

# Lawyer Well-Being: Destigmatizing Mental Health

By MAGGIE CASTINADO

**T**his past Easter holiday weekend, I attended a yoga retreat at Gita Nagari Eco Farm and Sanctuary in Pennsylvania. I arrived back in Connecticut ready to handle all the stress this profession entails. I am a self-proclaimed “spiritual enthusiast”! Yoga and yogic principles have been a part of my life for almost a decade, but it is only in the past few years that my spiritual practice has become as necessary as the air I breathe. You see, while my job of 25+ years as a public defender is a stressful enough job on its own terms, I decided to add a volunteer, unpaid, practically full-time position on the CBA president’s track, over three years ago (including my board positions at more than four different non-profits). And, well, here I am, nine months and one week into my presidency and, with only one article left after this one, as you can imagine, stress levels have been at an all-time high.

With May being Mental Health Awareness Month, I decided this is as good a time as any to take a chance, be vulnerable, and share my mental health journey with you in the hope that it perhaps encourages any of you out there to seek help. The fact that being “vulnerable” is considered “brave” speaks volumes with respect to the stigma. Sometimes the most effective mental health support is the simplest—encouraging colleagues who may be struggling and not being afraid to share your story. It is now widely acknowledged that the legal profession, to an extent greater than most professions, are suffering from startlingly high rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse issues and suicidal ideations. The Institute for Well-Being in Law indicates that the suicide rate in the legal pro-

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fession is among the top ten of all professions, with attorneys dying by suicide at a rate 33 percent higher than the norm.<sup>1</sup> The Institute’s 2023 survey shows 36 percent qualify as problem drinkers, 28 percent suffer from depression, 23 percent report stress-related symptoms, and 19 percent suffer from anxiety.

So, here I go. When I was 8 years old, I was sexually abused by my uncle. That abuse continued until I was 12. When I was 12 years old, I was abducted by a pedophile. I managed to escape but it wasn’t until 2019 that I told anyone about it. Why? Because I had suppressed the memories, which explained why I couldn’t remember most of my childhood, and my memories only resurfaced after I began counseling related to my weight struggles. When we started trying to find the root cause of all my “dis-eases” (obesity, chronic migraines, chronic insomnia, over-drinking), we discovered my childhood traumas, and the issues in my past finally started to make sense! Now add post-traumatic stress disorder to my list and thus began my journey to process and heal. That’s where yoga and yogic principles came in. Gabri-

el Bernstein’s books, *The Universe Has Your Back* and *Happy Days*, were where I started my journey and were instrumental in my introduction to spirituality. Meditation and yoga soon became desperately needed medicine for me. I continued to seek knowledge on trauma recovery, including ways to heal—to strengthen my spiritual connection to unlock my highest potential and best self—and ways to forgive. My hope is that the profession’s view of mental health is no longer something that is viewed derogatory or weak and instead become a new open forum where it is okay and “par for the course” to discuss mental health and substance use. So, if you are reading this and suffering in silence, know you are not alone! And know that you are a valuable member of this profession and the CBA community.

However, the reality is that we know that our profession, oftentimes, discounts the impact that this high-pressure environment, the constant stress, and demand to be in a “fight or flight” mode have on our mental and physical health. Even more unfortunate is the stigma surrounding mental health, which prevents many from

seeking the assistance they need. Destigmatizing mental health is a very important factor and the first step in changing the mindset of being viewed as weak, belief of possible job loss, and improving lawyer well-being is eliminating or deconstructing the stigma associated with seeking mental health assistance.

Although it was hard to remain focused the first few years, I stuck with it because the relief, relaxation, peace, and happiness, however temporary, was so worth the time and effort I put in! I soon found my sangha, my community of like-minded spiritual enthusiasts who have been my support, my hope, and my teachers. Meditation, journaling, and weekly group sessions have helped me realize the virtue of trauma to remove the false narrative of the ego of trauma and helps me identify current negative patterns and reactions

created by past traumas and conditioning. It is not easy, and I OFTEN fail miserably to control my Aries and Latina fire, but I can take positive steps forward and continue to break free from the patterns and reactions that have plagued me.

Spiritual practice, wellness programs, self-care, and therapy—however you want to find it—are essential in addressing our profession's mental health crisis. It is more important now, as 2024 holds no shortage of looming stressors and ongoing problems and threats to our mental health, that we stop complacency, stop judgment, and challenge ourselves to do more. One thing is clear: changing the stigmatic culture of the legal profession concerning mental health is going to require most of us to be brave, to have authentic conversations with our colleagues about their well-being, and to encourage

and support those who may be struggling to seek help. Set an example and support your attorneys. Create a safe haven to discuss mental health and promote self-care and resources, such as the Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers program, which is completely confidential and offers free sessions. Seeking help is a sign of strength not weakness!! ■

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*The Connecticut Bar Association, in partnership with Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, is committed to improving and enhancing lawyer well-being in the profession. The CBA Lawyer Well-Being Committee holds Lawyer Well-Being Week and its Annual Well-Being Summit in early May, which are designed to provide CBA members with wellness presentations and resources focused specifically on well-being issues commonly experienced by lawyers. For more well-being resources, visit [ctbar.org/Well-Being](http://ctbar.org/Well-Being).*

#### NOTES

1 <http://lawyerwellbeing.net>



The numbness slowly fades away,  
And you've started to feel again.  
You finally feel at ease.  
You finally feel sane.  
Healing took its time,  
And yes, you made it through!  
It was painful and tough.  
But now there exists  
a stronger **YOU!**

—Pranavi Khandeker

