



# Well-Being Among Arizona Lawyers

## Survey Finds Attorneys Stressed But Satisfied

"I thought I would have a normal life where I would go to work, make good money, somewhat enjoy what I do, and then go home and spend time with family and have a hobby or two. [Instead,] I dread going to work, hate the work, stress beyond belief, work until I'm bleary-eyed, go home, and sit on the couch for an hour, before doing it all over again."

The above words are from an Arizona lawyer when asked to compare his<sup>1</sup> expectations about the practice of law as a law student to his subsequent experiences as a practicing attorney. The characterization of the prac-

tice of law as involving long hours, a heavy workload and high stress is likely one with which most lawyers can identify. However, the statement above reflects a level of stress that is potentially life-threatening, though

not necessarily universal in or exclusive to the practice of law.

Employees working in high-stress jobs are 15.4 percent more likely than employees working in lower stress jobs to die prematurely.<sup>2</sup> Acute or chronic work stress often leads to negative psychological (e.g., anxiety, depression), physical (e.g., headaches, increased heart rate or cortisol) and/or behavioral (e.g., substance abuse, absenteeism) outcomes,<sup>3</sup> which, over time, may lead to immune, cardiovascular or metabolic health issues. However, when compared to the general population and other professionals, attorneys are more likely to suffer from depression,<sup>4</sup> dependence on alcohol or drugs<sup>5</sup> and death by suicide<sup>6</sup>—each of which is associated with work stress.

Yet, reducing the negative effects of work stress in the practice of law is possible. In fact, understanding, preventing and remedying detrimental lawyer work stress is the focus of a multistate interdisciplinary re-



**Table 1: Frequency of Survey Participants' Use of Common Coping Strategies**

Common Coping Strategies to Deal With Stress	YES	NO
Let my feelings out somehow	982	984
Refuse to think too much about it	794	1,149
Try to keep my feelings to myself	1,036	905
Talk to someone about how I am feeling	962	986
Criticize or lecture myself	1,012	914
Try to make myself feel better by eating, drinking, smoking, using drugs or medications, etc.	688	1,258
Make a plan of action and follow it	1,350	595

search team<sup>7</sup> who recently conducted a survey of Arizona attorneys with the support of the State Bar of Arizona. The results of this survey are presented and discussed in this article, followed by suggestions for coping with and diminishing harm from stress in the practice of law.

**Arizona Attorney Well-Being Predictors of attorney health and well-being (or lack thereof)**

Researchers have suggested workplace stressors that may account for the stress-related lack of well-being of attorneys (e.g., the legal culture).<sup>8</sup> A study of Singapore attorneys identified (1) time pressure and (2) fear of making mistakes that may lead to

serious consequences as two work stressors that caused extreme distress.<sup>9</sup> Another study determined that several job conditions (e.g., workload, role conflict, social support, autonomy) affected levels of burnout found among a sample of U.S. public-service attorneys.<sup>10</sup>

The State Bar survey focused on two workplace stressors that are relatively unique to the practice of law: the specific culture of law firms (i.e., whether attorney well-being is prioritized) and hours worked per week. Also, the researchers examined whether gender differences influence these stressors on attorney health and well-being. In addition to stress, two other common indicators of poor health

**MICHELE W. GAZICA, J.D., Ph.D.**, is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.

**SAMANTHA RAE POWERS, J.D., Ph.D.**, is an Assistant Professor of Strategic, Legal, and Management Communication at Howard University.

**MEGAN S. IRGENS** is a Clinical Psychology Ph.D. student at the University of Arizona.



and well-being—job dissatisfaction and intention to quit—were measured. Finally, coping strategies were assessed (see Table 1 on page 27).

### Survey Participants

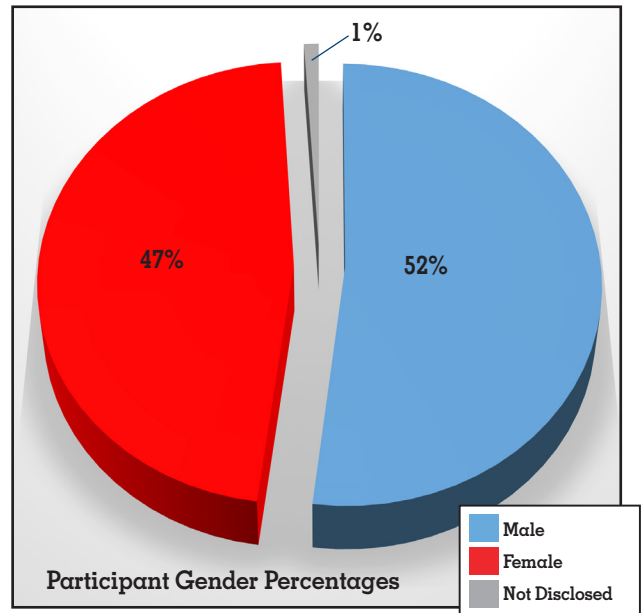
A total of 1,978 members of the State Bar of Arizona who identified themselves as currently practicing law participated in this study: 1,038 men and 921 women (19 did not report their gender). While most practiced litigation (1,327), transactional law (423), or a combination of both (48), others self-identified as in-house (66) or administrative law (67) attorneys. Forty reported practice areas that did not fit neatly into any of the foregoing categories. The majority of participants (703) reported working between 45 and 55 hours per week, on average, with 758 reporting fewer hours worked per week and 516 reporting more. Participants included those new to the practice of law (as little as one month) as well as those who have been practicing for decades (up to 53 years), with an aver-

age length of practice of nearly 20 years.

### Overview of results

The majority (1,412) of survey participants agreed (slightly, moderately or strongly) that they were satisfied with practicing law. Across the five different practice areas reported above, in-house attorneys and those who primarily practiced transactional or administrative law reported the highest satisfaction levels. Despite reporting relatively high satisfaction levels, nearly half (976) of the participating attorneys indicated that they have considered leaving the practice of law within the past year. Administrative and in-house attorneys were less likely to report considering leaving the practice of law within the past year than transactional and litigation

attorneys. The majority (875) of attorneys who were not solo practitioners (1387)<sup>11</sup> agreed (slightly, moderately or strongly) that attorney well-being is a priority to their law firm or employing organization. Approximately half (687) agreed that attorney well-being and productivity are both considered important to senior management.



## Strategies That Can Contribute to Attorney Health & Well-Being

### Individual Attorneys:

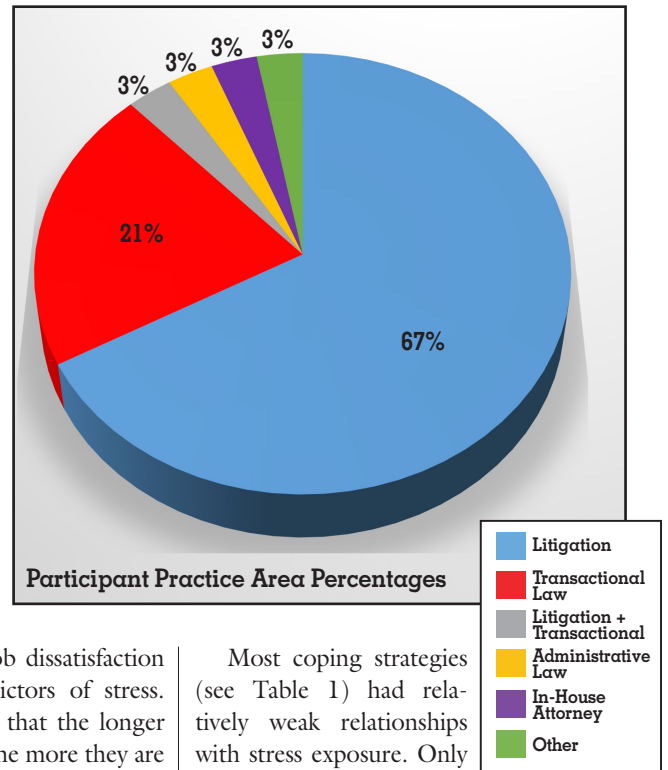
- Work in an area of law that you find engaging and meaningful.
- Engage in close relationships with others (e.g., family, friends, colleagues).
- Volunteer and do pro bono work.
- Exercise regularly.
- Take a vacation.
- Set work boundaries.

### Supervisors:

- Be respectful to subordinates.
- Acknowledge the perspectives of subordinates.
- Explain decisions made and/or engage subordinates in decision making.
- Promote vacations.
- Reward and demonstrate appreciation of subordinates (e.g., bonuses, pay increases).
- Monitor and redistribute workloads evenly and fairly.

### Organizations:

- Promote an environment in which mistakes are considered learning opportunities.
- Foster positive mentoring of younger attorneys (including training mentors).
- Make attorney well-being an organizational value that is represented through action.



## Stress

Prior research identifies hours worked per week, job dissatisfaction, employer prioritization of employee well-being and gender as likely predictors of stress. In the State Bar survey, the strongest predictor of stress was hours worked per week. Participants revealed that the more hours they worked per week, the more stress they experienced.

Years practicing law and job dissatisfaction were relatively weak predictors of stress. However, trends indicated that the longer one has practiced law and the more they are satisfied with one's job, the less stress one experiences practicing law. Gender was not a strong predictor of stress, but women did tend to report higher levels of stress than men.

Most coping strategies (see Table 1) had relatively weak relationships with stress exposure. Only two strategies predicted increased levels of stress: criticizing or lecturing oneself and using food, alcohol or drugs to cope. Women were more likely to criticize or lecture themselves than men. In



addition, while those who reported practicing the law longer generally experienced less stress than those relatively new to the profession, those who misuse substances (i.e., alcohol, drugs or food) to cope do not experience this downward trend in stress levels. Instead, their stress levels remain relatively constant, notwithstanding the number of years in practice.

**Job Dissatisfaction**

Research has shown that stress levels, hours worked per week, employer prioritization of employee well-being and years practicing law influence job dissatisfaction levels. Our analysis revealed that the number of hours worked per week did not predict job dissatisfaction. However, the extent to which the firm/employer prioritized attorney well-being did, with higher prioritization predicting higher levels of job satisfaction. Interestingly, job stress was a very weak predictor of job dissatisfaction. Gender was not related to job dissatisfaction; that is, no gender group was more dissatisfied than the

other. Like stress, only two coping strategies increased job dissatisfaction among attorneys: criticizing or lecturing oneself and using food, alcohol or drugs to cope. One coping strategy decreased job dissatisfaction: making plans and following them.

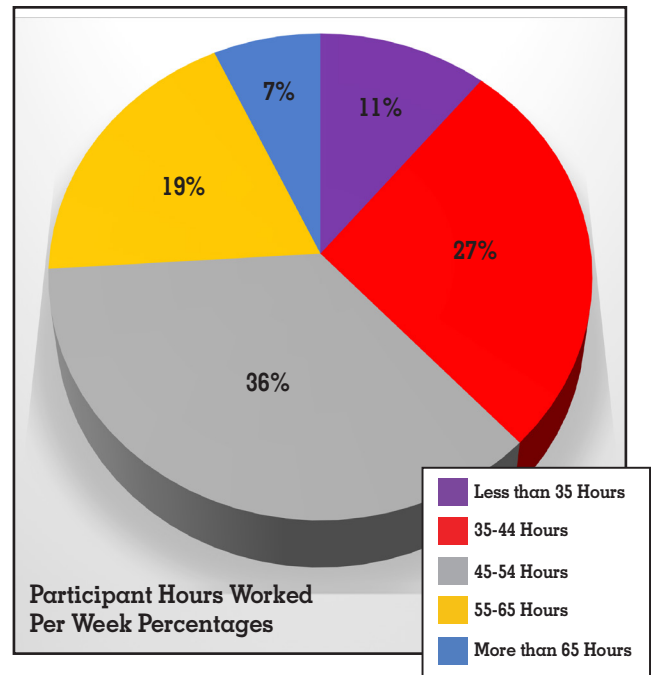
**Intention to Quit**

Predictors of intentions to quit the practice of law were: job dissatisfaction, employer prioritization of attorney well-being and stress. Job dissatisfaction was, by far, the strongest predictor of one's intentions to quit. Stress had a relatively weak relationship with intentions to quit. Gender and, surprisingly, prioritization of attorney well-being were not related to the desire to leave the practice of law. Of the coping strategies, the strongest predictors of

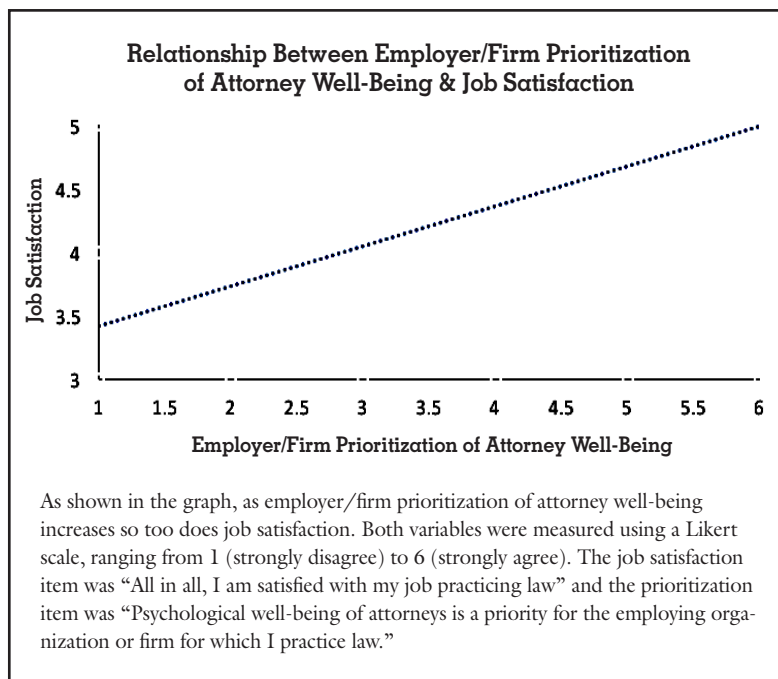
one's intentions to quit were: criticizing or lecturing oneself and using food, alcohol or drugs to cope. Making plans and executing them reduced the desire to quit.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

The State Bar survey provided preliminary



empirical evidence that excessive work hours contribute significantly to higher reported stress levels of attorneys. This finding does not deviate from research findings about other professions. However, although Arizona attorneys are highly stressed, they also tend to have relatively high levels of job satisfaction. In fact, most attorneys (54.4 percent) reported having both job satisfaction and stress. This finding contradicts prior research findings of a negative relationship between job stress and job satisfaction. Overall, the survey findings suggest that attorneys view stress as an inevitable part of the practice of law, having little effect on job satisfaction or intentions to quit.<sup>12</sup> However, even when accepting that one's work is stressful, long-term exposure to any stressors can still be detrimental.



Thus, stressed-out Arizona attorneys remain at risk of suffering negative stress-related mental and physical health outcomes, as described at the beginning of this article.<sup>13</sup> Given the inevitability of stress in the practice of law and its negative outcomes, it is imperative that attorneys use healthy

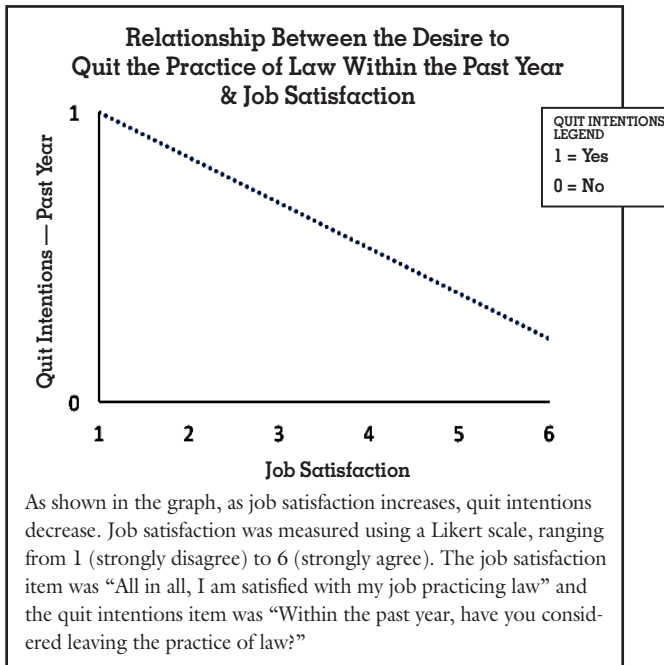
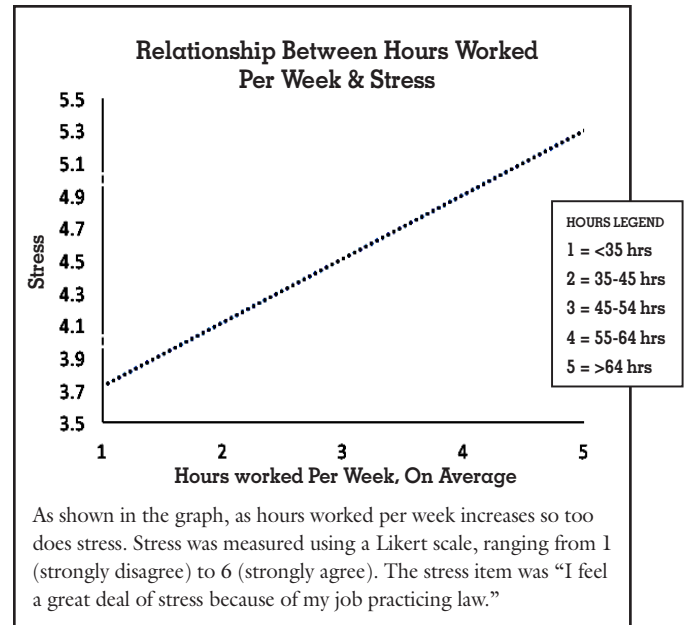
coping strategies to deal with the demands of law practice. Coping strategies generally fall into one of two categories: problem-focused coping that attempts to change the situation causing stress (e.g., delegating work, limiting work hours) and emotion-focused coping that attempts to alter one's perception of the stressful situation, or otherwise distance oneself from or avoid the stress (e.g., convincing oneself the sacrifice is worth long-term financial security, attempts to distance oneself from or alter one's perception of the stressful situation, or relaxation techniques).<sup>14</sup> The success of specific coping strategies over others is individual- and situation-specific, but the



State Bar survey revealed that criticizing or lecturing oneself and using food, alcohol or drugs to cope exacerbate attorneys' stress, job dissatisfaction and intentions to quit. Moreover, emotion-focused coping is favored for individuals who do not have control over the causes of their stress. In addition, do not underestimate the importance of interpersonal relationships. Friends, family and colleagues can be sources of emo-

tional, informational and instrumental support<sup>15</sup> that can help a person cope with and buffer the effects of workplace stressors.

Finally, law firms and employing organizations may help their attorneys cope with the stress of law practice by clarifying



attorney work responsibilities and expectations, monitoring and redistributing workloads, encouraging breaks or

sabbaticals, or implementing flexible work schedules (see sidebar on page 29). Ultimately, it benefits not only individuals but also business as a whole if firms/organizations prioritize the health and well-being of their attorneys. **AZ**

### Reaching Out

If you are concerned about your consumption of alcohol or other substances, please contact your primary care physician or, if available, your Employee Assistance Program for referrals to appropriate services. The State Bar of Arizona also provides members opportunities for confidential services (support group, peer support network, and a crisis hotline). Information on these services is available at <http://www.azbar.org/professionaldevelopment/map/> or by calling (602) 340-7334.

## endnotes

1. Gender identifiers are randomly designated in furtherance of maintaining the confidentiality of study participants.
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3. Michael Frese & Dieter Zapf, *Methodological Issues in the Study of Work Stress: Objective vs. Subjective Measurement of Work Stress and the Question of Longitudinal Studies*, in CAUSES, COPING AND CONSEQUENCES OF STRESS AT WORK 375 (C.L. Cooper & R. Payne eds., 1988).
4. William W. Eaton et al., *Occupations and the Prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder*, 32 J. OCCUP. MED. 1079 (1990). This statistic becomes ever more frightening given that, upon entering law school, law students' psychological profiles are similar to the general public. G. Andrew H. Benjamin et al., *The Role of Legal Education in Producing Psychological Distress Among Law Students and Lawyers*, 11 LAW & SOC. INQUIRY 225 (1986). After law school, 20 percent to 40 percent of lawyers have psychological dysfunction. *Id.*
5. Patrick R., Krill et al., *The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys*, 10 J ADDICT. MED. 46 (2016).
6. Adrian Hill, *Countering Despair*, THE CANADIAN BAR ASS'N (2006), [www.cba.org/CBA/national/augsep03/PrintHtml.aspx?DocId=6493](http://www.cba.org/CBA/national/augsep03/PrintHtml.aspx?DocId=6493).
7. In addition to the article authors, the team includes Stacey R. Kessler, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Management at Montclair State University; and Connie J.A. Beck, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Arizona.
8. Janet Chan, *Conceptualising Legal Culture and Lawyering Stress*, 21 INT'L J. LEGAL PROF. 213 (2014).
9. Lim Geok-choo et al., *Work Stress and Coping Amongst Lawyers in Singapore*, 36 ASIAN J. SOC. SCI. 703 (2008).
10. Susan E. Jackson et al., *Correlates of Burnout Among Public Service Lawyers*, 8 J. ORG. BEHAV. 339 (1987).
11. Of the survey participants, 591 were solo practitioners. These attorneys were excluded from answering questions regarding their firm/ employer's prioritization of attorney well-being.
12. Consistent with prior research, job dissatisfaction does appear to be a contributing factor to Arizona attorneys' intentions to leave the practice of law.
13. Justin P. Boren & Alice E. Veksler, *Communicatively Restricted Organizational Stress (CROS) I: Conceptualization and Overview*, 29 MGMT. COMM. Q. 28 (2015); Marko Elovainio et al., *Stressful Work Environment and Wellbeing: What Comes First?* 20 J. OCCUP'L HEALTH PSYCH. 289 (2015); Daniel C. Ganster & Christopher C. Rosen, *Work Stress and Employee Health: A Multidisciplinary Review*, 39 J. OF MGMT. 1085 (2013).
14. Susan Folkman & Richard S. Lazarus, *Coping as a Mediator of Emotion*, 54 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. 4466 (1988).
15. *Id.*