

Profession Overview and Research Brief: Lawyers

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Helping Profession Overview

The law profession is an integral role to society. Lawyers help promote justice by protecting the harmed and defending the accused. They advocate for different causes, offer counsel, and provide leadership in their community. However, being in such an important line of work also creates an unreasonable goal of perfection. Lawyers tend to be viewed as professionals who are always in control and who should require no support. Moreover, they must confront perceptions of distrust from the public. The negative viewpoint the public holds is that the profession has elements of manipulation, greed, and corruption (Shapiro, 2002).

From the outside looking in, it can be difficult to understand the challenges of this helping profession. Attorneys spend years pushing themselves academically in the pursuit of a dream career. Once they enter the career, they witness their colleagues experience burnout, emotional fatigue, mental/physical health issues, and substance abuse. Research from Krill et al. (2016) indicated how this field experiences higher rates of alcohol use disorders than other professional populations. The study also saw significant findings with mental health distress, noting higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress with problematic alcohol use. Another study by Leignel et al. (2014) saw similar findings among self-employed lawyers. Self-reports showed high levels of psychological distress, and alcohol consumption rates consistent with substance abuse. Lawyers also report taking on and worrying about the emotions and well-being of their clients. Research by Maguire & Byrne (2016) shows that lawyers experience vicarious trauma. Other helping professionals might rely on peer support to process this trauma, but the culture within the legal profession is highly competitive. Research by Omari & Paull (2014) describes a culture of intense competition and win-at-all-costs mentality at law firms causing individuals to become isolated.

There is a stigma attached to seeking help in this alpha community. This can create an environment where well-being is traded for the appearance of strength. In our research, we aimed to determine how we can effectively support lawyers and create a culture that values well-being.

Survey Data & Interviews

A survey was created and sent out to multiple lawyers in the Fort Worth area to gain more insight on the culture of their profession and their wellness needs. 32 participants answered 10 multiple choices questions for quantitative data, and 5 short answer questions for qualitative data. The questions were designed to not only understand experiences within the profession, but the lives of lawyers and how the two intertwine. Some common themes from the quantitative data are current state of well-being, professional burnout, and perception of seeking help.

1. Current state of well-being: “To what degree do you agree or disagree to the following statements?”

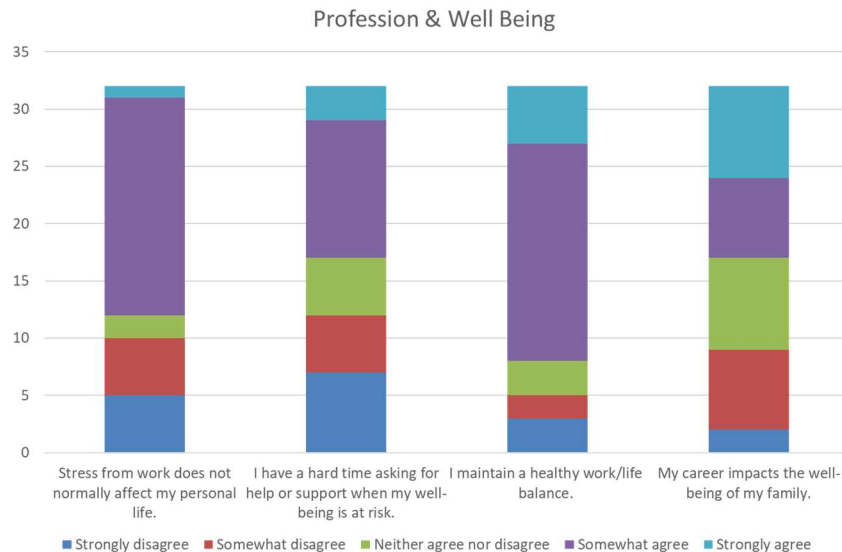


Figure 1

We combined somewhat agree and strongly agree answers to determine percentages of responses. About 63% of participants agree that stress doesn't normally affect their personal life, 47% agree that they have a hard time asking for help when their well-being is at risk, 75% agree that they maintain a healthy work/life balance, and 47% agree that their career impacts the well-being of their family. Based on these results attorneys view their well-being in a positive light but understand that their profession can have a direct impact on their personal life.

2. Professional Burnout: "How likely will individuals in your profession experience burnout?"

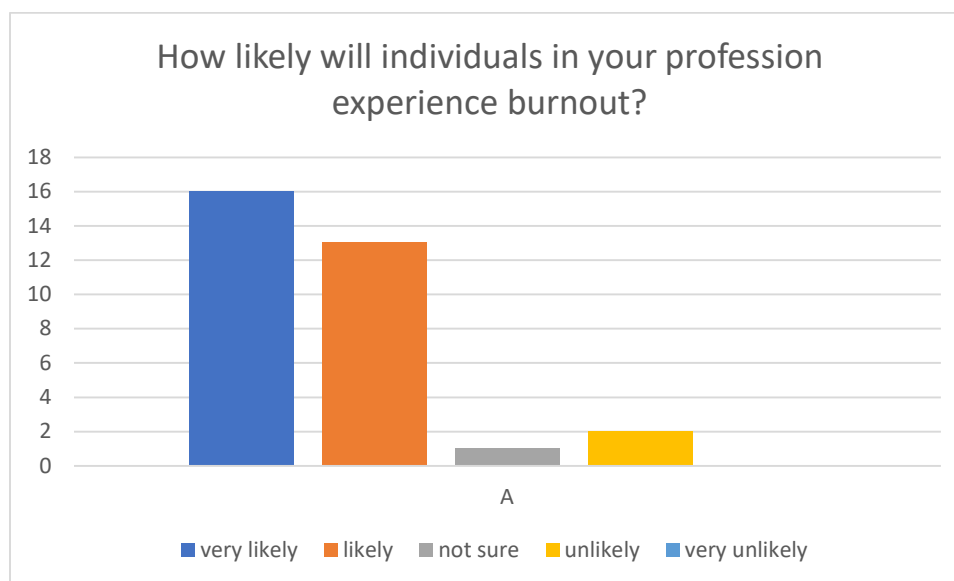


Figure 2

Most participants are aware that themselves and their colleagues are likely to experience burnout at some point in their careers. 50% of participants say that individuals in their profession are "very likely" to experience burnout, and 40% of participants say that individuals are "likely" to experience burnout in their profession. The remaining 10% of participants disagree and say that burnout is unlikely, or they are unsure. There is an awareness among lawyers of the demands of their profession and how it can lead to burnout and barriers with achieving wellness. This data

is interesting in comparison to Figure 1. It may demonstrate that individuals might believe they are immune from burnout but view it as a high risk in their community.

3. Perception of seeking help: “How likely are those in your profession to seek help or support?”

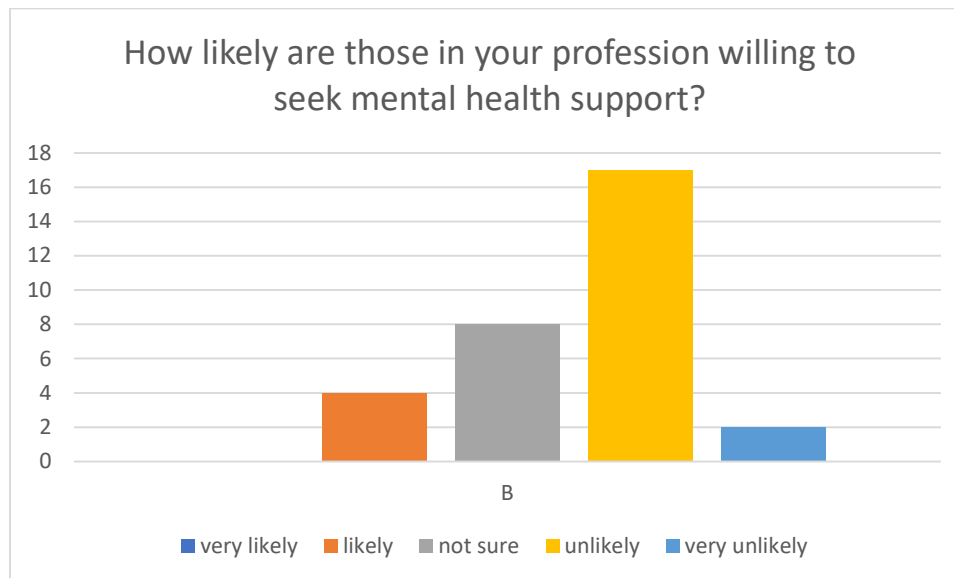


Figure 3

10% of participants answered that their colleagues are very unlikely to get support for mental health, 53% answered unlikely, 25% of participants are unsure, and 12% answered that their colleagues are likely to get mental health support. Most of the participants (63%) answered that colleagues are not willing to seek help for mental health. This ties into the stigma of mental health within their profession and how it can affect their well-being.

The quantitative data showed that lawyers perceive their wellness in a positive light, however they also understand that burnout is prevalent and that their profession can take a toll on their personal lives as well. The short answer questions allowed the participants to answer openly and showed a different perspective.

Example of short answer questions:

Describe a time you wanted to get support for yourself or a co-worker and struggled to find a way to get that support. What did you wish was available?

What resources, support, or experiences do you wish you/co-workers had that would promote more well-being in your profession?

Common themes from participants answer were the need for work life balance, struggling to find off time, the desire for meaningful networking and peer connection, and emotional fatigue. The short answer responses, in addition to individual empathy interviews, revealed the needs of lawyers and what could be done to improve their well-being and prevent burnout. These needs can be addressed by creating a healthy community in the profession where well-being is fostered (change of environment, non-alcoholic social gatherings, and more openness around mental health), and building emotional resiliency to fight burnout.

There was a discrepancy within the data: lawyers perceive their own well-being in relation to their profession in a different way than they perceive the wellness of their colleagues. In Figure 1 the participants stated they had a good work/life balance and had healthy ways to cope; in Figure 2 and 3 the participants viewed their colleagues as susceptible to burnout, and not likely to seek help. The open answer questions had contrasting data in comparison to the multiple-choice answers. The short answer responses revealed that there is a need for work-life balance, healthy social gatherings, and ways to cope with stress. It's possible that the short answer questions stimulated reflection from the participants which resulted in more open feedback.

Empathy interviews conducted with attorneys highlighted the stigma around getting help and acknowledging struggles. This gives insight into the discrepancy between the participants' perception of their own wellness compared to that of their colleagues.

Prototype & Deliverables

Lawyers experience demanding workloads, time constraints, and empathetic overwhelm within a competitive culture. They need balance, support, and belonging within their organizational cultures in addition to personal stress management tools to help prevent burnout and improve overall quality of life. To address the range of needs of lawyers we developed two design questions:

1. How might we create a community for helping professionals so that EFW can build skills through a grassroots effort to change the culture of helping professional working environments?
2. How might we build emotional resilience so the helping professional can have more well-being at work and home?

These questions led us to a variety of ideas ranging from a multipurpose wellness facility to a complex smartphone application. After considering feasibility, implementation, and needs we landed on an approach that incorporates three pathways to wellness and burnout prevention. These pathways include (1) virtual content, (2) informal social groups, and (3) formal training.

Pathway 1 - Virtual Content

According to a 2018 Legal Trends Report conducted by a legal software company, 75% of lawyers work outside of regular business hours and 39% say that the extended hours negatively impact their personal life (Clio, 2020). This correlates to our survey data from Figures 1 and 2. In our data, 90% of lawyers thought it was likely individuals in their profession would experience burnout and 47% said their career impacts the well-being of their family. This demonstrates a lawyer's need for timely information. They have demanding workloads which could prevent them from participating in events that require a time commitment. To address this

need we have created the pathway of virtual content. This content also addresses the need for privacy for those uncomfortable seeking help.

Virtual content can be delivered via email, social media, or the Empower Fort Worth Website. We have compiled a playlist of 32 short videos to begin:

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVvomVrtXtbUkwVX47T-iaLH0y8Thw7Jd>

These videos include lawyers across the nation telling stories about their experiences, insights into the law profession, and quick practices to build emotional resilience such as breathing exercises, meditation, and yoga. Research by Nielsen & Minda (2021) incorporated both in person and virtual mindfulness interventions. The virtual intervention included daily emails and short, online, guided meditations. Both studies demonstrated the efficacy of mindfulness meditation for increased positive affect and psychological resilience, as well as decreased negative affect and perceived stress in lawyers.

Through these short videos we will introduce lawyers to skills that build emotional resilience, improve mood, and decrease reactivity. We will also demonstrate the shared struggles of the profession to show them they are not alone. As they become more exposed to this content, they may decide to participate in one of the other two pathways.

Pathway 2 - Informal Social Groups

Abraham Maslow theorized that love and belonging are foundational human needs just after physiological and safety needs (McLeod, 2018). This need for positive interpersonal relationships has been shown to affect various areas of life including maladaptive versus adaptive coping behaviors. Research by Wilczynska et al. (2015) demonstrated the connection between a person's sense of belonging and positive coping skills. Additionally, social support has been shown to be a modifying factor in dealing with occupational stress (Bickford, 2005).

Bickford (2005) claimed that social support can reduce an individual's perception of stress, make them less reactive to stress, and facilitate healthy behaviors like physical activity and rest.

Based on our research, lawyers perceive the field as extremely competitive making it challenging to develop supportive peer relationships. In our qualitative surveys, we received feedback that it was hard for lawyer's family members to understand their situation. This demonstrated a clear need for meaningful peer connections. Our second pathway addresses the need for belonging, community, and peer support.

Empower Fort Worth can organize group events such as exercise groups and sports, mindfulness activities, and improv comedy nights. These events will give lawyers an opportunity to connect with peers and improve their well-being. Regular exercise has been shown to decrease sensitivity or reactivity to stress as well as provide protection from chronic disease (Tsatsoulis & Fountoulakis, 2006). Mindfulness practices such as breathing techniques, meditation, and yoga have been shown to help calm sympathetic nervous system activity thus increasing the capacity to observe thoughts and respond to stress in a less reactive manner (Jerath et al., 2015; Pascoe 2017). Research by Schwenke et al. (2020) tested improv comedy as an intervention and found a significant improvement in participant's psychological well-being and creativity. By coordinating health-promoting social activities, Empower Fort Worth can support lawyers' sense of belonging and health behaviors.

Pathway 3 - Formal Training

Lastly, we propose that Empower Fort Worth creates formal training opportunities. These can be created specifically for lawyers or all helping professionals. They can include topics such as vicarious trauma, emotional resilience, mental health first aid, burnout prevention, and group therapy. It will be important to recruit experts in these fields to create a safe environment for all

participants. Research by Maguire & Byrne (2016) demonstrated the effectiveness of trauma-specific training and access to informed peer support for lawyers who experienced vicarious trauma.

This pathway supports the need for self-efficacy, learning, and competence. It gives helping professionals access to evidence-based strategies for improving their well-being.

Our team created a graphic titled “5 Ways to Build Resiliency”. This graphic demonstrates that resiliency is a skill that can be learned through a variety of avenues.



Figure 4

The pathways created in this project contribute to resiliency, while creating space for individuality. One person might prefer virtual content, while another craves social connection. These pathways are not meant to be linear, and individuals can participate in any or all of them.

Each pathway is meant to address specific needs with overlap throughout. All three pathways contribute towards emotional resilience and a sense of belonging within the law profession.

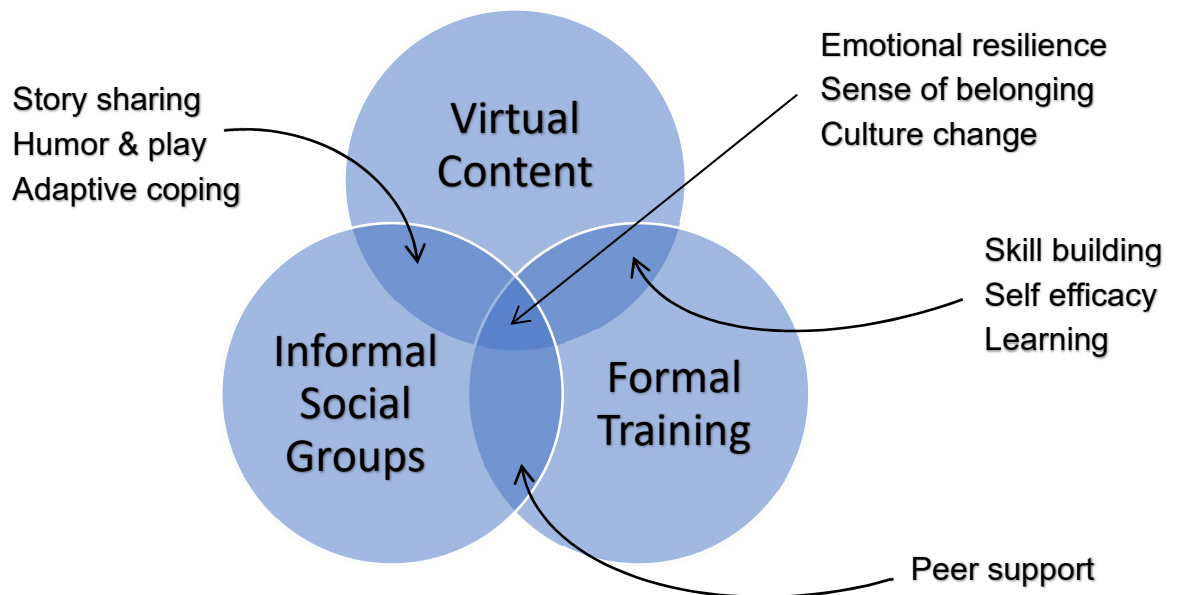


Figure 5

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