

Talking Mental Health: Tackling Stress As A Practice Leader

By **Constance Rhebergen** (July 9, 2024, 2:40 PM EDT)

Attorneys and other legal professionals share insights on mental health and well-being in this Law360 Pulse Expert Analysis series. In this installment, attorney Constance Rhebergen discusses how she handles the stress of being a practice chair, how sources of stress have changed in the legal industry over the past 10 years and steps the industry can take to prioritize mental health.

The Most Stressful Part of Leading a Practice Group

Leadership over the past few years — especially as the COVID-19 pandemic raged — was the biggest challenge because there were so many stress-causing uncertainties. We were all "working without a net." Partners, associates and staff looked to leadership for guidance and answers at times when we were figuring it out ourselves.

With no road map, I was part of a leadership team that helped the firm establish a COVID-19 task force, focusing on keeping our lawyers and staff informed and engaged by implementing an instant remote workforce structure across the entire firm.

This role permitted me to become keenly aware of the stress and damage caused by isolation — which could have occurred for us at the leadership level, too, if we were unable to openly brainstorm and share experiences.

I was able to experience firsthand that, through our separation, we could improve our personal connections with clients and others by seeing each other on video. Seeing a person's face and hearing their voice built connections that could not be replicated by email alone.

The pandemic also opened the door to today's remote workforce and the accompanying stressors. The challenge for me, along with other firm leaders, now, is to lead a practice and firm in an environment where remote work is an element that must be considered and balanced by the knowledge that we are better when together. Creating that balance is the continued goal.

A Change I Made to My Work Process That Improved My Mental Health

While I have been a lifelong gardener, changes I made in my lifestyle due to COVID-19 have increased my focus on small moments in nature. My husband and I have a butterfly garden in the yard. While we



Constance Rhebergen

were all stuck in place, I changed my morning routine from rushing to the office first thing to merely going outside as the morning broke and simply standing in the garden.

It was this new habit that made me realize I never actually saw the garden before — until I stood still. I began noticing the little things, such as the droopy, sleeping caterpillars coming awake as the sun first hit the garden. Or the fact that there were seven entirely different species of bees in my garden, depending on the flowers we planted.

This calming nature of my surroundings began to set the tone to my entire day. So even after returning to the office, I continue this morning routine before tackling the rest of my day.

By nature, and by training, lawyers are not good at standing still. This taught me a valuable lesson of taking the time to truly see the world around me. It has been a great boost to my mental health.

In my practice, I have also made it a habit to implement the principles of my firm's well-being program more intentionally into my daily routine, with an emphasis on making personal connections.

This means focusing on our four pillars of well-being: mental well-being, physical well-being, financial well-being and community. I participate in and encourage our lawyers and staff to attend programming that explores these themes in greater detail, as well as to participate in activities such as fitness challenges and sending gratitude cards.

Steps the Legal Industry Needs to Take as a Whole to Prioritize Mental Health

Law firms must continue to focus on well-being alongside client service. Encourage taking time for family, friends and community. This time should be planned just as mindfully as preparing a business schedule.

Law firms, corporate legal departments and law schools can start by signing the American Bar Association's Well-Being Pledge. Launched in 2017, the pledge aims to "improve the substance use and mental health landscape of the legal profession, with an emphasis on helping legal employers support a healthy and sustainable work environment. Participating in the Pledge is a visible way for legal employers to help break down barriers to obtaining mental health support."

To that end, firms and law schools would be well served to educate attorneys and students alike on the topics of well-being and the warning signs of mental health and substance abuse issues, and to provide mental health support services where individuals can tap into the tools and techniques for sustained long-term self-care.

And finally, we as leaders must create a safe place for our lawyers and staff to discuss personal hardships without worrying that others will think we are less capable as lawyers or less dependable. Only acceptance allows sharing, and only sharing starts a path toward healing.

How Sources of Stress in the Legal Profession Changed in the Last 10 Years

Technological improvements have created useful tools for those in the legal community, but the unintended consequences of these advancements have introduced new forms of stress across all industries.

Technology has created an expectation that lawyers are always on, which can be damaging to self-care. The availability of powerful software tools leads to expectations of faster service and instant response. The reality of multinational transactions leads to expectations of working at any and all hours. This all coincides with the improvements in smartphones and videoconferencing, putting the office right at your fingertips.

This new remote work environment that frees lawyers from the confines of an office also brings about a new burden of separating work hours and personal time. Working from home can make it difficult to maintain clear boundaries between the two.

You might have put in more late nights at the office 10 years ago, but when you returned home, there was a distinct delineation between work and personal time. Having an office and living room side-by-side can blur the separation of work and home life, triggering increased fatigue.

This can also be applied in reverse when your personal life bleeds over into work performance while at home, which can be equally as stressful.

How I Like to Unwind

Family and friends are my focus. I also enjoy get-togethers in the neighborhood or a video catch-up with friends from college.

As my children grew, I volunteered in organizations involving our family. I spent seven years teaching in the children's ministries, including designing and co-teaching a "Jump & Shout" program that incorporated music, motion and sign language to enhance traditional lessons. I was blessed to have a role in helping these children grow and mature.

I later moved into adult music ministries, where I currently play saxophone with my husband and sometimes my son. Our new Horizons Music Ministries plays in church, at hospitals and homecare facilities, and at charitable organizations. We play church music, jazz and music from the movies.

I would say we also enjoy collecting saxophones, but that is the natural result of three sax players in the family.

Our family also participates in the Stop Hunger program through our church. I enjoy packaging food with my family and being able to provide balanced meals to those most in need. It is also fun to watch my 6-foot-tall son carry large bags of lentils over the heads of the other volunteers. It is a sight to see.

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