

ABA CoLAP and Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation

Research Findings on Mental Health of Attorneys

By Tish Vincent

For the first time since 1990, a major research project has focused on the emotional and mental health of U.S. attorneys.

The American Bar Association's Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs worked with the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation to solicit responses from the nation's attorneys. This effort took years of work by a dedicated team of researchers. Their findings will be studied and referred to for years to come.

Some of the results are surprising. "The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys"¹ is an article every law student, legal educator, attorney, and judge should read. It is a snapshot of our field that sheds light on the personal difficulties of some members of the legal profession.

Description of the research

Participants were recruited from 19 states and 15 state bar associations, and 12,825 surveys were collected. Participants were not asked for identifying information.

The survey included a number of standardized instruments used to test for alcohol-use disorders, depression, anxiety, drug abuse, stress, and other mood disorders. The survey also asked about barriers to seeking help.

Important findings

Approximately 21 percent of respondents indicated they engage in hazardous alcohol usage—double that of the general population of highly educated individuals. To the investigators' surprise, the highest rates of dangerous alcohol usage occur in the first 10 years of practice, with the second-highest rate of troublesome usage occurring in the 31–40 age group. Previous research had indicated that rates of troublesome alcohol

usage increased with years of practice. The new findings are the direct opposite and will serve as a stepping-off point for further research on this issue.²

Twenty-eight percent of those surveyed reported high levels of depression, 19 percent reported high levels of anxiety, and 23 percent reported high levels of stress. Sixty-one percent reported high anxiety at some point in their career, and 46 percent reported depression at some point.³

According to those surveyed, the two biggest barriers to seeking treatment are not wanting others to find out they need help and concerns regarding privacy and confidentiality.⁴

Takeaways

Attorneys suffer from elevated levels of substance-use disorders, depression, anxiety, and stress. Given the influential nature of the practice of law and the trust placed in lawyers by individuals, businesses, corporations, governments, and other entities, these levels of impairment are significant and must be addressed. The fact that respondents linked barriers to treatment with their reputations or standing in the community underscores the need for education on these issues. It also emphasizes the need to support effective lawyers' assistance programs that offer responsive, immediate, specific mental healthcare services to attorneys

in every state. Lawyers' assistance programs understand attorneys' fears about damaging their reputation and know that the most damage is done when those who need help don't seek it. It cannot be emphasized enough that any contact with a lawyers' assistance program is confidential.

I've covered the important points of the survey, but strongly encourage you to read the entire article, "The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys." ■



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ENDNOTES

1. Krill, Johnson & Albert, *The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys*, 10 *J Addict Med* 46 (2016).
2. *Id.* at 51.
3. *Id.*
4. *Id.* at 50.

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