

Wellbeing *Special Section*

Content courtesy of Lisa Murray, LBA Professional Development & Leadership Director, and staff liaison to the Health & Wellness Committee.

MAY IS

MENTAL
HEALTH

AWARENESS
MONTH

Wellbeing *Special Section*

Know What You're Feeling — It Might Be Your Most Underused Professional Skill

May is Mental Health Awareness Month and this year the LBA Health & Wellness Committee is turning attention to something that rarely comes up in legal circles: emotional awareness. Not emotional expression — just awareness. The ability to recognize what you're feeling, name it and understand what it might be signaling.

For people who spend their days managing other people's crises, arguing under deadline pressure and carrying the weight of high-stakes work, that's harder than it sounds. Suppressing or ignoring emotions doesn't make them disappear — it makes them surface elsewhere, often as burnout, physical symptoms or friction with colleagues and clients. Emotional awareness is a learnable skill. Here are six ways to start practicing it this month.

1. **Name it to tame it.** Before your next stressful call or difficult meeting, take 30 seconds to identify what you're *actually* feeling. Stressed? Frustrated? Anxious about a specific outcome? Simply labeling an emotion reduces its intensity and gives you room to respond deliberately rather than react on instinct.
2. **Notice where stress lives in your body.** Legal work is cognitively demanding and it's easy to lose touch with physical cues. Tight shoulders, a clenched jaw, shallow breathing — these are your nervous system's early warning signals. Catching them before they escalate gives you more options for how to respond.
3. **Keep a brief end-of-day log.** It doesn't need to be a journal. A few words about what triggered a strong reaction, what the emotion was and what you did with it can help you spot patterns over time. Knowing your triggers puts you ahead of them.
4. **Pause before you reply.** Whether it's a tense email from opposing counsel or a frustrated client, the space between stimulus and response is where emotional awareness does its work. Even a 60-second pause — or drafting a reply and sitting on it before you send — can change the entire tone of an exchange.
5. **Reframe "negative" emotions as information.** Feeling angry after a meeting doesn't mean you've lost your professionalism — it might mean a boundary was crossed worth addressing. Feeling anxious about a case doesn't mean you're not competent — it might mean you need more preparation or support. Emotions are data. Use them.
6. **Check in with yourself the way you check in with clients.** Lawyers are trained to ask probing questions and listen carefully — to everyone but themselves. Once or twice a day, ask yourself the same question you might ask a client in distress: How are you *actually* doing? And mean it. ■

FIVE THINGS TO DO IN THE FIRST TEN MINUTES OF YOUR DAY THAT AREN'T EMAIL

Pick one. Try it for a week. The inbox will still be there.

Most people in legal work start the day by opening their inbox. Ten intentional minutes before that happens can change how the whole day feels.

1 Sit still for two minutes before you touch anything.

No phone, no screen, no podcast. Just quiet. It sounds almost insultingly simple. It works.



2 Write down three things you actually need to accomplish today.

Not your full task list. Three things. Deciding what matters before other people start deciding for you is one of the most useful habits in a high-demand job.



3 Move your body.

A short walk, five minutes of stretching, a quick trip up the stairs. Morning movement activates the nervous system in a way that caffeine alone doesn't replicate.



4 Read something that has nothing to do with law.

A few pages, a long-form piece, a poem. The point isn't the content. It's the act of directing your own attention before the day takes it from you.



5 Check in with yourself before you check in on everything else.

Ask: How am I actually going into today? Tired? Carrying something? A 30-second honest answer gives you a chance to adjust before you're already in the thick of it.



*The inbox will still be there in 10 minutes.
Your footing for the day is harder to recover once you've lost it.*

The Billable Hour and the Burned-Out Brain

The legal profession has a mental health problem it has been slow to name. According to the American Bar Association, lawyers experience depression at rates nearly four times higher than the general employed population. Anxiety, substance use and suicide are all elevated in the profession. And at the center of much of it sits a deceptively simple concept: the billable hour.

The structure itself isn't the villain. Billing time is a practical way to measure and price legal work. The problem is what happens to the person doing the billing, particularly when the metric of a good day becomes hours produced rather than work done well, clients served or problems solved.

Time pressure is one of the most reliable predictors of burnout. When work expands to fill every recoverable hour, the nervous system never fully disengages. Recovery — genuine cognitive and emotional recovery — requires periods of low demand. Without them, the brain doesn't restore. It degrades. Decision-making suffers. Attention narrows. Irritability rises. The skills that make a lawyer effective erode quietly, often long before anyone notices or says anything.

There's a second layer that gets less attention: the relationship between billable hour pressure and help-seeking behavior. Attorneys who are struggling often don't reach out because stepping back, for therapy, a medical appointment or a mental health day, feels like it costs something measurable. Every hour not billed is visible on paper. Every hour spent on well-being is not. That asymmetry shapes behavior in ways that accumulate over time.

The billable hour isn't going away. But the assumptions underneath it is worth examining.

A few reframes worth trying:

1. **Treat recovery time as non-negotiable.** Lunch away from your desk, a walk between calls, a hard stop at a reasonable hour, these aren't indulgences. They're the maintenance that keeps the work sustainable.
2. **Separate your worth from your output.** A slow billing month doesn't mean you're failing. Difficult cases, demanding clients, compounding pressure — all of these affect pace. Hours are a measurement, not a verdict.
3. **Talk about it.** Billing pressure is one of the most universal stressors in private practice and it is almost never discussed openly. Finding even one trusted colleague you can be honest with changes the experience of carrying it. Or join the LBA's Health & Wellness Committee for a safe space to talk about this and other issues affecting attorneys.
4. **Know what help looks like.** The Kentucky Lawyer Assistance Program (KYLAP) provides free, confidential support to Kentucky lawyers and law students dealing with stress, burnout, mental health concerns and substance use. Reach them at kylap.org or (502) 226-9373. ■



Legal Support Staff Are Not Okay Either

When the legal profession talks about mental health — and it is finally starting to, more seriously than before — the conversation almost always centers around attorneys. That’s understandable. Lawyers face high-pressure work, significant ethical obligations and a professional culture that has historically treated struggle as a character flaw.

But it leaves out the people sitting in the same offices, answering the same calls and working on the same difficult case files: paralegals, legal assistants, receptionists, billing staff, investigators and office administrators. The people who keep law practices running.

Legal support staff absorb an enormous amount. They hear the distressed clients. They manage scheduling around crises. They read the documents, organize the files and prepare the materials in cases involving violence, abuse, financial devastation and loss. They do this work, often without the professional training, peer networks or compensation that attorneys receive, and they come back and do it again the next day.

Repeated exposure to traumatic content is a recognized occupational hazard with a name: secondary traumatic stress. It doesn’t require direct involvement in a traumatic event to take hold. Exposure through documentation, client contact or case material is enough. The symptoms look a lot like primary trauma: intrusive thoughts, emotional numbness, difficulty sleeping, cynicism and a growing sense of dread going into work.

The legal profession hasn’t built many structures to address this in support staff. There are no mandatory well-being requirements for paralegals. Many staff members don’t know whether they have access to EAP resources, or where to find them. And because well-being conversations in many legal workplaces still default to attorneys, staff often don’t feel permission to name what’s happening.

That needs to change. And it can start with small, concrete things.



If you’re in a leadership or supervisory role:

- Check in with your staff — not about deadlines, about them. A two-minute conversation that isn’t about work output signals that they’re seen as people, not functions.
- Make sure support staff know what mental health resources they can access. EAP programs and community mental health resources should be easy to find, not buried in an onboarding packet from three years ago. The LBA offers an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for your firm through The Wayne Corporation. The EAP provides confidential support services, including counseling and resources, to help members manage personal and work-related challenges effectively. Visit <https://www.loubar.org/member-benefits/> to learn more.
- Watch for the quiet signs. Disengagement, increased errors, a shortened fuse, frequent illness, difficulty making decisions. These can all indicate someone running on empty. Address it early and directly.

If you’re a member of legal support staff:

- What you carry at work is real. The fact that it doesn’t come with a bar number doesn’t make it lighter.
- You are allowed to use whatever mental health resources your employer provides. You are allowed to name when something is hard. And you are allowed to draw a line on what you take home with you — mentally and physically — at the end of the day. ■

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

Support for you, your colleagues and your clients.

NEED HELP NOW?



Call or text 988

Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (24/7, free, confidential)



Text HOME to 741741

Crisis Text Line (24/7 support)

LOUISVILLE & KENTUCKY

Seven Counties Services

24/7 Crisis Support
502-589-4113 (Adult)
502-589-8070 (Child)

Wellspring Crisis Stabilization

Short-term residential care
502-584-2870

FindHelpNowKY.org & Dial 211

Community resources and referrals

Louisville Metro Crisis & Deflection

Call 911 and request “deflection”
Non-emergency: 502-574-7111 (option 5)

University of Louisville Hospital

Emergency psychiatry
502-562-3100

University of Louisville Hospital

Emergency psychiatry
502-562-3100

FOR THE LEGAL COMMUNITY

Kentucky Lawyer Assistance Program (KYLAP)

502-564-3795 | kylap.org

ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance

www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance

Wayne Corp Employee Assistance Program

info@waynecorp.com | 502-451-8262 | www.waynecorp.com

NATIONAL RESOURCES

NAMI Helpline

800-950-6264 | Text NAMI to 741741

SAMHSA National Helpline

800-662-HELP (4357) | Text your zip code to 435748

SPECIALIZED SUPPORT

The Trevor Project (LGBTQ+)

866-488-7386 | Text START to 678678

RAINN (Sexual Assault)

800-656-HOPE (4679) | www.rainn.org

Human Trafficking Hotline

800-373-7888 | Text HELP to 233733

WHEN TO REACH OUT

- ✓ Feeling overwhelmed, anxious or burned out.
- ✓ Struggling with substance use.
- ✓ Supporting a colleague or client in crisis.
- ✓ Not in crisis, but need to talk.



*Reaching out is a strong first step.
Support is available –
confidential, professional and
ready when you are.*

Wellbeing *Special Section*

Compassion Fatigue Is Real and Here's How to Recognize It

Lawyers and legal professionals who work closely with people in crisis — for example, in family law, criminal defense, immigration, public interest work and victim advocacy — give something of themselves in every client interaction. That's not weakness. It's what makes them good at what they do. But it has a cost, and that cost has a name: compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is the gradual erosion of empathy and emotional capacity that comes from sustained exposure to others' suffering. It's different from burnout, which stems primarily from workload and exhaustion. Compassion fatigue is specifically about the toll of caring, and it shows up in ways that are easy to dismiss or misread. Here's what to watch for.

1

You feel emotionally flat where you once felt engaged.

Cases or clients that once felt meaningful now feel like tasks to move through. You're not detached because you stopped caring. You're detached because you've been caring without replenishment.

2

You dread client contact. Not the difficult cases. All of them.

If picking up the phone or walking into a client meeting feels like bracing for impact, that's worth paying attention to.

3

You bring it home.

Intrusive thoughts about cases, difficulty being present with family, trouble sleeping because your mind won't leave work. These are signals your nervous system is saturated.

4

Your empathy has a short fuse.

Compassion fatigue often shows up as irritability, not sadness. If you're snapping at people or feeling quietly contemptuous of clients you would normally feel for, that's the fatigue talking.

5

You've stopped talking about your work, even when it would help.

Isolation is both a symptom and an accelerant. If you've stopped debriefing with trusted colleagues because it all feels like too much, that's precisely the moment to push back against the instinct to go quiet.

The Five-Minute Reset

Six quick recharge moves for a demanding profession.

01

Step outside.

Trade fluorescent lights for five minutes of daylight. Even a walk to the parking lot counts as a real reset.

02

Box breathe.

Inhale 4 counts. Hold 4. Exhale 4. Hold 4. Two rounds can shift your nervous system out of stress mode.

03

Hydrate and rest your eyes.

Fill your water bottle. Look 20 feet away for 20 seconds. Small habits, but they add up by end of day.

04

Desk stretch.

Roll your shoulders back. Stretch your neck side to side. Stand up and reach overhead. Your body keeps score.

05

Brain dump.

Write down the three things weighing on you most right now. Getting it on paper gets it out of your head.

06

Connect.

Say something genuine to a colleague, not work-related. Human connection is often the fastest antidote to stress.

Passionate about attorney wellbeing? The LBA Health & Wellness Committee welcomes new members.

Contact Lisa M. Murray at lmurray@loubar.org to get involved.