

How to Recognize When It's Time to Get Support

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Seeking support for mental health concerns has traditionally been seen as taboo. **With the current political climate, social justice concerns, and transitioning out of a global pandemic, lawyers are in a season of potentially facing unique challenges and may need to seek support now more than before.** It is safe to say that for many, there have been unprecedented stressors present over the last year. The ability to have objective eyes on one's situation helps know when to get the support needed to make a highly stressful profession sustainable. This article will also address the main reasons why people utilize therapy, ways to cope, and how to identify a therapist that is a good fit.

Have you ever felt overwhelmed with too much on your plate? Have you wondered how you were going to manage it all? Perhaps you have isolated yourself or been paralyzed and unmotivated to do the things you used to love. These types of behaviors, thoughts, and feelings are indications of anxiety and depression. Learning to process anxiety and depression are the two main reasons people attend therapy sessions.

The most prevalent causes of concern for clients entering therapeutic

services because of anxiety include hypervigilance, irritability, restlessness, lack of concentration, racing thoughts, unwanted thoughts, fatigue, or sweating.

Depressive symptoms include insomnia or sleeping too much; slowed thinking, speaking, or body movements; feelings of worthlessness or guilt; fixating on past failures or self-blame; unexplained physical problems, such as back pain or headaches; angry outbursts, irritability, or frustration, even over small matters; feelings of sadness, tearfulness, emptiness, or hopelessness.

Both depression and anxiety are on a spectrum. On one end of the spectrum, dwelling on the past leads to sadness,

which over time can cause depression. Being down or feeling sad is not the same as depression.

"An estimated 17.3 million adults in the United States had at least one major depressive episode" (NIMH, 2019). Replaying situations and scenarios wishing you "shoulda, coulda, woulda" done differently and so on is called rumination. This behavior is a key indicator of an individual dealing with a depressive episode. Depression leads to a sort of paralysis. Often when someone is depressed, they have trouble literally moving or attending to basic functions because of this paralysis.



On the other end of the spectrum, predicting negative outcomes in the future leads to nervousness and worry. Left unchecked, worry can develop into anxiety over time. Anxiety is defined as “a feeling of emotional or physical tension. It can come from any event or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry, or nervous.” Anxiety and stress are not the same. With more than 3 million cases per year, anxiety can truly be debilitating for some. Anxiety can inhibit your ability to make decisions or act at all for fear of a bad outcome. This is known as “analysis paralysis.”

Human beings are not designed to be in a chronic state of stress. However, many are often unaware of the effect of constant stress on their brains and bodies. Individuals with high-stress professions often experience what is known as secondary trauma. Secondary trauma is an indirect exposure to trauma through a firsthand account or narrative of a traumatic event. Particularly in a profession where confidentiality is mandated, lawyers tend to internalize or turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms to deal with secondary trauma. It is important to understand how to manage life stressors to avoid burn out, create a work-life balance, and quickly return to physical and psychological equilibrium. Mindfulness and meditation are popular and effective treatment recommendations because they assist a person in returning back to the moment – the here and now – where everything is typically OK. Finding healthy coping skills that are designed to combat symptoms of anxiety and depression is key. However, deeper work such as counseling and coaching help to uncover the cause of the issue and address the root of the problem. It is never too late to find a therapist, coach, and/or mentor.

Meditation is a practice where an individual uses a technique – such as mindfulness, or focusing the mind on a particular object, thought, or activity – to train attention and awareness, to achieve a mentally clear and emotionally calm, and stable state. This training is a great practice for lawyers who are subject to high-stress cases and environments because it is a simple exercise that can be done anywhere and anytime. A few minutes a day can provide significant benefits such as: building skills to manage stress, increased self-awareness, reducing negative emotions, stress reduction, and lengthened attention span.

“Mindfulness is the quality or state of being conscious or aware of something.”

Mindfulness is a form of meditation. It can be practiced in every situation in your life. You can make tea mindfully. You can shower mindfully. You can walk mindfully. The point of mindfulness is just being present in your body and experiencing what is around you. In therapy, there is a similar intervention called grounding, in which you identify things that you experience in or around you. For example, naming three things that are blue. Naming six things that are green. What do you smell? How do you feel? Are you hungry? Are you thirsty? Getting out of your head and into your body allows you to become in tune with your body and mind. Have you ever driven home and not remembered experiencing the route there? It is not because you were unconscious but because you automated that route from work to home and you were not being mindful or aware of the things around you. Next time that you go for a drive on one of your automated routes, make a conscious effort to look around and take in the experience as if it is new and rediscover the difference.

Practicing awareness helps a person understand what is going on in their body and mind. This understanding provides information needed for developing creative strategies to work through and process the feelings and traumas you are experiencing. Journaling, practicing gratitude, going for walks, watching funny shows and movies, and limiting media consumption all contribute to a better mental state of being. Consider a mental hygiene routine. Is it working effectively, or could it use a tune-up? If you do not have a routine, I encourage you to develop one that works for you.

How does one know when it is time to seek support? Whenever a person is dealing with something that makes it challenging to continue to function normally this feeling is a clear indicator that help is needed. One of the greatest misconceptions is that people have to manage their life concerns alone. It is much easier to identify and develop a relationship with a therapist, coach, and/or mentor then to wait for a crisis and struggle through finding someone for support. Fit is one of the determinants of effectiveness in therapy. Fit is an understanding that the therapist can and will help you with stressors you are dealing with. Two major indicators of a good fit are:

1. The therapist listens and understands you; and
2. You develop a sense of hopefulness shortly after working with the therapist.

In the first session, expect the therapist to ask questions regarding your background and what is happening at the present time – including family of origin, family history, dynamics, relationships, trauma, life circumstances, medical history, goals, and challenges. Each therapist has a different approach, and they will likely discuss what therapy with them looks like. Prepare for the first session by jotting down your own questions so that needs and concerns can be addressed upfront. Therapy is a process designed for the client; be sure to be open in a way that will assist the therapist in customizing the sessions specifically to your needs.

While being strong and pushing through tough times is often glorified, sometimes it can be likened to playing on an injury and having to deal with the aftermath later. Lawyers are extremely resilient both in and out of the courtroom. However, I encourage you not to wait too long to get the proper support in place for mental and emotional well-being.

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