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The hidden cost of excellence

BURNOUT AND BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE LIFE AS A WOMAN IN THE LAW

Addicted to social media? Bad. Addicted to substance? Bad. Addicted to trashy romance novels? Bad. Addicted to work? Go on, girl! *Flex!* We brag about working 12-16 hour days regularly, running on fumes and getting sick due to a depressed immune system like we should receive an award for it.

We don't even know what our hobbies are because outside of being a workaholic and maybe an overwhelmed guilt-ridden parent/caretaker, we can't even dream of a world that allows us space to explore such luxuries. We talk about skipping meals because we were so busy we "forgot to eat." We are nutritionally deficient. We use "work-life balance" as some cute catch phrase-goal we sort of hope to achieve, but not really because then we wouldn't be hardworking baddies. We brag about not being able to achieve work-life balance, because our jobs just won't allow it and we're too dedicated for that. But.... Is that even true? Who are we even competing with? Who even came up with that idea, anyway?

This article will identify an issue facing women in the law and discuss its consequences. I'll offer solutions to help alleviate some of the strain being placed on women due to unmanaged professional demands. We'll remove the stigma and shame of admitting we are tired and overwhelmed by illuminating it, with the hope that this invites thoughtful discussion amongst my sisters-in-law and a safe place to seek support from each other.

The issue – exhaustion

The truth is, too many of us are not willing to admit that deep down we are *exhausted* chasing excellence. Not just excellence, many of us are simply fighting to even be seen. It is no secret that women are not as professionally recognized as men; we are overlooked more for professional advancement, and considered less dedicated to our jobs than our male counterparts.

While fighting to obtain those impressive settlements and verdicts, we are doing so often at the cost of our health and relationships. We've convinced ourselves that these are the sacrifices we must make to be objectively successful and worthy of recognition.

You've heard it before, "Work hard, play hard." You've seen it before, the social-media posts of numerous computer screens on and notes and transcripts scattered everywhere with a timestamp of 1:00 a.m. I am not inferring that these things are not true or necessary, but I am inferring that they are not true and necessary *all the time*. This type of overworking all the time is not a strength, it's a gross mismanagement of time, priorities and capacity.

When it is necessary, I like to call these periods of time "seasons of hustle." Obviously, when preparing for a big deposition, writing or opposing a dispositive motion, preparing for mediation, or preparing for trial, we may have to pull long hours and the other parts of our lives may temporarily suffer. However, those should be seasons, and not a year-round lifestyle that results in the chronic fatigue, illness and burnout we cannot seem to find a way to avoid. It will catch up to us all. There are no exceptions to this rule.

The unfortunate theme I see repeated is the inability or difficulty in admitting that while we desperately want to love what we do and how we run our professional and personal lives, we're actually pretty miserable. We can't bring ourselves to contemplate the real price of this being our next 20-30 (or more) years. Even though we know deep down that our work life is not sustainable long-term, we cannot shut down our laptops at a reasonable hour and log off. We cannot stay off of Slack, group chats, work texts and emails for fear of missing something, being disconnected, or worse – looking

like we aren't dedicated enough. And what about real joy? We don't know her. *But, what if we could?*

"You can have it all," including burnout

What compounds this issue are the social media "You can have it all!" posts. For some, that may be true. But not for all of us. For many of us, we *can* have it all, just not at the same time. Watching other women lawyers, or law-firm owners, preaching about how they can work, make lots of money, travel, have regular date nights with their spouses and have successful social lives can leave many feeling like they are failing at something.

I know that not *all* of us experience this, but I do know enough (I've had this experience myself more often than I would care to admit) to warrant an open and honest discussion about this. Without guilt. Without shame. Talking about exhaustion and what balance should look like is almost as taboo as talking about money, but it shouldn't be. So, let me hit you with some facts.

While we are continuing to inch our way to equality, we are obviously not there. Women suffer from higher rates of burnout according to a 2023 Bloomberg Law survey. This survey revealed that female lawyers spend less time on self-care and experience more burnout than their male counterparts. Female lawyers experienced burnout at an average of 56% of the time, compared to 41% of the time for male lawyers. Female lawyers experienced more physical symptoms, including disrupted sleep, anxiety, physical health issues and depression. In fact, only 10% of women reported experiencing none of these symptoms compared to 21% of male lawyers. (https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/self-care-gap-expands-as-female-lawyers-spend-less-time-on-themselves-report-more-burnout#google_vignette).

Walking out the Door

Walking Out the Door is a research report that evaluated why women are leaving the law. It identified damaging disparities between female and male attorneys, leading to stress, burnout, job dissatisfaction, and ultimately departure. This study revealed that women report being *four to eight times more likely* to be overlooked for advancement, denied a salary increase or bonus, treated as a token representative for diversity, lacking access to business-development opportunities, perceived as less committed to her career, and lacking access to sponsors. (Liebenberg & Scharf, *Walking Out the Door*, *supra*, at p. 8.)

With respect to job satisfaction, 87% of senior men reported job satisfaction compared to 72% of women. However, with respect to those who are somewhat or extremely dissatisfied, 5% of men reported feeling this way while 21% of women shared this sentiment. (Liebenberg & Scharf, *Walking Out the Door*, *supra*, at p. 4.)

While 91% of men believed their firms were strong advocates for gender diversity, only 62% of women agreed. (Liebenberg & Scharf, *Walking Out the Door*, *supra*, at p. 14.)

Essentially, the *Walking Out the Door* report's conclusion is unequivocal: Women are not opting out of private practice, they are being pushed out by systems that reward overwork, obscure power, and tolerate inequality.

Also concerning are the disparate effects on women of color. "Research shows the experiences of women of color differ from the experiences reported for women in general (which have typically reflected only the experiences of white women) in the legal profession. Little has changed since foundational research was conducted in the 2000s revealing that women of color feel invisible and unsupported in a work environment that is indifferent, if not outright hostile, to their unique perspectives and challenges. Not surprisingly, women of color were found to be leaving law firms for

more flexibility, as well as more predictable and less subjective pathways for advancement." (Bree Buchanan, Jodi Cleesattle & Katy Goshtasbi, *Losing Our [Best] Minds: Addressing the Attrition Crisis of Women Lawyers in a Post-Pandemic World*, p. 6 (Cal. Lawyers Assn. 2022).)

Effects on health

The job dissatisfaction and burnout experienced by women carries with it significant health consequences. According to the World Health Organization, "burnout" is not a medical condition, but an occupational phenomenon. It is directly tied to workplace stress, and is concluded from the presence of three symptoms: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job and reduced professional efficacy. (World Health Organization, *Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International Classification of Diseases*, <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases> (as of Feb. 2, 2026).)

While the definition of burnout stops at occupational functioning, the body does not. While you may know this, it's well worth repeating. Persistent burnout is a cause of reduced quality of life, increased risk of sleep impairment, mild cognitive impairment, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

There is also overlap between burnout and depressive symptoms, with severe clinical burnout having transient manifestations of depression or subclinical depression. *Anyone with burnout may be more susceptible to clinical depression.* (Razia A.G. Khammissa, Simon Nemutandani & Gal Feller et al., *Burnout Phenomenon: Neurophysiological Factors, Clinical Features, and Aspects of Management*, 50 J. Int'l Med. Res. 30006052211064228 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/03000605221106428> (as of Feb. 2, 2026).)

Unsurprisingly, common physical symptoms include changes in appetite, disrupted sleep patterns, headaches, and

gastrointestinal complaints (not surprising, since we've all seen some form of a stressed-out person at work chugging Pepto Bismol or popping Tums). (Stefanos Karakolias, *Seeing Burnout Coming: Early Signs and Recognition Strategies in Health Professionals*, 13 Front. Pub. Health 1721220 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2025.1721220> (as of Feb. 2, 2026).)

We cannot pretend that these physical symptoms are not warning signs of the stress we are putting on our bodies. The good news is that we have some control over many of these conditions. There are several things we can do to manage, or even reverse, these symptoms and restore our nervous systems and health.

Possible solutions

We've identified the problem, we've identified the consequences of the problem, now let's dig into possible solutions. I say "possible" solutions because this really is not a one-size-fits-all problem. It shows up differently for people. However, there are a few solutions that are broad enough to be adaptable on a large scale, and most certainly worth investigating and adopting.

Recovery is a solid and proven way to manage burnout. Recovery includes sleep protection, mental disengagement and unstructured time.

Sleep protection

Sleep protection is *huge*, and many of us suffer from poor sleep hygiene. It's truly amazing how overwhelming a problem can look when you are tired, and how solvable it feels after a good night's sleep. Lack of sleep can distort challenges, leading to greater reactivity and unnecessary stress.

One major sleep-derailer is the phone. I don't know about you, but I tend to feel cheated if I work all day, run kids to sports practice, make dinner, clean up and then go straight to bed without a little time to unwind ("unwind" meaning doomscrolling by myself in bed). However, I used to crawl into

bed to do so at 9:15 p.m. and end up not falling asleep until almost 11 p.m. because I got pulled into social media. I would panic at the thought of shutting it down, feeling like I didn't get enough time to really enjoy by myself.

I know I need at least 7.5 hours of sleep to function optimally, so I have learned to adjust accordingly. One solution that has worked for me is not to set a bedtime, but rather to set a time to be off my phone or stop any wind-down activity. I know I need to stop activities at least 30 minutes before bed to allow my brain and body to prepare for sleep, so I adjust my time accordingly. I make sure I dim all the lights around me (this communicates to my brain that we are getting ready to sleep).

I know I want to be asleep by 10:00 p.m., I know I need to be done with any wind-down activity by 9:30 p.m. I then tend to get myself into bed a little earlier to accommodate doomscrolling, or whatever I choose that night – watching a television show, playing Uno with my son, or reading a book. I then shut everything down, turn the lights off, and take four or five deep breaths and usually fall asleep pretty quickly.

On nights I am having particular trouble, I use a little sleep mocktail. Should you want the recipe, all you have to do is ask and I will be more than happy to share. It has worked for several of my friends.

Mental disengagement

It is nearly impossible to get the rest you need if you do not “shut it down” at an appropriate hour and for the rest of the day. The book *Deep Work* by Cal Newport discusses this process and has revolutionized how I treat my workday. I highly recommend this book to anyone looking to squeeze as much productivity from their day, which requires, in part, shifting how you show up in your life outside of work.

If you take your work home, check your Slacks at 8 p.m., check your email while cooking dinner, respond to work

texts, etc., you do not fortify the mental boundary you need from work, and protect the restorative downtime you need to show up more energetically and productively at work the next day. I'm telling you – shutting it down at night makes a huge difference.

Part of fortifying this boundary meant removing notifications from my phone. I do not have email or Slack notifications enabled. I must be intentional about checking those platforms so they do not hijack my attention. In the beginning, this caused anxiety, and I repeatedly reminded myself that nothing was going to burn down by morning. I know several people who practice this in different ways. One attorney may not have email on his phone at all. Instead, the moment he gets home, he checks email to ensure nothing was missed. Many others simply remove notifications.

To make sure I am honoring time to disengage, I have a routine that signals to my brain that the workday is concluding. My final email check is the last task of the day, and I try to ensure everything is sorted into its respective case files. Once that is complete, my brain recognizes that the day has ended and it is time to shut it down.

While the beginning was a challenge, I adapted quickly. Now, when I go to dinner with lawyer friends and watch them check notifications on their phones or lift their wrists to examine their Apple Watches, I am much more aware of it and deeply appreciative that I reclaimed this control.

Checking notifications in the presence of others creates an uncomfortable break in conversation and reminds us how easily we become captive to constant interruption. It also creates disconnection in the experience you are trying to have with another person, prevents you from being fully present, and when you really think about it, it is simply rude.

Based on my own experience and the experiences of attorneys I have spoken to, I highly recommend learning to compartmentalize work as much as possible and building a fortress around your restor-

ative hours outside of it. “I work all the time” is no longer the flex we are carrying through 2026.

Unstructured time

Unstructured time is not productivity-adjacent hobbies. It is actual time spent on things you love outside of the law. These are activities that bring raw joy and/or peace, done simply for their own sake. This has been a real struggle for me. With the demands of parenting and work, I sometimes forget this is even a possibility.

I was recently invited to go for a walk in nature and accepted, though I was admittedly not all that excited about it. It meant shifting other parts of my day, specifically errands I thought needed to get done before my son's baseball practice. I showed up, went on the walk, and was blown away by how much I enjoyed something so incredibly simple: a peaceful walk with good conversation through a nature reserve. I have never fancied myself an outdoorsy girl, but I also realized I had never truly given myself the chance to find out. It was well worth the responsibility shifting to allow myself that joy, and who knows what the future holds there.

Whatever it is you love outside of work, make it a priority. Your health, and quite possibly the quality of your work, depends on it, my friend.

Deep work

Creating opportunities to perform deep work is something I am currently working on after reading the book. I will admit that setting aside time for deep work not only makes me feel like a better lawyer, it also has the side effect of managing stress and anxiety. I am no longer being pulled in a thousand directions by small tasks that rarely amount to much beyond becoming a useless time sink.

To create opportunities for deep work, I review my weekly calendar once on Friday and again on Sunday evening (this gives my subconscious time in between to work its magic). By Sunday, I am identifying my priorities and where they fit into each day. I then time-block hours

for deep work, completing those hours in either 25-minute or 45-minute chunks. Watching those chunks of time add up is deeply satisfying, as is completing something hard and demanding that you have been putting off simply because it is hard and demanding.

How these women handle legal stress

I asked several other attorneys what they do to manage stress and overwhelm, and I would like to share the golden nuggets I gathered.

Chandra Gehri-Spencer takes solo trips where she unplugs entirely and can rejuvenate with silence (and scuba). Jenna Edzant makes sure she gets travel on her calendar so she knows she has dedicated time to unwind on her horizon (Siannah Collado echoes this for both short and long trips). Jenna also finds that seeing the world gives her fresh perspective and reminds her there is more to life than work.

Teresa Johnson combats burnout by taking a day off without looking at her phone and doing something just for herself. She also suggests doing this proactively, not only during burnout, and taking advantage of slower periods to reset. Casey Hultin names the issue early and then enlists the help of a friend or therapist. She identifies the biggest source of stress and works to offload it. She also reminds herself that if the world does not fall apart while she is in trial, she can also stop to take a day off. She does not use email notifications on her phone.

Puneet Toor suggests co-counseling cases when possible and saying no to clients you do not like. Maryann Gallagher also stresses the importance of saying no to clients you do not like and reminds us that one good client can bring in more revenue than five difficult ones.

I really hope this article struck a chord with you somewhere. I hope you can think of some change, large or small,

that brings more peace, joy, resiliency, and rest into your life. If this can be done, even in incremental doses, I believe you will be floored by the positive changes you see in your health, your work, your relationships, and the love you feel for the woman staring back at you in your mirror.

That woman staring back at you is your biggest asset, friend, and the vehicle for everything you ultimately want in this life. Take good care of her. She deserves it. 

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