

Lawyers on the Brink: Shocking NJ Report Reveals Alarming Mental Health Crisis in the Legal Profession



A recent survey by the New Jersey State Bar Association revealed that more than two-thirds of the lawyers who responded reported feeling anxious within the past two weeks. The survey also revealed that 68% of lawyers surveyed experienced anxiety during that time period, while 56% reported a high prevalence of alcohol misuse. Even more concerning, 10% of the surveyed Garden State lawyers reported having suicidal thoughts.

This survey is part of a growing trend of states examining lawyer mental health and looking for ways to improve their well-being. The state bar released a report based on its November 2022 survey of 1,643 lawyers, which concludes that its attorneys suffer burnout, depression, suicidal thoughts, substance use disorders, and anxiety at significantly higher rates than the working population. Similar research by bar associations in New York, Massachusetts, California, and the District of Columbia has reached similar conclusions in recent years.

“We are a profession in crisis,” said New Jersey bar president Jeralyn Lawrence.

The survey found that 49% of respondents reported moderate to high levels of burnout, which is nearly twice as high as the general working population. Lawyers between the ages of 35 and 50 were significantly more likely to report burnout than those over 65. According to the report, many hours worked on weekends, isolation, and the expectation of being available outside normal business hours also correlated to higher burnout rates.

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“Lawyers hardly ever, if ever, put themselves first,” the report reads. “The court comes first, the client comes first, their firm comes first, their family comes first.”

In addition to burnout, the survey found that nearly a quarter of the respondents reported high levels of depression symptoms, while 49% reported feelings of isolation. Among the survey respondents, 28% said they were looking to leave the legal profession.

To address these issues, the New Jersey State Bar has already asked the state’s supreme court to eliminate a question about mental health conditions on the character and fitness questionnaire submitted by those seeking admission because such disclosures deter law students and lawyers from seeking help. The report recommends that the New Jersey court establish a task force on lawyer and judicial well-being, conduct further study of lawyer mental health, and allow lawyers to get continuing legal education credit for programs focused on wellness.

The legal profession needs to take a more proactive approach to address the mental health challenges facing lawyers. By establishing task forces, conducting further research, and providing opportunities for continuing education on wellness, the legal profession can take a step in the right direction toward improving the well-being of its practitioners.

It is also important for lawyers to prioritize their well-being and seek help when needed. The report highlights that lawyers often put the needs of others before their own, which can contribute to burnout and other mental health challenges. By prioritizing their health and well-being, lawyers can better serve their clients and the legal profession.