

# When Our Stress Becomes Dangerous

By Patrick R. Krill

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*And I never wanted anything from you*

*Except everything you had and what was left after  
that too, oh*

*Dog Days are Over—Florence + the Machine*

No one is born wanting to die. It is a simple truth, but one that points to a difficult and complex question often left in the wake of suicide: what happened? What happened along the way, to your friend, family member, coworker, or boss. When, and why, did they lose the will to live? What was the source of their pain, their despair?

New research on a population that is highly predisposed to suicidal thoughts—lawyers—offers important clues and lessons about suicidality that on one hand are specific to the legal profession, and on the other hand may transcend career choice to offer anyone a cautionary warning about our priorities, choices and boundaries.

In addition to supporting the findings of several prior studies showing that lawyers were at least twice as likely as the general working population to experience suicidal ideation, [new research](#) by myself and colleagues at the University of Minnesota Medical School is the first to go further and examine why that is the case.

Loneliness, being overcommitted to work and having a prior mental health problem were all associated with meaningful increases in a lawyer's likelihood of experiencing suicidal thoughts, as was being male. As such, efforts and interventions targeting these factors will be an important part of any effective suicide mitigation strategies for the legal profession. Above all, however, stress was the primary culprit. In fact, lawyers with high levels of perceived stress were a remarkable 22 times more likely to experience suicidal thoughts than those with low stress. While stress has been linked to suicidality in many

other populations as well, the stress-suicidality circuit in lawyers appears especially, and perhaps uniquely, well-formed.

During the years I spent counseling lawyers in treatment at the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, I noticed an unmistakable trend among many of them that might come as a surprise: once the initial discomfort of being in a residential addiction treatment center began to fade, they were often relieved, and not just because they had escaped, even temporarily, the torment of their addiction. The lawyers were also—and often more—relieved to be away from the stress of their work. No clients, no billable hours, no aggressive opposing counsel, no deadlines. At least for the moment, they felt newly able to breathe, and sometimes cry.

Taking eight steps back and viewing this as an objective outsider, one might say that it is sad that someone would rather be in a monthlong treatment program for a substance use disorder than to be at work, especially when they invested significant sums of money and years of hard work to get their job. It may indeed be sad, but it is also highly instructive.

When I first wrote about the problem of lawyer suicide nine years ago, it was in the wake of a spate of recent suicides in the legal profession that had garnered national attention. At the time, the only data we had on the subject were generally prevalence data (i.e., how often lawyers died by suicide). For many of us who were seeking to raise awareness and mitigate the problem, we had to rely on a combination of our professional experience and educated assumptions based on known suicide risk factors in the general population.



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With this new research, however, we can better understand the mechanisms of distress that for some may tip the scales in favor of death. We can also all, whether lawyers or not, begin to question when and under what circumstances the stress we invite into our lives, including through our work, is truly worth it.

For lawyers especially, this may be a pressing question. A recent analysis by the Washington Post found that law is the most stressful profession, based on an examination of 11 years of data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Across the profession, several recent studies have shown that lawyers are struggling with mental health, drinking too much, and burning out at alarming rates. A new study of completed lawyer suicides that examined data from the National Violent Death Reporting System found that lawyers' suicides were 91% more apt than other suicides to have job problems as a contributing factor.

A mentor of mine—also a lawyer—used to joke that the common denominator in all his failed relationships was him. At a certain point, we ignore obvious patterns at our own peril, but find growth and solutions upon acknowledging the true origins of our problems. For law, a profession that is perhaps more vital now than at any time in our nation's history, being honest about the sources of our problems is essential. It is essential for the health of lawyers themselves, and for a society that is depending on them to help safeguard liberties and freedoms in a rapidly changing and often precarious world.

To be fair and optimistic, it is important to note that meaningful efforts to improve mental health have been underway and gaining momentum in the legal profession for the last several years, and many dedicated individuals are doing excellent work. As someone whose earlier research and advocacy

helped ignite the current push for improved wellbeing in the legal profession, I have sincere gratitude for the progress we've made. But I also know the goal line remains elusively far away, and often obscured by the more stubborn forces of inertia, maladaptive attitudes, entrenched business models and extrinsic motivations.

In direct or tacit support of the status quo, there are also those in the legal profession who resist the idea that the mental health problems of lawyers should be worthy of sustained focus, let alone the revamping of work behaviors and organizational cultures. Such attitudes towards the importance of mental health are hardly confined to law, however, and have been shown to prevail in many other work environments as well. But citing that as a reason or excuse to not do better would be among the most self-defeating forms of whataboutism imaginable. It is also difficult to think of other contexts in which lawyers would view being average or common as an acceptable standard.

Even following the COVID-19 pandemic, when mental health problems spiked across the board, there are those who will point out—correctly—that most people do not have a mental health problem and an overwhelming majority are not suicidal. This is of course true, but by that same logic, the warning label on a pack of cigarettes would be optional, and the restaurant host would still be asking if you want “smoking or non?” After all, cigarette smoking is overwhelmingly the main cause of lung cancer, yet only about 10-20% of smokers develop the disease. It's clearly an affliction of the minority, but we recognize the harm as sufficient to warrant various forms of meaningful remediation, as we do with countless other risks and dangers that do not ultimately affect everyone.

Work is an essential part of our lives, one that can provide a sense of dignity, purpose and enrichment. Yet, when it comes to the stress generated by our jobs, the potential for harm can be just as great and often greater than the harm caused by other behaviors or lifestyle choices. Our efforts to mitigate that risk should have a commensurate level of seriousness. While these problems may be particularly acute in the legal profession, it is time for all of us to acknowledge that perhaps warning labels don't just belong on Marlboros. We should also acknowledge that we can do better, much better. And in light of the heightened mental health struggles of the generation that will soon be part of the workforce in law and elsewhere, it is imperative that we do.