

Mindfulness: Big Law's Newest Mental Health Initiative

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Big Law Gets Creative in Response to Growing Mental Health Concerns

As the number of vaccinated Americans continues to rise and some sense of “normalcy” slowly trickles back into our daily lives, many working professionals continue to struggle with mental health issues caused or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. And while no industry seems to have been spared the mental impact of the widespread fear, loss, and social isolation brought on by the pandemic, legal professionals have had a particularly hard time coping with pandemic-related challenges.

Mental health and substance abuse problems have, in fact, been on the radar of Big Law firms since well before the pandemic. The unfortunate truth is that legal professionals have been disproportionately affected by these issues for quite some time — and the reasons why are fairly unsurprising. After all, legal work — and litigation especially — requires a great deal of mental stamina, whether it's related to meeting unforgiving deadlines, juggling high-pressure demands from clients, preparing for an intensive, high-stakes trial, or just keeping up with the fast-paced environment of busy firms and growing practices. When most of one's work is accompanied by a significant mental strain, there will always be a risk of negative impacts on their mental health.

Attorneys have been forthcoming about mental health concerns and their causes in recent years, and annual surveys on mental health and substance abuse conducted by the American Lawyer Media (ALM) continue to both raise awareness and reveal the full extent of the problem. However, awareness alone does not constitute a solution. Despite novel efforts to provide new methods of treatment and support, [the most recent survey](#) suggests that the mental health crisis in Big Law is increasingly getting worse.

Of the more than 3,200 attorneys and law firm staff members surveyed by ALM in 2020, 37% reported feeling depressed, 71% reported symptoms of anxiety, and 14% reported other mental health conditions, with reports in all areas representing an increase from [the previous year's study](#).

The pandemic has only complicated efforts within Big Law to address these issues, and it is important to keep that in mind when evaluating the efficacy of current treatment and support methods. A total of 70% of all survey respondents reported that the pandemic had made their mental health worse, and over half cited social isolation as a contributing factor to their conditions.

But the truth is that Big Law firms are, in fact, showing an increased dedication to their staff's mental well-being — and this dedication is not going entirely unnoticed. According to the survey, nearly 55% of legal professionals recognized their firm's efforts to mitigate mental health concerns, and around 63% of respondents reported feeling that these efforts were sincere. As restrictions related to the pandemic ease and problems related to isolation can be avoided more strategically, the real value of Big Law's treatment of mental health conditions should begin to come into focus.

Applying Creative Solutions

Sadly, complications related to mental health are often shrouded in shame, misunderstanding, and stigmatization. Moreover, conventional methods of treating mental illness are commonly avoided outright based on the social or cultural associations that surround them. And in an industry where buttoned-up professionalism and steely poise are often felt to be the necessary standard, many attorneys are unlikely to seek mental health treatment absent demonstrably supportive environments and effective methods. Whether it relates to depression or addiction, legal professionals need a level of support that goes beyond simply being pointed in the direction of a talk therapist or provided with a list of local 12-step meetings. They need creative solutions that yield actual results, offered with unquestionable sincerity and compassion.

Fortunately, throughout the course of the pandemic, we have seen such solutions applied with increased frequency by Big Law firms. Former Big Tech senior patent counsel, former Big Law litigator, and long-term meditation practitioner, [Rudhir Krishtel](#), of Krishtel Coaching, routinely consults with Big Law firms and corporate legal departments on [quality of life and wellness](#) topics. "Mindfulness practices are a real support when we are facing unpredictability, a lack of a sense of control, and social isolation. When we are concerned and unsettled, we're not our best selves. Unable to root into the wise lawyer that we are. We're actually on edge, and we're reactive, which is a drain on our energy. Mindfulness practices bring us back to the present and ground us."

Regardless of how difficult it can be to treat certain conditions, many firms have made truly admirable — and creative — efforts to lessen the impact of the pandemic on their team's mental health. Here are just a few of the creative approaches we've seen Big Law firms use to encourage and support the mental well-being of their staff:

Meditation and Mindfulness – Meditation has been ingrained in Eastern cultures and traditions for thousands of years, but we have only recently seen these practices become more mainstream within American society. At a surface glance, sitting still and practicing quiet, focused breathing are activities that don't necessarily mesh with the decidedly Western notions of bottomless achievement and grit. However, when we look more carefully at what these practices can offer, we can see their potential to empower and support our ambitions rather than to stultify them. In recent years, American society has been learning how to mine these traditions for their measurable benefits, as practices like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) [have been proven to enhance our mental, and even our physical, well-being](#). Many Big Law firms have begun integrating these practices into their mental health campaigns, offering employees free access to MBSR and/or yoga classes. Seyfarth Shaw, an AmLaw 100 firm based out of Chicago, has been offering a variety of meditation and mindfulness programming for its staff through its Seyfarth Life initiative. Similarly, Best Best & Krieger — a firm established in 1891 with more than 200 attorneys — offers a firm-wide mindfulness program founded by its managing partner that features half-day mindfulness seminars, weekly meditations, and even a book club. It would be encouraging to see these trends continue to grow in popularity amongst Big Law firms in the future.

Virtual Seminars on Mental Well-Being – This is an increasingly popular approach among Big Law firms, likely due to the flexibility of the virtual format. Whether they are willing to speak about it publicly or not, people suffering from mental health conditions *want* solutions. They want to be inspired to get better, and they want information about specific methods and resources that might help them in overcoming their difficulties. Removing the need to attend events like these in person greatly improves the likelihood that people will show up for them. The ALM survey reflects this fact, with many responding favorably about the various mental health conferences and webinars made available to them by their firms. One respondent described receiving “great advice” from a speaker, and said they found the event was “really valuable.”

“Golden Hours” – In addition to feeling isolated due to the pandemic, many legal professionals today feel like they are overworked at a general level. The billable-hours model of most big law firms can induce a sense of being “constantly on call” — and that sentiment was common among survey respondents, many of whom felt like that pressure had actually increased while working in a remote setting. Perhaps one thing the pandemic has taught us is that we need to reimagine what our workdays look like, regardless of our industry. Some big firms today have already been making a meaningful change in this area, designating hours in the day when employees can feel free to take a break and spend some time outside. These so-called “golden hours” could prove crucial to providing legal professionals with a renewed sense of freedom to prioritize their own well-being, and not to feel constantly under pressure to neglect their mental health for the sake of the firm or their clients.

Results and Resilience Needed Now More Than Ever

As persistent as the problem of mental health has been in the legal field, the worst thing Big Law firms can do is allow themselves to be discouraged. All attempts to return to “normalcy” will inevitably represent another period of adjustment for legal professionals — and how firms continue their efforts to mitigate mental health concerns could have huge implications for the well-being of their employees in the long-term. If we truly want to improve the mental health of our legal professionals, we need to remain creative and optimistic in our efforts, forgetting the failures of old initiatives, and celebrating — as well as multiplying — the new ones.

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