

WELCOME TO OUR NEWEST COLUMN FOCUSED ON LAWYER WELLBEING

Pathways to Wellbeing is launching this year at the request of North Carolina attorneys. This column is the first of its kind to be published in the *Journal*. In late 2017, the North Carolina State Bar conducted a survey asking its members how they would like the State Bar to communicate with them, and what content would be of interest. Numerous lawyers who responded to the survey shared that they would like to read articles about how to manage the stress of working in the legal profession, how to better deal with difficult situations, and how to achieve a better work/life balance.

I was delighted when Jennifer Duncan, the *Journal's* editor, invited me to write an ongoing column on attorney wellbeing. As a resilience coach and a burnout prevention consultant and trainer at Conscious Legal Minds LLC, I work across the state and around the country educating lawyers about wellbeing. I hear first-hand from attorneys and judges about the impact that the stresses of law have on their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing. In this column, I am eager to share the practical tips and applicable tools I teach in trainings and utilize with my private clients. My hope is that the suggestions offered in this column support individual lawyers and judges in upgrading their personal wellbeing, and add momentum to the wellness efforts of law firms and professional organizations statewide, creating a ripple effect that results in a more resilient Bar.

The stressors of legal practice are nothing new—we are well aware of the demands inherent in litigation, the challenges of dealing with clients and difficult cases, the pressures of being a new lawyer, the responsibility of presiding over a courtroom, the burdens associated with running a law firm, and the concerns about prospering financially, to name a few. The impact of lawyers' professional stress, however, is just recently being evaluated. In 2016 the *Journal of Addiction Medicine* published a landmark study (bit.ly/2Ghpj19) conducted by the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs and the Betty Hazelden Ford Foundation. The study found that lawyers have significantly elevated levels of mental health distress including anxiety, depression, and chronic stress, as well as comparatively higher rates of alcohol use disorders than other professions, including physicians. Similarly distressing findings were reported about law school student wellbeing in an article published in 2016 in the *Journal of Legal Education* (bit.ly/2DBlf3H).

In response to these eye-opening reports, the ABA's National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being published "The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change" in August 2017 (bit.ly/2i0KGW0), authored by a broad range of stakeholders, including peer review by North Carolina State Bar Lawyer Assistance Program Director Robynn Moraites. Even if you are not a lawyer wellness aficionado, this 73-page report is a must-read; it is chock-full of constructive and feasible recommendations that numerous stakeholders—including legal employers and bar associations—can take to promote wellbeing in our profession. The authors focus on five main themes: (1) identifying stakeholders and the role each of us can play in reducing the level of toxicity in our profession, (2) eliminating the stigma associated with help-seeking behaviors, (3) emphasizing that wellbeing is an indispensable part of a lawyer's duty of competence, (4) educating lawyers, judges, and law students on lawyer wellbeing issues, and (5) taking small, incremental steps to change how law is practiced and how lawyers are regulated to instill greater wellbeing in the profession.

Even before the publication of the ABA Task Force's report, the North Carolina State Bar demonstrated leadership in issues related to lawyer wellbeing. The State Bar's Lawyer Assistance Program (LAP) is well-respected nationally for the depth and breadth of the services provided, its robust volunteer network, its support group offerings around the state, and for the scope of CLE topics offered related to wellbeing. The State Bar led the way in creating awareness about lawyer mental health when years ago it adopted a Rule requiring a mental health CLE credit hour every three years. Recognizing the important and emerging field of lawyer wellness, the State Bar CLE Board approved the first six-week Mindfulness for Building Resilience to Stress CLE course last March; I was honored to create and teach this course for the 28th Judicial District. The article about the course published in the *Journal* (bit.ly/2rEas3z) sparked interest in law firms, judicial districts, and bar practice groups across the state. Since then, Conscious Legal Minds and LAP have partnered to bring similar mindfulness CLEs to other judicial districts around the state. In addition, LAP's quarterly *Sidebar* newsletter launched a new column I author entitled "Mindful Moments" this past summer (bit.ly/2FhvmLB). The inception of "Pathways to Wellbeing" in the Bar's *Journal*—and soon a page on the Bar's website where attorneys can easily access each quarter's "Pathways to Wellbeing" column (look for it in the "For Lawyers" section)—is yet another concrete way the State Bar is promoting lawyer wellbeing, in alignment with the ABA Task Force's recommendation to emphasize wellbeing and eliminate the stigma associated with help-seeking.

This column will take the recommendations of the ABA Task Force one step further and address specific things that we, as individuals, can do during the workday to cultivate our own wellbeing. I will share real-life examples of attorney stressors, and offer resilience-building tips and mindfulness and neuroscience-based tools that can be used to alleviate stress and foster greater wellbeing.

For example: Adley and Blaine have both been feeling overwhelmed as they juggle client case work, run their small firm, and take time for themselves. Adley skims this article, tosses it in the recycling, and goes back to work. Blaine reads this article and takes a moment to write down a definition of wellbeing that resonates, then makes a list of five small things that cultivate wellbeing. Blaine then puts each of the five things on the calendar for the week and sends an invite to either a colleague, friend, or family member to join in for each. One of the things Blaine calendars is a walk with Luca. When Luca and Blaine are walking, Luca suggests an app that Blaine can use to fax and scan documents on a smartphone, which will save Blaine time and money. Blaine leaves the walk feeling happy to have connected

with Luca, invigorated from physical exercise, more relaxed having left the office for an hour, and inspired by the efficiency the new app will offer. Blaine goes back to the office, cheerfully greets the law office support staff, and is relaxed and clear-headed in afternoon meetings with clients. When Blaine checks in with Adley at the end of the day, Adley is exhausted and frustrated, saying nothing got accomplished all day.

Try it for yourself: What does the term “wellbeing” mean to you?

Does this definition of “lawyer wellbeing” that the ABA Task Force uses in its report resonate with you: “a continuous process whereby lawyers seek to thrive in each of the following areas: emotional health, occupational pursuits, creative or intellectual endeavors, sense of spirituality or greater purpose in life, physical health, and social connections with others”? If there’s a definition that would land more than this one, take a moment now to write down a more meaningful definition. Then read the definition slowly, imagining upgrading your own wellbeing as you think about the definition. *Note: Neuroscience research shows that our brains retain information that is personally meaningful. Using a definition of wellbeing that is meaningful to you will make information on the subject more engaging for you.*

Now try this: Five Small Things

1. Make a list of five to ten small things you can do to cultivate wellbeing this week.
2. Read your list aloud a few times.
3. Notice which ones you feel the most inspired to do.
4. Circle your top five.
5. Calendar them (yes, right now!); invite along someone you’d like to connect with, if appropriate.
6. Enjoy doing each of your five small things.

Note: While the impact of doing one small thing (or applying any mindfulness tip or tool) may not feel entirely effectual in a highly stressful moment, over time each small step creates a cumulatively larger ripple in our lives toward greater satisfaction and wellbeing, and may also extend into the lives of our friends, families, and colleagues.

The timely concurrence of North Carolina lawyers saying “we need help” when research statistics are saying “you need help,” and the ABA Task Force is saying, “please get help,” bodes well for the wellbeing trajectory of our state’s lawyers. It inspires me that so many North Carolina lawyers requested to read articles about how to better cope with stress and how to improve work/life balance. What if North Carolina lawyers could lead the way toward new pathways to wellbeing for colleagues in this state and across the nation? It is my hope that this column ignites conversations among attorneys, law schools, law firms, judicial districts, legal bars, within the courts—and among lawyers and their families and friends—about the topic of lawyer wellbeing. I aspire for the tips and tools that I share to make a difference in your life. Take what inspires and motivates you to live the life you want to live. Put the rest in the recycling. But most importantly, put one foot in front of the other on your personal pathway to wellbeing.

Laura Mahr is a NC lawyer and the founder of Conscious Legal Minds LLC, providing mindfulness-based coaching, training, and consulting for attorneys and law offices nationwide. Laura’s cutting edge work to build resilience to burnout, stress, and vicarious trauma in the practice of law is informed by 11 years of practice as a civil sexual assault attorney, two decades of experience as an educator and professional trainer, and 25 years as a student and teacher of mindfulness and yoga, and a love of neuroscience. She is an advisory member of the newly formed 28th Judicial District’s Wellness Committee and a provider on the North Carolina Bar Association BarCARES panel. Find out more about her work at consciouslegalminds.com.