

LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

ABA LAUNCHES WELL-BEING TOOLKIT

In the last two years, the legal profession has experienced a sobering “wake-up call” about how serious the wellness and mental health challenges are in our ranks. In short, profession-wide action is needed to improve lawyer well-being for all of us.

In February 2016, the national study “The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys” was published, conclusively establishing that the legal profession suffers striking rates of depression, alcoholism and addiction. Very unhealthy rates of anxiety and stress are also prevalent in our profession.

In response to that 2016 study, the American Bar Association (ABA) published its “The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change” report in August 2017, challenging all stakeholders in the profession to take action. The report offered specific recommendations on what each segment of the profession can do to help turn our overall culture in a direction that promotes well-being. We need to learn how to set boundaries and carve out dedicated time for self-care, placing our personal well-being first. The mission is simple: learn real tools for self-care and then make using them a real priority.

It’s a very tall order for legal professionals. We are all driven and competitive by nature. In law school, many of us practiced self-sacrifice mixed with indestructible tenacity as the basic recipe for competing at an unprecedented academic level. We then took that high level of energy, dedication, skill and passion to the legal profession. Basically, we set our work-ethic “cruise controls” at a very high speed and buckled up for the long haul.

That’s all well and good, but most of us did not receive any education on how important it is for all high-functioning professionals to still maintain well-being and promote healthy work environments. Also,

heretofore, we have never had a specific manual to teach us how to take personal steps to set boundaries and prioritize well-being.

There’s great news to report!

Just published in 2018, in partnership with the ABA, the “Well-Being Toolkit for Lawyers and Legal Employers” is a comprehensive manual created by Anne M. Brafford, JD, MAPP and PhD “in progress.” The well-developed treatise discusses topics including the Definition of Lawyer Well-Being; the Definition of a Healthy Workplace; 8-Step Action Plan for Legal Employers; Policies and Practice Audit; Activities and Events; Education and Development; Assessments; Online Resources and Technology; Book Recommendations; Well-Being Partners; Well-Being Speakers and Consultants; Activity Workbook; and Well-Being Partner Appendix.

All of the above ABA reports and the new Well-Being Toolkit are available on the Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (JLAP) website: www.louisianajlap.com/wellbeingtoolkit/.

Per the ABA Toolkit:

Because too many lawyers aren’t thriving, multiple initiatives have been launched to take action. For example, in 2015, former Chair of the American Bar Association’s (ABA) Law Practice Division Tom Bolt successfully advocated for the creation of a new Attorney Well-Being Committee. Next, the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being was formed and it issued a comprehensive report, “The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change.” The report motivated ABA President Hilarie Bass to form a Presidential Working Group to Advance Well-Being in the Legal Profession focused on how legal employers can support healthy workplaces.

The toolkit is designed to help lawyers and legal employers improve well-being holistically and systemically. This goal will require new choices, considerable effort and changes that will likely upset the

status quo. Positive change agents might meet resistance, including that there is no room, time, resources or need for change. This toolkit offers reasons for prioritizing lawyer well-being as well as information, strategies and resources for implementing a plan for positive change.

Practicing lawyer well-being is the key to reducing the currently elevated numbers of mental health problems that the legal profession suffers. While JLAP provides an extremely effective “peer-professionals’ program” and totally confidential services to assist those who have developed diagnosable problems with alcohol, drugs, depression and other types of mental health issues, JLAP also fully supports general health, wellness and mindfulness. Practicing self-care can effectively prevent the development of some mental health issues.

In the last two years, JLAP has dedicated significant resources to the lawyer well-being initiative. JLAP’s CLE presentations on “Compassion Fatigue” and “The Professional Duty of Self-Care” have been popular.

Visit JLAP’s website to download the new ABA Well-Being Toolkit. Remember, JLAP offers complete wellness and well-being support to Louisiana’s legal profession. JLAP can provide resource material, CLE presentations and clinical referrals to help you or your law firm come up to speed on well-being initiatives. Call JLAP at (985)778-0571, email jlap@louisianajlap.com or visit the website, www.louisianajlap.com.

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