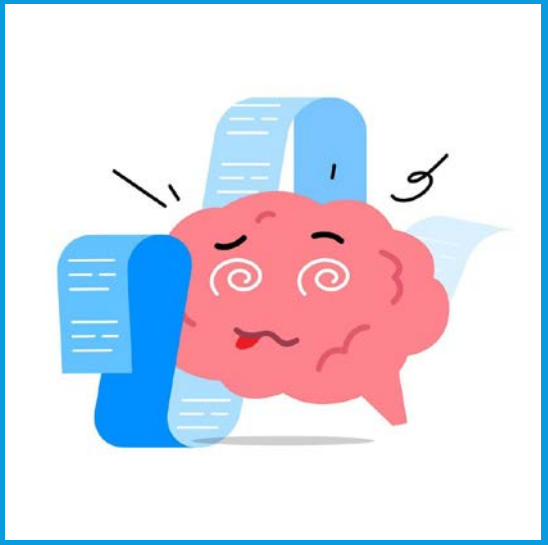
THE COST OF BEING THE PERSON EVERYONE COUNTS ON: MENTAL HEALTH, BURNOUT & BOUNDARIES IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

Premier Health

Emily Cross, MSW, LISW



LET'S TALK ABOUT THE ELEPHANT IN THE CONFERENCE ROOM

- 47.5% of lawyers reported high or very high burnout
- 41.8% screened positive for risky alcohol use
- 21.6% reported moderate-or-higher depression symptoms
- 20.4% reported moderate-or-higher anxiety symptoms
- 35.9% reported high or very high work-family conflict

- These are from the brand-new 2025-2026 ABA/Krill Strategies study of approximately 37,000 lawyers.

THIS ISN'T JUST ABOUT BEING "STRESSED"

- **STRESS → CHRONIC STRESS → BURNOUT**



- Stress - A response to demands.
- Chronic Stress - The demands continue without adequate recovery.
- Burnout -A pattern of exhaustion, mental distance/cynicism and reduced professional efficacy associated with chronic workplace stress.

- The WHO definition of burnout specifically describes it as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.

THE LAWYER'S BRAIN DOESN'T HAVE AN "OFF" SWITCH

- DEMAND → THREAT/URGENCY → ACTIVATION →

PERFORMANCE → NO RECOVERY → MORE DEMAND

The problem occurs when: Urgency becomes your baseline.

Extreme work hours are associated with dramatically higher stress and burnout



WHEN WORK COMES HOME WITH YOU



Physical health

Sleep

Parenting

WORK

Marriage/Partner

Friendships

Hobbies



& Much more!

35.9% of lawyers reported high or very high work-family conflict

THE RULES WE LEARN -- "I'M FINE"

- Be strong.
  Handle it yourself.
  Don't complain.
  Keep working.
  Don't let them see you're struggling.
  Take care of everyone else.



- What happens when those rules stop working?

ALCOHOL: WHEN COPING BECOMES A COST

- **41.8%**
- **screened positive for risky drinking**
- **26.4%**
- **met the higher hazardous-drinking threshold**
- **20.5%**
- **reported increased alcohol or other drug use attributable to legal-profession stress**
- **2.3%**
- **reported a current alcohol use disorder diagnosis**



THE BOUNDARY PROBLEM

- **Boundary = communicating what you can realistically give, when you can give it, and what happens when you can't.**
- **Examples:**
  - **“I will respond to this tomorrow morning.”**
  - **“I can meet Tuesday or Thursday. Which works better?”**
  - **“I don't have capacity to take this on right now.”**
  - **“I can handle X. I cannot take on Y.”**
  - **“I am unavailable after 6 p.m. unless this is an emergency.”**



THE 90-SECOND RESET

- **STOP**
  - Pause what you're doing.
- **BREATHE**
  - Take 3 slow breaths with a longer exhale.
- **NAME**
  - Ask: “What am I feeling right now?”
- **NOTICE**
  - Ask: “What is actually urgent?”
- **CHOOSE**
  - Ask: “What is the next right thing?”



LEARNING YOUR PERSONAL EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

GREEN:
Sleeping normally
Enjoying things
Exercising/socializing
Normal drinking
Irritated occasionally
Work stays at work

YELLOW:
Sleeping less
Less interested in pleasurable activities
Drinking more
Irritable often
Thinking about work constantly



RED:
Can't sleep/sleeping too much
Nothing feels enjoyable
Isolating
Drinking excessively
Constant anger
Can't disengage

DON'T WAIT UNTIL IT'S AN EMERGENCY

· There are resources out there to help. You are not alone!

- **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**
  Confidential mental health/substance use support through your employer
- **Lawyer Assistance Program (LAP)**
  State-specific confidential assistance for lawyers
- **ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs**
  Mental health + substance use + lawyer wellness resources
- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**
  Call/text 988
- **SAMHSA National Helpline**
  1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- **Psychotherapy / Psychiatric Care**
  Primary care, therapist, psychiatrist, addiction specialist



LOCAL HELP

Premier Health

- **Outpatient Services**

- **Premier Outpatient Behavioral Health — Warren County**
  - **401 Atrium Dr., Middletown, OH, 45005**
  - **(513)-974-6049**



SOURCES

- The 2025-2026 ABA CoLAP—Krill Strategies Research Project
  - https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/research/lawyer-well-being/