

How Do YOU Measure Up? Substance (Mis)Use Among Law Professionals

BY DR. SUNSHINE COLLINS

As the legal profession grapples with an array of demanding challenges, substance abuse among attorneys and other law professionals has emerged as an increasingly critical issue. With a profession characterized by long hours, high pressure, and the constant weight of responsibility, attorneys and other law professionals are uniquely susceptible to the allure of substance use as a coping mechanism. The implications of this are far-reaching, as the mental health of law professionals impacts not only the individuals and their loved ones but also the integrity of the legal profession and the quality of service they render to clients.



It is crucial to stay mindful of how we manage stress and unwind. The below quiz¹ will help you consider your relationship with substance use. Whether it is a glass of wine to decompress or a prescription medication, understanding our habits can lead to healthier choices. Track which response letter you select most frequently.

After a challenging day or week at work, how do you typically relax and de-stress?

- A. Engage in non-substance-related activities like exercise or hobbies.
- B. Occasionally have a drink or two, but nothing excessive.
- C. Often use substances (e.g., alcohol, prescription drugs) to unwind.
- D. Regularly rely on substances to cope with stress.

How often do you find yourself using substances to cope with work-related stress?

- A. Rarely or never – I have other coping mechanisms.
- B. Sometimes, but it's not my main way of coping.
- C. Regularly, it has become part of my routine to manage stress.
- D. Almost always, I struggle to cope without using substances.

Have you ever missed work or underperformed due to the aftereffects of substance use?

- A. Never.
- B. Once or twice, but it was an eye-opener for me.
- C. Yes, it's happened a few times.
- D. Yes, it's a recurring issue.

How do you perceive your current substance-use habits?

- A. I believe my habits are healthy and under control.
- B. I'm cautious but not overly concerned.
- C. I'm starting to worry about my habits.
- D. I recognize my habits are unhealthy and need to change.

Have people close to you (friends, family, colleagues) expressed concern about your substance use?

- A. No, never.
- B. Rarely, and usually in a general context.
- C. Yes, I've heard concerns from a few people.
- D. Yes, I frequently hear concerns about my substance use.

Do you feel in control of your substance use, or does it feel like it's controlling you?

- A. I feel in control and use substances in moderation.
- B. Mostly in control, but there are moments of concern.
- C. Sometimes it feels like my substance use is starting to control me.
- D. I feel like my substance use is controlling me.

Have you ever considered seeking help or reducing your substance use?

- A. No need, I'm confident in my control and usage.
- B. I've thought about it but haven't felt the need to act yet.
- C. Yes, I've considered it and am exploring my options.
- D. Yes, I know I need help and am seeking or planning to seek it.

Results:

- **Mostly As:** You seem to have a healthy relationship with substances, using them infrequently or in moderation. Continue to be mindful of your habits and maintain your positive coping strategies.
- **Mostly Bs:** Your substance use might occasionally be a concern. Stay aware of your patterns and consider exploring additional healthy stress management techniques.
- **Mostly Cs:** Your responses indicate that substance use is becoming a significant coping mechanism for you, which could lead to potential issues. Reflect on your habits and consider seeking advice or altering your approach to stress and relaxation.
- **Mostly Ds:** It appears that substance use may be having a detrimental impact on your life and work. Acknowledging this is an important first step. Seeking support from professionals or support groups can provide you with strategies to regain control.

If you scored mostly Cs and/or Ds, you are not alone. Substance use and abuse within the legal profession have been subjects of increasing concern and study. While alcohol is the most commonly abused substance, law professionals also report issues with other substances. Although exact percentages vary, the use of prescription drugs, marijuana, and illicit substances is reported within the legal profession, often as mechanisms to cope with stress, anxiety, or depression.

A notable study conducted by the American Bar Association (ABA) and the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation found that approximately 21 percent of licensed, employed attorneys consume alcohol at levels consistent with problematic drinking. When compared to other professional groups, legal professionals exhibit higher rates of substance-use and mental health issues. For example, a study comparing attorneys with other professionals found that attorneys are more likely to engage in problematic drinking and are at a greater risk for depression and anxiety. The patterns

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of substance use often begin in law school, where students may adopt unhealthy coping mechanisms to deal with academic and financial pressures. Surveys indicate that law students have higher levels of stress and substance use compared to their peers in other graduate programs.

The same study indicated that younger attorneys, particularly those in the first 10 years of their practice, exhibit the highest rates of hazardous, harmful, and potentially alcohol-dependent drinking. Among attorneys 30 years old or younger, 31.9 percent reported problematic drinking patterns.

Research indicates that male attorneys have higher rates of alcohol use and problematic drinking compared to their female counterparts. However, female attorneys report more mental health concerns, which can be correlated with substance use.

The prevalence of substance use can vary by the setting in which attorneys practice. For instance, solo practitioners have higher rates of problematic drinking compared to those working in larger firm settings.

The ABA study also found that 28 percent of attorneys struggle with depression, 19 percent with anxiety, and significant numbers reported stress, all of which are associated with higher rates of substance use and abuse. It is estimated that substance abuse plays a role in a substantial percentage of attorney disciplinary and malpractice cases. Studies suggest that attorneys struggling with substance abuse are more likely to experience career dissatisfaction, job turnover, and reduced productivity, which can have long-term implications for their professional success and personal life. Despite the high rates of substance abuse, a study by the International Journal of Law and Psychiatry suggests that many attorneys are reluctant to seek help due to fears of jeopardizing their careers.

A focus on prevention and early intervention is needed. Law firms and legal institutions can play a pivotal role by implementing policies that promote work-life balance, reducing the stigma associated with seeking help, and providing access to wellness resources. Training sessions and seminars can equip law professionals to recognize the early signs of substance abuse and awareness of the long-term implications of substance abuse on health and career. Additionally, encouraging practices such as mindfulness, regular physical activity, and stress management techniques can build a foundation for resilience and a healthier approach to coping with the demands of the profession.

Where prevention strategies are not sufficient, early intervention can prevent the escalation of substance use disorders and mitigate their impact on a professional's career and personal life. Law firms and legal associations should

establish clear, compassionate, and confidential pathways for individuals to seek help without fear of judgment or professional repercussions. Peer support programs can offer a powerful means of support, providing a platform for law professionals to share their experiences and recovery strategies in a confidential, non-judgmental setting. Partnerships with mental health professionals should be established. Specialized treatment programs can offer the necessary support and guidance for those struggling with substance abuse, ensuring they receive the comprehensive care needed to navigate the path to recovery.

Prevention and intervention strategies such as these can cultivate a healthy sustainable legal profession while making it possible for law professionals to retain their careers and community standing once their substance abuse is properly addressed.

Regularly reflecting on your well-being and habits can help you maintain

a healthy balance and catch potential issues early. If your quiz results indicate a risk of substance abuse or if you have concerns about your mental health, reach out to a healthcare professional for support and resources tailored to your needs. The state bar has resources available to members at <https://nybar.org/for-lawyers/resources/wellbeing/>.

Consider making this kind of self-assessment a regular part of your self-care routine. Staying informed about the signs of substance abuse and the available support resources can empower you to make informed decisions about your health and to support colleagues who may be facing similar challenges.

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ENDNOTE:

1. The quiz published in this article is for self-reflection and informational purposes. It was not developed through the application of psychometric principles or validated through empirical research. As such, it should not be construed as a diagnostic tool, or a definitive indicator of substance use or mental health status.

The responses and outcomes are not intended to replace professional evaluation, diagnosis, or treatment. If you have concerns regarding your substance, use or mental health, seek the guidance and support of a qualified professional.