Managing Stress and Trauma in the Lawyer's Office:

Understanding Vicarious Trauma, Preventing Burnout, and Building Resilience

Presented by:
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Learning Objectives

Participants will be able to:

Identify signs and symptoms of stress overload, burnout, and vicarious trauma.

Understand how exposure to clients' trauma affects attorneys and legal staff.

Recognize personal and organizational risk factors.

Create a personal action plan for sustainable legal practice.

The Reality of Lawyer Stress

How many of you have lost sleep over a client?

How many of you replay difficult cases at night?

How many of you feel emotionally exhausted at the end of the week?

How many of you feel that you get blamed for EVERYTHING that goes wrong in a case?

How many of you feel totally unappreciated by your clients most of the time?

Sources of Lawyer Stress

Heavy caseloads
High conflict cases
Adversarial work environment
Exposure to traumatic facts
Time pressures and deadlines
Financial pressures
Difficult clients
Perfectionism
Fear of mistakes
Isolation
Emotional and mental overstimulation

The work of Lawyers is not just intellectually demanding—
it is emotionally demanding.

The Three Threats of Lawyering

Stress Overload

1. Short-term response to excessive demands.

Symptoms:

Irritability
Poor concentration
Sleep disturbance
Physical tension
Reduced productivity

The Three Threats of Lawyering

2. Burnout

Chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.

Signs:

Emotional exhaustion
Cynicism
Detachment
Reduced effectiveness
Loss of purpose

Leading to the question:
Do you still care about your clients—or are you simply surviving the day?"

The Three Threats of Lawyering

3. Vicarious Trauma

The transformation that occurs when helping professionals absorb the emotional pain and traumatic experiences of others.

Lawyers often hear:

Child abuse allegations
Domestic violence
Sexual assault
Homicide
Elder abuse
Military trauma
Human trafficking
Catastrophic injury

The Three Threats of Lawyering:
Over time the pressure of these threats can lead to:

Diminished Trust- in self and in others

Safety feels uncertain, which can lead to emotional withdrawal

The world feels more dangerous, and a sense of safety becomes harder to maintain.

Compassion becomes harder and cynicism becomes stronger and more of a habit

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BURNOUT AND VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

Burnout	**Vicarious Trauma**
Caused by workload	Caused by trauma exposure
Exhaustion	Emotional and cognitive shifts
Can improve with time off	Requires processing and awareness
Work feels overwhelming	Worldview begins changing

Many attorneys experience both simultaneously. And many fail to identify vicarious trauma so it does not get appropriate treatment.

Warning Signs Lawyers Often Miss-however they may be apparent to others and relationships may be impacted. Please note, There is considerable overlap between **burnout** and **vicarious trauma**, which is why many professionals—including lawyers—don't recognize what is happening until it becomes significant. However, there are some important differences.

Shared Warning Signs

These can occur with both burnout and vicarious trauma:

Emotional Signs

Irritability
Increased frustration
Anxiety
Feeling overwhelmed
Emotional exhaustion
Reduced patience
Mood swings
Loss of enthusiasm for work

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Shared Warning Signs

These can occur with both burnout and vicarious trauma:

Cognitive Signs

Difficulty concentrating
Forgetfulness
Poor decision-making
Reduced creativity
Negative thinking
Cynicism

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Shared Warning Signs

These can occur with both burnout and vicarious trauma:

Physical Signs

Fatigue
Sleep problems
Headaches
Muscle tension
Changes in appetite
Increased illness
Digestive issues

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Shared Warning Signs

These can occur with both burnout and vicarious trauma:

Behavioral Signs

Withdrawal from others
Working excessive hours
Avoidance of difficult tasks
Increased use of alcohol or other substances
Reduced productivity
Procrastination

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Shared Warning Signs More Specific to Burnout

Burnout Often Sounds Like:

"I can't keep up."
"I have nothing left to give."
"I just don't care anymore."
"I'm tired all the time."

Common Signs

Emotional exhaustion
Feeling depleted
Detachment from work
Decreased job satisfaction
Loss of motivation
Reduced sense of accomplishment
Feeling trapped
Viewing work as meaningless

The core emotion of burnout is often:
"I am exhausted."

Warning Signs Lawyers Often Miss-however they may be apparent to others and relationships may be impacted. Please note, There is considerable overlap between **burnout** and **vicarious trauma**, which is why many professionals—including lawyers—don't recognize what is happening until it becomes significant. However, there are some important differences.

Warning Signs More Specific to Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma results from repeated exposure to other people's trauma, suffering, violence, or tragedy.

In their practices, Lawyers frequently encounter:

Domestic violence
Child abuse
Sexual assault
Homicide
Catastrophic injuries
Family conflict
Human trafficking
Elder abuse

It does not matter what the specialty of the lawyer, as problems in one area of one's life tend to create problems in other areas of one's life-thus if a client is having problems in one area of their life, there is more vulnerability for family conflict, accidents, etc.

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Warning Signs More Specific to Vicarious Trauma
Common Signs
Changes in Worldview
This is often the biggest clue.
Increased mistrust
Loss of optimism
Feeling less safe
Expecting bad outcomes
Viewing others as dangerous
Intrusive Thoughts
Thinking about cases after work
Replaying conversations
Disturbing images or details lingering
Difficulty "turning off" work

Warning Signs Lawyers Often Miss-however they may be apparent to others and relationships may be impacted. Please note, There is considerable overlap between **burnout** and **vicarious trauma**, which is why many professionals—including lawyers—don't recognize what is happening until it becomes significant. However, there are some important differences.

Warning Signs More Specific to Vicarious Trauma
Common Signs
Emotional Numbing
Reduced empathy
Feeling disconnected from loved ones
Difficulty experiencing joy
Feeling emotionally flat
Hypervigilance
Increased concern about safety
Overprotectiveness toward family
Constantly scanning for danger

The core emotion of vicarious trauma is often:
"The work is changing how I see the world."

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS RESONATE WITH YOU RIGHT NOW?

Which statement resonates most right now?
I feel exhausted.
I feel detached.
I feel cynical.
I cannot stop thinking about certain cases.
The world feels less safe than it used to.
I am carrying clients' stories home with me.

If you identify with #1–3, burnout may be the primary issue.
If you identify with #4–6, vicarious trauma may be playing a significant role.

If you identify with all six, they may be experiencing both—which is very common in legal practice.

Think about this:

Burnout affects how you feel about your work.

Vicarious trauma affects how you feel about the world.

When left unaddressed, both can affect how you feel about yourself.

When we spend the majority of our working time repeatedly working with people in crisis, this is one of the dangers we face.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS, BOTH ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL?

Personal Risk Factors

These are factors that make an individual more susceptible to stress overload, burnout, or vicarious trauma.

1. High Empathy

Lawyers who genuinely care about clients often absorb more emotional distress.

Signs:

Thinking about clients after hours

Feeling responsible for outcomes

Difficulty "letting go" of cases

Ironically, the attorneys who care the most are often at the greatest risk.

2. Perfectionism

Many lawyers are trained to seek precision and avoid mistakes.

While this can create excellence, it can also create:

Constant self-criticism

Fear of failure

Excessive work hours

Difficulty feeling "good enough"

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS, BOTH ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL?

Personal Risk Factors
Poor Boundaries
Examples:
Constant email monitoring
Taking client calls at all hours
Difficulty saying no
Bringing work home every night
Without boundaries, recovery becomes impossible.

Personal Trauma History
Individuals with unresolved trauma may be more affected by certain cases.
Examples:
Domestic violence attorney with a personal history of abuse
Family law attorney who experienced a difficult divorce
Child abuse attorney who experienced childhood adversity

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS, BOTH ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL?

Personal Risk Factors

Lack of Self-Care

Not because self-care is a cure-all, but because chronic neglect creates vulnerability.

Examples:

Poor sleep

Lack of exercise

Social isolation

Excessive alcohol use

No restorative activities

Unrealistic Expectations

Believing:

"I can save everyone."

"I should never feel stressed."

"I should always be strong."

These expectations often lead to disappointment and guilt.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS, BOTH ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL?

Personal Risk Factors
Isolation
One of the strongest predictors of distress.
Lawyers often:
Work alone
Handle confidential information
Avoid discussing difficult cases
Feel they must manage everything themselves
Isolation magnifies stress.

Please note: These factors, if acknowledged and recognized, can **BE MANAGED.** They are **ALERTS** that danger may be lurking and **SOMETHING** needs to be addressed before there is damage done.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS, BOTH ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL?

Organizational Risk Factors

These are conditions within the workplace that increase the likelihood of burnout and trauma exposure.

1. Excessive Workload

The most common organizational risk factor.

Examples:

High billable hour expectations

Large caseloads

Staffing shortages

Constant deadlines

People cannot sustain chronic overload indefinitely.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS, BOTH ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL?

Organizational Risk Factors

2. Lack of Control

Stress increases when employees have little influence over:

Schedules

Caseloads

Work methods

Decision-making

A lack of autonomy is a major burnout driver.

3. High Conflict Environments

Legal offices often operate in:

Adversarial settings

Crisis situations

Emotionally charged disputes

Continuous exposure to conflict drains emotional resources.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS, BOTH ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL?

Organizational Risk Factors

4. Trauma Exposure Without Support

Organizations may expect attorneys to manage traumatic material without training or support.

Examples:

Domestic violence cases

Child abuse cases

Sexual assault cases

Homicide cases

Without processing opportunities, exposure accumulates.

5. Poor Leadership

Leaders increase risk when they:

Ignore stress concerns

Reward overwork

Discourage time off

Model unhealthy behaviors

Employees often follow the culture leaders create.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS, BOTH ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL?

Organizational Risk Factors

6. Lack of Recognition

People can endure significant stress when they feel valued.

When contributions go unnoticed:

Motivation declines

Cynicism increases

Burnout accelerates

7. Workplace Incivility

This is where your expertise around kindness and workplace violence fits beautifully.

Examples:

Disrespectful communication

Gossip

Bullying

Public criticism

Exclusion

Chronic negativity

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS, BOTH ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL?

Organizational Risk Factors

8. Culture of Invulnerability

Many law firms unintentionally communicate:

Work harder.

Don't complain.

Figure it out yourself.

Leave personal issues at home.

This culture discourages help-seeking and allows problems to grow.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS, BOTH ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL?

The risks can be divided into three categories. They are:

Individual Risks
Perfectionism
High empathy
Poor boundaries
Personal trauma history
Isolation

Workplace Risks
Excessive workload
High conflict
Lack of control
Poor leadership
Incivility

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS, BOTH ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL?

The risks can be divided into three categories. They are:

Cultural Risks
Stigma around stress
Fear of appearing weak
Competitive environments
Unrealistic expectations
Lack of psychological safety

Burnout and vicarious trauma are rarely caused by a single factor.
They occur when personal risk factors, workplace pressures, and organizational culture intersect.
Resilience is not simply about making people stronger. It is also about creating environments where people can thrive.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

First, you need to figure out where YOU are.

What is your level of stress, burnout, impact of vicarious trauma.

Level of support in your life. Is it strong and dependable? Are you using it enough?
Or are your loved ones feeling pushed away and feeling frustrated?

Essence of happiness you feel and experience.

Is what you are doing for a living congruent with your values, dreams, hopes?

Or are you feeling disappointed in life and wondering “How did I get here?”

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Second, you need to decide if the organizational culture you live in suits the you that **YOU** want to be.
Does it feel supportive?

Does it feel rewarding other than just financially?

Do you respect the leadership?

Do you dread going to work?

Do you feel listened to by your superiors?

Do you think that positive change is necessary and that the leaders are open to hearing about ideas, concerns?

Do you feel a comradeship with those who work with you?

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?
Step 1: Assess Where You Are Today

Ok, once you know, or think you know, where you are, you can make a plan. Here is how. Do this assessment-scale from 1-5 with 1=low and 5=high. BE HONEST

Statement	Rating
I feel energized by my work.	___
I sleep well most nights.	___
I can leave work at work.	___
I have supportive relationships.	___
I feel physically healthy.	___
I regularly engage in activities I enjoy.	___
I have effective stress-management strategies.	___
I feel hopeful about my future.	___

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Take some time to REALLY think about the following questions. Hint: Get a notebook and write about them over a few days, you will be surprised by what you find out.

Reflection Questions

What concerns me most about my current stress level?

What am I doing well?

What needs attention?

What do I have control over to change and what do I not have control over to change?

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Step 2: Identify Your Warning Signs

Ask:

When I am becoming overwhelmed, I tend to:

☐ Become irritable
☐ Withdraw from others
☐ Work longer hours
☐ Lose patience
☐ Have trouble sleeping
☐ Feel emotionally numb
☐ Worry excessively
☐ Lose motivation
☐ Other: _____

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

My top three warning signs are:

1._____

2._____

3._____

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Step 3: Identify Your Stress Triggers

My greatest sources of stress are:

☐ Caseload
☐ Difficult clients
☐ Financial concerns
☐ Work-life balance
☐ Organizational issues
☐ Exposure to traumatic material
☐ Family responsibilities
☐ Health concerns
☐ Other: _____

The trigger that affects me most is:_____

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Step 4: Build Your Resilience Plan using these categories.
Connection
One thing I will do to strengthen my support network:

Examples:
Schedule lunch with a colleague
Call a friend weekly
Join a lawyer support group
Do something FUN with a loved one
Call a friend you have not talked to for a long time
Tell others nice things that you appreciate about them
Smile-a lot

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Step 4: Build Your Resilience Plan using these categories.
Physical Health
One thing I will do to improve my physical well-being: Keep an accountability log or partner to make sure that you do this!!

Examples:
Walk 20 minutes daily
Improve sleep habits
Exercise three times weekly

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Boundaries
One boundary I will implement:

Examples:
Stop checking email after 8 PM
Take lunch away from my desk
Protect vacation time
Set limits with others
Get up and move when feeling stress or overwhelm
Reach out to others when feeling overwhelmed

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Recovery

One activity that helps me recharge:

Examples:

Reading
Gardening
Music
Travel
Meditation
Watching a funny movie
Watching kids or animals play
Smelling something wonderful that brings back positive memories
Playing-remember what that is?

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Meaning and Purpose

One thing that reconnects me to why I became a lawyer:

Examples:

Mentoring younger attorneys

Pro bono work

Celebrating client successes

Take this out past why you became a lawyer. Ask yourself, “How can I make this a better world?” And then put that into action. Giving is the best road to Getting.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Here is where the rubber meets the road.

Step 5: My Commitment

During the next 30 days, I will:

1_____

2._____

3_____

Just list three things, otherwise you can get overwhelmed with "another job"

Take time to think about these commitments because they are the starting of your journey and they will be the "map-maker" of your journey.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Here is where the rubber meets the road.

Step 5: My Commitment

At the date you set to review, think about these questions>

1. Where am I with the goals I set for myself?
2. What have I learned during this time, about myself, about others, and about how I want my life to be.
3. How am I going to maintain the positive changes I have made?
4. What is next to keep the positivity going?

Take time to think about these commitments because they are the starting of your journey and they will be the “map-maker” of your journey.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Here is where the rubber meets the road.

Accountability Partner

The person who can support me in these goals is:

I choose him/her because:

Hint: don’t use your intimate partner-that can create issues in a relationship, instead use a friend you know will be honest and supportive.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Here is where the rubber meets the road.

Follow-Up Date

I will review this plan on: Make the date one month to 6 weeks. Then you don't forget and you will see real results.

Make the date and keep it. Be honest about what you have done and what you haven't done. If you don't make an effort-any effort, nothing will change except going deeper into the hole you might be now. The change is YOUR RESPONSIBILITY, and the results are YOUR GIFTS TO YOURSELF.

In doing this work, you may be faced with making some tough decisions. Whatever you decide, do not be hard on yourself now or later. We all have to make decisions based on where our life is at the moment. It may not be ok to make a HUGE change decision now, so look for the smaller changes that will make life better.

HERE IS WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU WORK YOUR PLAN

The ROI of Resilience

Benefits:

Personally

Better health

Better relationships

More energy

Greater life satisfaction

Professionally

Better decision making

Fewer mistakes

Better client relationships

Greater career longevity

Increased job satisfaction

In closing:
"If a client came into your office tomorrow carrying the same level of stress that you are carrying today, what advice would you give them?"
Then ask:
"What would happen if you followed your own advice?"

Remember:
"Resilience begins when we extend the same compassion, patience, and understanding to ourselves that we routinely offer to our clients.“
Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to connect with you today. I hope this has given you some insight and awareness of yourself, and ways of making the rest of you life richer, creating goodness in the world.
May kindness be a part of your day.

About the author

Michele Koonin, LCSW, MBA is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, educator, and speaker with more than 30 years of experience helping individuals, organizations, and professionals navigate stress, trauma, conflict, and life challenges. Her work has included private practice, military populations, court and probation systems, critical incident response, and workplace violence prevention.

Today, Michele focuses on resilience, workplace well-being, violence prevention, and creating healthier organizational cultures. She believes that professionals who spend their careers helping others deserve practical tools to protect their own well-being, strengthen resilience, and sustain meaningful careers. Michele is the founder and Director of Affordable Online Classes, www.affordableonlineclasses.com and can be reached via the website.

Helping professionals move from stress to strength through awareness, resilience, and connection.