

Loneliness Is The Other Pandemic, Researchers Say

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Summary

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Body

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Individualism, competitiveness, fear of failure, high pressure and heavy workloads contribute to why lawyers are among the loneliest category of professionals, according to psychiatric metrics, the study says. The culture of overwork in the legal profession has proven counterproductive, according to the authors of the study, Olivia Ash of Indiana University School of Health and Human Sciences and Peter H. Huang of University of Colorado Law School.

"Loneliness is the source of a lot of people's anxiety and depression," Ash, a lawyer and wellness advocate, told Law360. And consequently, "Lawyers are high on the spectrum for anxiety and substance misuse. That's at odds with best serving your clients."

The researchers define loneliness as distinct from simple isolation. Loneliness is associated with feelings of alienation and lack of meaningful connection with others, according to the UCLA Loneliness Scale, a tool psychologists use to gauge feelings of loneliness.

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According to Ash and Huang, the thought patterns that make someone successful as a lawyer can be deleterious to their mental health: a killer instinct in the courtroom can bleed into their personal life, breeding aggression and paranoia.

"It is striking how characteristics of 'thinking like a lawyer' parallel the state of hypervigilance: an increased emphasis on self-preservation, avoidance of perceived threats, and increases in anxiety, heart rate, and blood pressure," they wrote. "Perhaps learning how to critically analyze an opponent's arguments and 'defend one's boundaries' enhances students' hypervigilant responses, contributing to increased feelings of loneliness."

The solution to the loneliness epidemic lies in fighting against the cultural tendency toward individualism and self-reliance in favor of connection, solidarity and work-life balance, Ash told Law360.

"Being vulnerable is not what they teach you in law school. It's exactly not what they teach you," Ash told Law360. "If you're having high levels of loneliness and there's a massive chasm between the connections you need and what you have, you have to reach out."

While it's important to open up to others, it's equally crucial not to be too available to work, especially in a time where working from home is the industry standard and lawyers are theoretically able to work at any time and from anywhere.

"It's important to create boundaries. That's a skill that everybody needs to practice," she said.

But the onus is on management and other people with power in law firms to go against cultures of overworking and burnout, for example by telling employees explicitly to go home at a reasonable hour and take time off, among other measures that foster mental health, Ash said.

"When we look at strategies for reducing loneliness, there has to be an environment that supports asking for help without being seen as a weak link," she said.

--Editing by Nicole Bleier.