

Talking Mental Health: Encouraging New Attys To Find Joy

By **Rudene Haynes** (August 13, 2025)

*Attorneys and other legal professionals share insights on mental health and well-being in this Law360 Pulse Expert Analysis **series**. If you'd like to write about these issues, please reach out to expertanalysis@law360.com.*

In this installment, attorney Rudene Haynes discusses her experiences as a hiring partner, common sources of stress that newer attorneys face and steps that law firms can take to protect their attorneys' mental health and encourage personal life fulfillment.

Why Joining a New Firm Can Feel Overwhelming

For many, the law firm environment is unlike anything they have ever experienced, even if they have previously worked in a professional setting prior to starting at a law firm. Everything seems new and novel, and you may feel unsure of yourself and your abilities.

I think getting accustomed to encountering new things daily — maybe hourly — and not necessarily knowing all the answers immediately is what makes joining a law firm so stressful.



Rudene Haynes

New arrivals are typically assigned to a team, so associates must build relationships and learn to collaborate with the different personalities of their assigned team. In addition to understanding your fellow team members, you are also trying to navigate your new practice area.

Even though you might be familiar with the practice area, you are asked to tackle novel, first-impression questions when time is of the essence. And of course, at some point you have to interface with your clients and figure out how best to cultivate those relationships while still trying to figure out your new role at the firm.

Getting accustomed to the culture of the law firm also takes time, and while BigLaw has become more welcoming and inclusive in recent years, BigLaw can still feel very isolating to many junior lawyers. Managing all of the new things being thrown at you and establishing a place for yourself in a law firm at the same time can feel incredibly overwhelming.

How Firms Can Protect Newer Attorneys' Mental Health

At every opportunity, beginning with their summer associate programming, law firms should discuss the importance of mental health and wellness and offer practical strategies for lawyers and law students to deal with stress.

Practicing law at an exceptional level is mentally and physically taxing. And unfortunately, the stressful environment can lead to a wide array of dysfunctional behaviors to cope with the stress of the practice.

We need to normalize conversations about the impact of stress on the mental health of

lawyers and offer resources for lawyers to manage stress. Law firms should consider developing mental health programming for all of its lawyers and staff covering a range of topics, including anxiety and depression, burnout, healthy and unhealthy relationships, and mindfulness.

Firms should also offer resources for lawyers and staff to seek professional counseling and therapy.

In addition, law firm leaders need to be more open and honest as role models for younger associates, sharing how they manage stress in their professional and personal lives, and how they are able to reset when they fall short.

Industry Success Increases Pressure on Practitioners

Stress in the legal profession has grown in the last 10 years due in large part to the incredible success of the profession. Being a law practitioner continues to be a highly sought-after profession by the most talented college graduates. This in turn has contributed to a robust pipeline of talented law students seeking summer clerkships and permanent offers from law firms.

This increased supply of junior talent, combined with an incredibly competitive marketplace for outside counsel, puts added pressure on landing a job in BigLaw and keeping it.

Many law students also have accumulated significant student loan debt. And while the increase in first-year salaries in BigLaw firms has grown to compensate for some of the financial stress, the expectations for new associates have also risen. These expectations include a greater focus on associate productivity and availability, with some firms expecting billings of more than 2,100 hours annually or requiring around the clock responsiveness.

Many associates are expected to cultivate an acumen for business and client development, adding thought leadership assignments to their already-full task lists.

But young lawyers are not just hamsters on a wheel. Law firm leaders need to develop and maintain a culture that respects individual lawyers and their contributions. They also must collectively recognize the toll that these increased — and competing — pressures have on the psyche of their lawyers and the importance of promoting a healthy work-life balance.

Finding Joy Beyond the Day-to-Day

I would encourage junior lawyers to find joy in the practice of law.

As a firmwide hiring partner, I often moderate the "How to Have a Successful Summer" panel during our summer associate orientation program. This year, I asked each of our firm panelists to share how they have found joy and fulfillment in the practice, and then encouraged each of our summer associates to find joy during their 10-week summer clerkship.

As we all know, the practice of law can be incredibly intense, the days can be incredibly long and, at times, unforgiving. Even so, you have to take care of yourself and find what brings you joy.

For me, I find joy in being connected to something bigger than the day-to-day of my practice and life. Over my 25 years of practice, my spirituality has been my moral compass

and has centered me when I found myself overwhelmed with the pressures of the profession.

My spirituality also motivates me to get involved in my community and serve in organizations centered around my passions of social justice, health equity and early childhood development. I would encourage junior lawyers to discover what brings them joy in life and in their practice and religiously set aside time to experience that joy.

Balancing Technology Throughout the Day

One major change that helped me was deciding not to check my cellphone for anything work-related or anything particularly heavy or mentally draining when I first wake up.

Up until six months ago, I would leave my cellphone in another room to charge when I went to bed. Now because I'm obsessed with the New York Times' Connections and Spelling Bee games, I have to at least try to solve the day's game before going to bed, so my cellphone is allowed to stay in my bedroom.

Utilizing technology to keep me organized and better manage my time is another helpful change. At the beginning of each workday, I take a few minutes to set alarms on my phone for each appointment I have scheduled for the day, so I don't miss any meetings. This habit provides a quick way for me to assess what I have on my plate so I can prepare myself mentally for the day.

How I Like to Unwind

For me, physical activity has been my favorite way to unwind, and it's a great way to balance out my foodie tendencies. In the last couple of years, I've developed a love for hot yoga. I often joke that when you're in hot yoga, your fellow yogis — and your instructor for that matter — never know if you're sweating or crying on your mat. What happens on the mat stays on the mat.

I've also recently deepened my resolve to improve my Spanish-speaking skills. Though I studied abroad for a semester in Valencia almost 30 years ago and minored in Spanish at the [University of Virginia](#), I really didn't use my Spanish and fell out of practice speaking it. However, in honor of the 40th year of existence of my study abroad program, I had an opportunity to revisit Valencia in 2023 and engaged a Spanish tutor in preparation for the trip.

Since then, I returned to Valencia with my family for the winter holidays in 2023 and continue to advance my language skills by listening to podcasts in Spanish, reading Spanish books and conversing with one of my Spanish tutors at least once every two weeks.

Trying to master a second language requires me to see and understand the world from a different cultural lens, which gives me something else to focus on when I find myself stressed with my day job.

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