

The Juggle is Real: Strategies for Balance & Boundaries

Wellness Competence MCLE
April 22, 2025

Women of CMCP Conference

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MCLE OVERVIEW

This CLE panel, hosted by the California Minority Counsel Program, will address burnout, systemic challenges, and cultural expectations, and share practical solutions for achieving a sustainable and fulfilling career. Designed to resonate with busy, multi-faceted attorneys, this session will offer practical advice on setting boundaries, building support systems, and advocating for yourself and each other. Panelists will also discuss navigating intersectional challenges in high-pressure environments. Featuring an all-women panel of industry experts, business leaders, and distinguished attorneys, the discussion will examine the unique ways in which women lawyers navigate challenges in the practice of law.

INTRODUCTION

The law is inherently demanding, characterized by long hours, high stakes, interpersonal adversity, and a culture that prioritizes productivity over personal well-being. For women, the stresses of legal practice are further compounded by cultural and gender expectations, workplace bias, and the persistent systemic inequities prevalent in the law. These intersecting pressures can erode physical and mental well-being, increasing vulnerability to burnout and other impairments that can compromise professional competency. This document explores the unique challenges women in the law face in maintaining both professional excellence and personal well-being, and offers research-based, practical strategies for fostering a healthier and more sustainable career in the law.

The Cost of Inequity

Inequity within the legal profession extends beyond moral considerations, directly impacting organizational performance and profitability. Disparities in opportunity and representation contribute to diminished morale, increased burnout, and substantial financial losses due to disengagement and turnover.

- Perceived inequity in the workplace can lead to decreased motivation, disengagement, and loss of productivity. Such environments foster burnout, resulting in higher absenteeism and reduced performance.
- Women attorneys who experienced gender discrimination were more likely to report feelings of cynicism and reduced job satisfaction (Eansor & Lafreniere, 2015).
- Gender-based inequities contribute to higher stress, burnout, and attrition among women attorneys (Anker & Krill, 2021).
- Employees who perceive that their organization does not treat people fairly and consistently are more likely to experience burnout (Salmons, 2017). These practices contribute to increased turnover, particularly but not exclusively among marginalized groups.
- Departing legal professionals take with them valuable institutional knowledge, client relationships, and specialized expertise. The time required to bring a new hire to full productivity can span several months, during which team efficiency dips and client satisfaction may suffer.

Addressing inequity is essential for reducing stress, improving retention, and creating sustainable legal careers. Equity is not just a moral obligation; it's a strategic advantage in the competitive legal landscape.

Workplace Bias & Mental Load

Even the most capable, driven women in law can find themselves sidelined—not for lack of skill, but because they encounter invisible obstacles that hinder their advancement. Subtle yet pervasive, workplace bias can limit access to meaningful work, delay promotions, and erode a sense of efficacy. Whether through unequal access to opportunities, skewed performance evaluations, or disproportionate assignment of non-promotable tasks, gender-based bias plays a critical role in driving chronic stress and burnout among women legal professionals.

- Women are disproportionately assigned non-promotable tasks that are essential to the organization, but costly to their careers. While these tasks benefit the team or firm, they offer little visibility, recognition, or advancement opportunities for the woman taking them on (Babcock, 2018).
- Skills many women naturally excel in, like effective listening and team collaboration, are frequently undervalued or overlooked in performance evaluations. Traditional assessment metrics tend to prioritize individual achievements over these essential collaborative contributions (Westfahl, 2015).
- As compared to their male counterparts, “women consistently get feedback about their personalities rather than their work” (Textio, 2024). This type of feedback ignores actionable performance metrics and contributions, and can impede professional growth and contribute to frustration, stress, and burnout.
- Women with caregiving responsibilities may face assumptions about their commitment and availability, leading to fewer challenging assignments and slower career progression. This bias, known as the “maternal wall,” significantly impacts career trajectories.
- Women in law often shoulder a disproportionate mental load, managing both professional responsibilities and the invisible labor of household coordination. This constant cognitive burden—planning childcare, organizing family schedules, and anticipating needs—contributes to chronic stress and burnout.
- Work-family conflict is a leading driver of attrition for women in the law. Female attorneys experiencing high levels of work-family conflict are approximately 4.6 times more likely to consider leaving the profession due to mental health concerns, stress, and burnout (Anker & Krill, 2021).

Addressing workplace bias is crucial in mitigating burnout and attrition among women in law. By recognizing and actively combatting these biases, organizations can create a more equitable environment that supports the well-being and advancement of all legal professionals.

The Case for Equity

Despite reaching parity in law school enrollment and entering the profession at similar rates as men, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles, underscoring broader patterns of unfairness that persist within the legal profession. But equity in the legal profession is not only a matter of fairness but also a strategic imperative for law firms and legal departments. Research indicates that firms fostering equitable environments experience enhanced retention, innovation, and profitability.

- In their annual report of trends in the legal profession, the ABA found that while more than half of students in law schools are women, “men still dominate the upper echelons of the legal profession through federal judgeships, state supreme courts, law firm partnerships, and corporate counsel positions” (2024).
- A commitment to equity enhances a firm’s culture, making it more attractive to top talent. Surveys indicate that law firm culture, including diversity, inclusivity, and fair advancement practices, is a significant factor for candidates when choosing where to work (Yale Law Women+, 2024).
- Companies with more women in leadership roles see higher profitability, and benefit from enhanced collaboration, innovation, and client satisfaction (Westfahl, 2015).
- A McKinsey report on diversity found that “companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 25 percent more likely to achieve above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile” (2020).

Promoting equity is essential for fostering a competent and resilient legal workforce. By ensuring that women have equal opportunities, organizations not only uphold principles of fairness but also enhance their overall performance and reputation.

Equity, Mental Health and Professional Efficacy

Equity is integral to ethical lawyering and sustainable legal practice. The research is clear: unfairness drives chronic stress, burnout, attrition, and ethical violations. Equitable workplaces promote psychological safety, reduce chronic stress, and help prevent burnout—all critical for maintaining the mental health, judgement, and reliability required of competent legal professionals.

- Workplace equity strengthens team cohesion and performance, creating environments where diverse perspectives are valued and integrated into problem-solving strategies.
- Inequity contributes to chronic stress, which impairs the prefrontal cortex—the brain’s decision-making and emotion-regulating center. A stressed out, dysregulated attorney is an ineffective attorney. Mental health is foundational to competence.

A commitment to equity is inseparable from the duty to maintain professional competence and uphold the ethical standards of legal practice. By fostering equitable environments, employers not only support attorney well-being, but also create resilient, high-performing, and ethically sound teams.

The State Bar of California – Rule 1.1

The State Bar of California is aware of the challenges faced by many distressed attorneys and understands the possible negative effects on an attorney’s ability and responsibility to perform their duties with competence, as outlined in Rule 1.1, revised March 2021:

- a) A lawyer shall not intentionally, recklessly, with gross negligence, or repeatedly fail to perform legal services with competence.
- b) For purposes of this rule, “competence” in any legal service shall mean to apply the (i) learning and skill, and (ii) **mental, emotional, and physical ability** necessary for the performance of such service.

By explicitly linking competence to an attorney’s mental, emotional, and physical well-being, the State Bar of California underscores that supporting attorney wellness is not optional—it is a professional obligation. Ensuring equitable, healthy work environments is therefore essential to upholding both ethical standards and the quality of legal services.

BURNOUT OVERVIEW

The association and connection that people have with their work has long been a central topic in the research community. In the early 1900s, the subfield of industrial and organizational (IO) psychology emerged to specifically study the human experience in the workplace. This new subfield allowed researchers to examine various topics, including job satisfaction, engagement, productivity, motivation, and employee well-being.

However, the exploration into the experience of burnout—and specifically, the term itself—only entered the academic arena in the 1970s, when it was first used to describe the emotional experiences of counselors working in a free crisis-intervention clinic. Even then, it was understood that burnout was not just an individual phenomenon, but that it could also occur at the departmental or large-scale organizational level. In fact, most recent studies have confirmed this suspicion, demonstrating that it is the organizational and environmental influences—more so than the personal factors—that play the largest causal role in burnout.

Definition

Burnout syndrome is characterized by three distinct yet interrelated dimensions—exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Each dimension represents a cluster of physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms commonly associated with burnout:

- Exhaustion encompasses the feelings of physical, mental, and emotional depletion.
- Cynicism represents feeling detachment from one’s work, colleagues, and clients.
- Inefficacy accounts for a decrease in the quality or quantity of work product output.

Burnout occurs at the intersection of all three dimensions. While symptoms associated with only one or two dimensions do not meet the full criteria for burnout, this is still a cause for concern, and individuals should consult with a medical or mental health expert for a proper evaluation.

An Occupational Phenomenon

The World Health Organization has clarified that burnout is not a medical diagnosis or a catch-all term, but instead “refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.”

Recent & Landmark Studies

The fact that attorneys in the U.S. struggle with higher-than-average rates of depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation is widely accepted. A landmark Johns Hopkins University study (Eaton et al., 1990) examined the rate of major depressive disorders across 104 professions and found that even when compared with their peers in other highly stressful and demanding professions, such as nursing and social work, lawyers had the highest occurrence of depression. Other studies have found similarly alarming trends with substance abuse and suicidality, revealing attorneys to be one of the professional groups with highest incidence rates.

- Compared with the prevalence rates of individuals in Western industrialized countries, attorneys were far more likely to suffer from depression, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse (Benjamin, Darling, & Sales, 1990).
- A University of Arizona study examined psychological distress symptoms and alcohol abuse and found incidence rates consistent with the above 1990 study, concluding that “a large percentage of practicing lawyers are experiencing a variety of significant psychological distress symptoms well beyond that expected in a normal population” (Beck, Sales, Benjamin, 1995).
- Sponsored by the ABA and Hazelden Betty Form Foundation, researchers examined the prevalence of mental health issues and substance use behaviors and found that attorneys exhibit symptoms of stress, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse “at a higher rate than other professional populations” (Krill, Johnson & Alpert, 2016).
- A 2021 University of Minnesota study compared the occurrence of mental health symptoms, substance use, and attrition rates of male and female attorneys and found that the “prevalence and severity of depression, anxiety, stress, and risky/hazardous drinking were significantly higher among women” (Anker & Krill).

Attorneys are at an elevated risk of burnout due to the demanding nature of legal work. When chronic stress and burnout erode or overwhelm coping mechanisms, attorneys become more susceptible to developing depression, anxiety, and substance use issues.

Risk Factors

Burnout is a complex phenomenon, often emerging from the cumulative interaction of various risk factors across environmental, individual, interpersonal, and technological domains.

Environmental and occupational contributors include excessive workload, high billable hour expectations, limited autonomy, low error tolerance, and systemic inequities such as gender disparities and biased organizational practices. Exposure to difficult and demanding clients, traumatic case material, inadequate staffing, and a lack of recognition further exacerbate occupational strain.

Individual risk factors—including perfectionism, self-criticism, inflexibility of thought, low emotional intelligence, poor boundary management, and undiagnosed mental health conditions—can intensify the effects of external stressors.

Relational and interpersonal dynamics, such as adversarial interactions with opposing counsel, competitive internal hierarchies, and unsupportive supervisory relationships, further compound stress.

Technological demands—including the expectation of constant connectivity, virtual meeting fatigue, and the pressure to keep pace with evolving digital tools and AI—create a persistent cognitive and emotional load that accelerates the path to burnout.

Symptoms

While burnout syndrome is not a medical diagnosis, researchers have identified a set of symptoms that are often associated with burnout. Individuals experiencing burnout commonly suffer from correlated symptoms that fall into one of three categories: physiological, psychological, and behavioral. Recognizing the symptoms in oneself or others is critical for early intervention.

- Burnout and chronic stress can manifest in a range of **physiological** symptoms, including persistent fatigue, frequent illness, and physical pain such as headaches and muscle tension. Over time, these symptoms may contribute to more serious health issues, including high blood pressure and weakened immune function.
- In addition to physical symptoms, burnout also takes a significant **psychological** toll—often leading to heightened anxiety, depression, irritability, and emotional instability. Left unaddressed, these symptoms can escalate into feelings of hopelessness or suicidal ideation, seriously impairing both personal well-being and professional competence.
- Unaddressed chronic stress can also give rise to **behavioral** changes, including increased substance use, poor sleep and eating patterns, and withdrawal from responsibilities or social supports. Over time, these behaviors can further isolate individuals and compound the effects of burnout, making recovery more difficult.

If you are experiencing any of the above symptoms, do not self-diagnose. Please consult with a medical professional and mental health provider who can assess, diagnose, and treat your symptoms and their underlying causes.

TARGETED APPROACH

Because burnout is often the result of the complex interaction between unique environmental and personal factors, an effective strategy for managing and preventing burnout must be comprehensive and consider both: (a) your organization's culture and values; and (b) the individual needs of each employee or team.

While there is no one-size-fits-all model, the most successful strategies for managing burnout and improving attorney wellness implement a three-tier approach: (i) prevention; (ii) early detection; and (iii) rehabilitation.

Prevention

Burnout is the cumulative result of unresolved, chronic stress experienced over an extended period. Because the process is so gradual, the incremental changes from day-to-day are virtually undetectable. By the time most people notice that something is wrong, they are likely experiencing the more moderate or severe symptoms of burnout, that are debilitating to the individual, disruptive of their life, and more resistant to short-term treatment.

Because burnout is difficult to detect and treat, the most strategic approach should center on prevention, with an emphasis on education and collaboration. Educating attorneys and organizational leaders about mental health is a critical component of prevention and early intervention. Wellness initiatives—such as in-office presentations, confidential resources, informational conversations, and leadership-led well-being efforts—help normalize mental health dialogue and reduce stigma. When firms prioritize mental health education and equip leaders with the tools to support their teams, they create a culture where seeking help is accepted and supported.

Although research shows that environmental factors are the primary drivers of burnout, the responsibility for managing workplace stress is often placed on individuals. A more effective and sustainable solution requires a collaborative approach—one that engages both organizations and individuals in shaping a healthier work environment. This dual strategy includes top-down efforts, where leaders model and create supportive, inclusive systems, and bottom-up efforts, where individuals build resilience through self-awareness, skill development, and boundary-setting. Together, these approaches promote a culture of shared accountability for well-being and performance.

Early Detection

Early detection of chronic stress and burnout is essential for effective intervention and recovery. Recognizing even mild symptoms and seeking timely support—from healthcare professionals, workplace allies, or personal networks—can prevent worsening mental and physical health. However, many attorneys delay getting help due to stigma, fears about career impact, internalized pressure to appear strong, and concerns about confidentiality or time. These barriers often lead to isolation or self-medicating, further exacerbating the problem.

Rehabilitation

Burnout is a multifaceted condition with no singular cause or universal solution. Therefore, effective recovery requires a personalized approach that addresses both organizational and individual factors. This includes involvement from a qualified medical or mental health professional, targeted interventions to reduce environmental stressors, and workplace accommodations—such as workload adjustments, increased support, or medical leave—designed to promote recovery without penalty.

Strategies for Managing Stress

Because burnout is difficult to detect and treat, well-being must be a priority. Wellness strategies, including daily practices for managing stress, can significantly reduce chances of burnout.

- Mindfulness and grounding techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation, improve attorneys' ability to remain present, allowing them to pause and respond intentionally rather than reactively (Sercekman, 2024).
- Psychotherapy, particularly approaches that emphasize cognitive patterns and emotional intelligence (EQ), helps attorneys navigate interpersonal dynamics and manage their own emotion responses effectively.
- Self-awareness enhances attorneys' ability to recognize and interrupt implicit bias, particularly in cross-cultural interactions. Recognizing and addressing implicit biases is crucial in preventing gender-based discrimination in and out of the workplace.
- Conflict de-escalation tactics (e.g., reflective listening, re-framing, softening tone) help mitigate adversarial communication and reduce interpersonal strain.
- Micro-practices such as three-breath pause, labeling emotions, and cognitive reframing, can be seamlessly implemented in real-time during litigation, meetings, negotiations, and even during a quick ride in the elevator.
- Regular physical activity, even in brief intervals, has been shown to lower the stress hormone cortisol levels, improve mood regulation, increase self-esteem, and enhance cognitive resilience under pressure.
- Consistent sleep hygiene—including limiting screen exposure before bed, maintaining a regular sleep schedule, and creating a restful, disruption-free environment—significantly improves emotional regulation, focus, and stress recovery.
- Boundary-setting practices, such as defined work hours, protected personal time, and regularly scheduled breaks, help maintain energy reserves and prevent physical and emotional depletion.
- Peer support provides emotional validation, normalizes professional challenges, and reduces feelings of isolation. A strong community is a buffer against stress.

Incorporating even a few of these strategies into daily routines can build long-term resilience and protect against the cumulative effects of stress. By proactively managing stress, legal professionals can sustain performance, enhance well-being, and reduce the risk of burnout.

Role of Law Firms & Legal Organizations

Organizational culture sets the tone for the individual experience. When law firms and legal institutions prioritize sustainable workloads, mental health, and ongoing professional development, they create environments where attorneys can thrive. Proactively addressing burnout isn't just about well-being—it's essential to preserving performance, judgement, and client trust.

- Written codes of conduct help institutionalize expectations and create shared norms—but only when fairly and consistently enforced.
- Senior partners and firm leaders must consistently model healthy boundaries and behaviors in how they manage, mentor, and advocate.
- Mentorship is critical: pairing junior attorneys with eager mentors who exemplify professionalism encourages civility and camaraderie from the start.
- Ongoing education on stress reduction, emotional intelligence, and communication can reinforce well-being. Integrating mindfulness programs, stress-reduction tools, and mental health support creates a safer and more productive workplace.
- Leadership training, including “the importance of providing clear and regular feedback,” improves job satisfaction and well-being (Krill, 2022). When legal professionals understand what is expected of them and how these expectations align with firm values, they report lower levels of stress and improved mental health.

Well-being isn't just an individual obligation—it's a systemic responsibility. Law firms and legal organizations have both the opportunity and the duty to shape a culture where professionalism and well-being thrive.

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RESOURCES

Below is a list of resources available to California legal professionals.

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American Bar Association

[Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs](#)

The State Bar of California

[Lawyer Assistance Program](#)

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California Minority Counsel Program

Cmcp.org

Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation

[Substance Use Disorders Among Legal Professionals](#)

The Other Bar

Supporting Recovery in the Legal Community

otherbar.org

Institute for Well-Being in Law

lawyerwellbeing.net

Mindfulness in Law Society

mindfulnessinlawsociety.org