

Ushering in a New Decade: Time to Take Stock



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Much has changed at the Law Society over the last decade. Ten years ago, continuing professional development (CPD) was not mandatory and the Law Society did not offer CPDs like “Mental Health and Lawyers: Real Life Lessons” or “You Are Not Alone: The Lawyers Guide to Dealing with Anxiety”.

There is a substantial body of evidence demonstrating that lawyers suffer from mental illness and substance abuse at much higher rates than the general population. An American Bar Association study in 2016 found that 28% of lawyers suffer from depression, 19% of lawyers suffer from anxiety, and 21% qualify as problem drinkers. Other statistics suggest lawyers suffer from mental illness and substance abuse between twice to 3.6 times the rate of the general population.

So what’s the good news?

In the last few years we have begun talking about mental health openly. Numerous articles have been published about the mental health crisis in law, CPDs are offered on the topic and the Canadian Bar Association and several law societies have developed committees to address the issues, including the Law Society of Manitoba, which recently struck a committee on health and wellness. Increasingly, lawyers and judges with first-hand experience are boldly speaking out, such as Judge Tim Daley from Nova Scotia, John Hoyles, former CEO of the Canadian Bar Association (CBA) and recently retired Supreme Court Justice Clément Gascon, among many others. This helps immeasurably to reduce the stigma associated with seeking help.

As we start a new year and a new decade, it’s worth pausing to think about what we each can do to look after our physical and mental health, as the link between the two has become increasingly clear.

For lawyers who are managing partners or run small practices, it’s also important to consider your workplace culture and whether there are steps you can take to encourage and support the people you work with to be healthy.

An effective strategy is to start with small changes. At the personal level, this may include deciding to step away from your desk at lunch a couple of times a week to either go for a walk or meet a friend or colleague for lunch. Take a *true* day off and don’t check your email when you say you aren’t going to. Resolve to finally take up the guitar, register for that martial arts class or do whatever else it is that you’ve been wanting to for the pure enjoyment of it, but didn’t think you had the time. We need to schedule time for ourselves and honour that commitment the same way we fulfill all of the other commitments on our calendars. If we don’t look after ourselves, we will have difficulty looking after the needs of our clients over the long term.

At work, add health and wellness to the agenda for your next partners meeting. Start a walking club at lunch. If you have access to an appropriate space, bring a yoga instructor in to offer lunchtime classes. Respect the boundaries of the lawyers and staff you work with by not expecting them to respond to non-urgent emails in the evenings and on weekends. Conduct an anonymous online survey in your office and ask people for their ideas on how to improve health and wellness in your workplace. You can find more ideas in the resources section below.

Connection between wellness and diversity and inclusion

What is the connection between diversity and inclusion and wellness? When we talk about increasing diversity in the profession, we typically think about gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation

or gender identity. However, there are many facets of diversity. Essentially it's about making space for those who don't fit into the traditional mold of a successful lawyer and have their own definitions of success. The profession is comprised of a variety of personalities who bring different perspectives and life experiences to their work as lawyers. Unfortunately, the culture of the legal profession doesn't reflect those differences and typically celebrates certain traits and behaviors including overworking, aggressiveness, perfectionism and the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism, to name a few.

Given the statistics on the grim mental health of the profession, it is clear we need to change this culture. By broadening our collective view of what it looks like to be a "successful lawyer" and making space for a wider range of styles and approaches, we become more inclusive and give people the opportunity to create and define success on their own terms. What does this actually mean? Some, like John Hoyles, argue that we need to re-visit the big-firm business model and the high billable hour targets that force lawyers to work many long and stressful days. Some lawyers experience "burn out" and find themselves leaving their firms if they see no other option but to comply with long-standing expectations. It costs money to train an associate who then leaves in a few years, seeking greener pastures and a more balanced lifestyle. Maybe success is the ability to retain good people and earn their loyalty by offering different work models and different paths to success. Maybe success is being able to work as a lawyer while taking time for family and making time for yourself. Whatever your definition of success may be, remember that there are many different definitions that deserve to be acknowledged and respected.

The answer isn't clear or easy, but one thing is: we need to engage in self-reflection and continue having the conversation. The health of our profession depends on it.

Health and Wellness

Resources

The [CBA's Wellness Subcommittee](#) offers a variety of resources for lawyers.

The [American Bar Association's](#) website offers article and resources on wellness, mindfulness and work-life balance.

[Ways for Law Firms to Support Health and Wellness](#)

[Travel Manitoba](#) provides some great suggestions for fun things to do in Manitoba in the winter time that will get you out of the office.

[10 Meal Prep Tips for Busy Professionals](#)

[The case](#) for how spending time outdoors improves your mental and physical well-being.

