnout is essential for effective intervention and recovery. Many attorneys delay getting help due to stigma, fears about career impact, internalized pressure to appear strong, and concerns about confidentiality or time. These barriers often lead to isolation or self-medicating, further exacerbating the problem. Recognizing even mild symptoms and seeking timely support from healthcare professionals and workplace allies, can prevent worsening mental and physical health.

### Rehabilitation

Burnout is a multifaceted condition with no singular cause or universal solution. Therefore, effective recovery requires a personalized approach that addresses both organizational and individual factors. This includes involvement from a qualified medical or mental health professional, targeted interventions to reduce environmental stressors, and workplace accommodations—such as workload adjustments, increased support, or medical leave—designed to promote recovery without penalty.

## Strategies for Managing Stress

Because burnout is difficult to detect and treat, well-being must be a priority. Wellness strategies, including daily practices for managing stress, can significantly reduce chances of burnout.

- Mindfulness and grounding techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation, improve attorneys' ability to remain present, allowing them to pause and respond intentionally rather than reactively (Sercekman, 2024).
- Psychotherapy, particularly approaches that emphasize cognitive patterns and emotional intelligence (EQ), helps attorneys navigate interpersonal dynamics and manage their own emotional responses effectively.
- Self-awareness enhances attorneys' ability to recognize and interrupt implicit bias, particularly in cross-cultural interactions. Recognizing and addressing implicit biases is crucial in preventing discrimination in and out of the workplace.
- Conflict de-escalation tactics (e.g., reflective listening, re-framing, softening tone) help mitigate adversarial communication and reduce interpersonal strain.
- Micro-practices such as three-breath pause, labeling emotions, and cognitive reframing, can be seamlessly implemented in real-time during litigation, meetings, negotiations, and even during a quick ride in the elevator.
- Regular physical activity, even in brief intervals, has been shown to lower the stress hormone cortisol levels, improve mood regulation, increase self-esteem, and enhance cognitive resilience under pressure.
- Consistent sleep hygiene—including limiting screen time before bed, maintaining a regular sleep schedule, and creating a disruption-free environment—significantly improves emotional regulation, focus, and stress recovery.
- Boundary-setting practices, such as defined work hours, protected personal time, and regularly scheduled breaks, help maintain energy reserves and prevent physical and emotional depletion.
- Peer support provides emotional validation, normalizes professional challenges, and reduces feelings of isolation. A strong community is a buffer against stress.
- Enhancing executive functioning skills strengthens attorneys' abilities to manage workload demands effectively and minimize overwhelm. This includes skills such as organization, prioritization, delegation, time management, and cognitive flexibility.

Incorporating even a few of these strategies into daily routines can build long-term resilience and protect against the cumulative effects of stress. By proactively managing stress, legal professionals can sustain performance, enhance well-being, and reduce the risk of burnout.

## What to Expect from a Mental Health Professional

You don't have to go at it alone! Meeting with a mental health professional offers the confidentiality and peace of mind to share openly without fear of judgement or professional consequences. Your therapist will ask you about current symptoms, concerns, and goals, and work collaboratively to develop a personalized treatment plan.

## Role of Law Firms & Legal Organizations

Organizational culture sets the tone for the individual experience. When law firms and legal institutions prioritize sustainable workloads, mental health, and ongoing professional development, they create environments where attorneys can thrive. Proactively addressing burnout isn't just about well-being—it's essential to preserving performance, judgement, and client trust.

- Written codes of conduct help institutionalize expectations and create shared norms, but only when fairly and consistently enforced.
- Reevaluating performance targets, ensuring equitable distribution of assignments, and incorporating value-based metrics can reduce chronic overwork and inequity in workload allocation.
- Senior partners and firm leaders must consistently model healthy boundaries and behaviors in how they manage, mentor, and advocate.
- Psychological safety is key: creating channels for attorneys to raise concerns without fear of retaliation builds trust in the organization and encourages early intervention. Anonymous reporting systems, ombudsperson roles, or third-party consultants may increase the likelihood that concerns will be reported.
- Mentorship is critical: pairing junior attorneys with eager mentors who exemplify professionalism encourages civility and camaraderie from the start.
- Adequate support staff, thoughtful hiring practices, and ongoing training and professional development ensure that attorneys are not overburdened with administrative tasks.
- Responsibly integrating AI tools for tasks such as document review, legal research, and administrative work can reduce attorney workload and free up time for higher-value analysis. However, the organization must provide training on both the capabilities and limitations of AI to build fluency with emerging technologies. Without this support, use of AI can increase errors and add to the workload rather than reduce it.
- Ongoing education on stress reduction, emotional intelligence, and communication can reinforce well-being. Integrating mindfulness programs, stress-reduction tools, and mental health support creates a safer and more productive workplace.
- Expanding confidential access to mental health services, peer support groups, and external wellness providers ensures attorneys can seek help without fear of stigma or career risk.
- Leadership training, including “the importance of providing clear and regular feedback,” improves job satisfaction and well-being (Krill, 2022). When legal professionals understand what is expected of them and how these expectations align with firm values, they report lower levels of stress and improved mental health.

Well-being isn't just an individual obligation. It's a systemic responsibility. Law firms and legal organizations have both the opportunity and the duty to shape a culture where professionalism and well-being thrive.

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## RESOURCES

Below is a list of resources available to California legal professionals.

### **Ilona Salmons, Ed.D., LMFT**

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### **American Bar Association**

[Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs](#)

### **The State Bar of California**

[Lawyer Assistance Program](#)

[LAP@calbar.ca.gov](mailto:LAP@calbar.ca.gov) | 877.LAP.4HELP

### **Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC)**

[Southern California Chapter](#)

### **California Minority Counsel Program**

[Cmcp.org](http://Cmcp.org)

### **Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation**

[Substance Use Disorders Among Legal Professionals](#)

### **The Other Bar**

Supporting Recovery in the Legal Community

[otherbar.org](http://otherbar.org)

### **Institute for Well-Being in Law**

[lawyerwellbeing.net](http://lawyerwellbeing.net)

### **Mindfulness in Law Society**

[mindfulnessinlawsociety.org](http://mindfulnessinlawsociety.org)