

# The Mental Health and Psychological Impact on Legal Professionals

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## Abstract

Advocacy is crucial for driving social change, yet it carries significant mental health challenges for those involved. This article explores the psychological impacts on advocates, including emotional labour, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma. It also examines how financial stress, family dynamics, and a constant focus on negativity affect advocates' personal lives. By understanding these challenges, advocates can adopt effective self-care strategies to sustain their important work.

Lawyers face in their professional lives is undeniable. A lawyer, often immersed in the pursuit of justice, must not forget the importance of self-care and emotional well-being- Justice D.Y. Chandrachud.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Attorney, Advocates, Mental Health, Judges, Depression, Stress

## Introduction

Advocates play a vital role in promoting justice, equality, and positive societal change. However, the emotional and psychological toll of this work is often underrepresented in discussions about advocacy. The esteemed position of the legal profession in society often masks the daily challenges faced by lawyers and others in this field. These challenges include long working hours, fixed deadlines, intense competition, and the pressure to meet client expectations, all while managing the significant stress that accompanies high-stakes decision-making. The intense nature of advocacy can lead to various mental health challenges, affecting not only the advocates themselves but also the communities they serve. This article delves into the definitions of key psychological impacts and their specific effects on advocates, drawing on existing literature to provide a comprehensive overview.

## Definitions

**Emotional Labour:** The process of managing feelings and expressions to fulfil the emotional requirements of a job, particularly in roles that involve caring for others.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, "The Legal Profession and Mental Health," Address at the Inaugural Session of the National Conference on Mental Health, Bar Council of India, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Grandey, A. A. (2000). Emotional regulation in the workplace: A new way to conceptualize emotional labor. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 5(1), 95–110. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8998.5.1.95>

**Compassion Fatigue:** A condition of emotional and physical burnout that results in a reduced ability to empathize with others, commonly experienced by those who care for trauma survivors.<sup>3</sup>

**Vicarious Trauma:** The emotional residue of exposure to traumatic stories and experiences of others through work; witnessing fear, pain, and terror that others have experienced; a pre-occupation with horrific stories told to the professional.<sup>4</sup>

### Impact on Advocates

Lawyers are often characterized by perfectionistic and highly competitive traits. These personality attributes can create an environment where individuals grappling with suicidal thoughts may feel less inclined to seek help, as the pressure to maintain a facade of competence and success often outweighs the acknowledgement of personal struggles. "It has been observed that the environment of courts and the presence of fellow lawyers can contribute to a deeply stressful atmosphere, making it challenging to maintain mental well-being. The inherent pressures and emotional burdens associated with the legal profession can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and depression.

A Canadian Bar Association (CBA) [survey](#) revealed that approximately 58% of legal professionals—including lawyers, judges, and law students—experience stress burnout. Additionally, around 48% report dealing with anxiety disorders, while 25% of lawyers are suffering from depression.<sup>5</sup>

A 1990 [study](#) by researchers at Johns Hopkins University revealed that lawyers had a depression rate three times higher than professionals in 25 other fields. Subsequent studies have shown that around 15 percent of lawyers will experience some form of depression during their careers.<sup>6</sup>

#### 1. Emotional Labor

Advocates often engage in emotional labour, managing their feelings to maintain a professional demeanour while addressing sensitive issues. This can lead to burnout and emotional exhaustion.<sup>7</sup> CJI Chandrachud has said that the legal profession is stressful and competitive, and that the adversarial nature of the profession can lead to mental health issues. He has also said that lawyers should avoid glorifying overwork.<sup>8</sup> While speaking at the Harvard Law School center on "The Corporate Legal Sector's Impact on India," Justice DY Chandrachud remarked that the legal profession can be extremely stressful.

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<sup>3</sup> Ruiz-Fernández, M. D., Ramos-Pichardo, J. D., Ibáñez-Masero, O., Cabrera-Troya, J., Carmona-Rega, M. I., & Ortega-Galán, Á. M. (2020). Compassion fatigue, burnout, compassion satisfaction and perceived stress in healthcare professionals during the COVID-19 health crisis in Spain. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 29(21-22), 4321-4330.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15469>

<sup>4</sup> California department of corrections and rehabilitation:

<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/bph/wp-content/uploads/sites/161/2021/10/Trauma-Fact-Sheets-October-2021.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.cba.org/CBAMediaLibrary/cba\\_na/PDFs/CBA%20Wellness%20PDFs/FINAL-Report-on-Survey-of-Lawyers-on-Wellness-Issues.pdf](https://www.cba.org/CBAMediaLibrary/cba_na/PDFs/CBA%20Wellness%20PDFs/FINAL-Report-on-Survey-of-Lawyers-on-Wellness-Issues.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Mental Health in the Legal Profession By Scott Mitchell, 2007. Issue of Diversity & The Bar.

<https://mcca.com/mcca-article/mental-health-in-the-legal-profession/#notes>

<sup>7</sup> Hochschild, A. R. (1983). \*The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling

<sup>8</sup> Avoid Tendency To Glorify Over-Work; Mental Health Important For Lawyers: CJI DY Chandrachud LIVELAW NEWS NETWORK 11 Jan 2023 8:13 PM

<https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/avoid-tendency-to-glorify-over-work-mental-health-important-for-lawyers-cji-dy-chandrachud-218718>

He highlighted that lawyers are particularly vulnerable to addiction and mental health challenges, including depression, at rates higher than those found in the general population.

## 2. Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue can occur when advocates repeatedly encounter the suffering of others. This emotional strain can lead to feelings of detachment and cynicism.<sup>9</sup> Vicarious trauma rates among U.S. attorneys are nearly five times higher than those in other professions, with almost two-thirds of judges experiencing short- or long-term symptoms of vicarious trauma.<sup>10</sup>

Gender-based stereotypes are prevalent in every profession. Due to the patriarchal system and hierarchical structures, it is particularly challenging for women to enter and thrive in the legal industry. These issues may not impact men and women equally. Reports suggest that levels of anxiety and problematic drinking may be higher among women in the legal profession, with some studies estimating that attrition rates for women are 150% higher than those for men.<sup>11</sup> On 10.02.2024, the Delhi High Court Lawyer's Forum hosted a discussion on mental health and happiness for legal professionals. Dr. Achal Bhagat, a renowned Psychiatrist highlighted the entrenched patriarchal nature of society, noting that women are often confined to traditional roles and expected to excel as both homemakers and professionals. He emphasized that these pressures contribute to the higher vulnerability of women advocates to mental health issues, underscoring the need to overcome these constraints to foster fairer environments for women.

## 3. Vicarious Trauma

The stories and experiences shared by those advocates support can lead to vicarious trauma, resulting in anxiety, intrusive thoughts, and emotional dysregulation.<sup>12</sup> High-stress professions, such as medicine, contribute to stress levels comparable to those experienced by legal professionals. This parallel underscores the intense pressures faced in both fields.<sup>13</sup> Financial pressures can exacerbate the mental health challenges faced by advocates. Many work in non-profit sectors or rely on donations, which can be unstable. This uncertainty can lead to anxiety and feelings of inadequacy.<sup>14</sup> Consistently ignoring one's own emotions can negatively impact social, cognitive, and physical well-being. This lack of awareness causes issues in all areas of life, including cognitive symptoms like rigid thinking, poor concentration, confusion, memory loss, loss of purpose, and fixation on unchangeable stressors.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Impact on Family Life

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<sup>9</sup> Figley, C. R. (1995). \*Compassion Fatigue: Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder in Those Who Treat the Traumatized

<sup>10</sup> The Canadian Bar Association, Janice Mukalov.

<https://www.cba.org/Publications-Resources/CBA-Practice-Link/Work-Life-Balance/Health-Wellness/Compassion-Fatigue-in-the-Legal-Profession>

<sup>11</sup> Benchmarking Report 2016, New York City Bar <https://documents.nycbar.org/files/BenchmarkingReport2016.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> McCann, I. L., & Pearlman, L. A. (1990). \*Vicarious Trauma: A Framework for Understanding the Psychological Effects of Working with Trauma Survivors

<sup>13</sup> Kamran Azam<sup>2</sup>, Anwar Khan<sup>1</sup> and Muhammad Toqeer Alam Causes and Adverse Impact of Physician Burnout: A Systematic Review: Journal of the College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan 2017, Vol. 27 (7): 00

<sup>14</sup> Bruner, A. (2015). "Financial Stress and Mental Health.

<sup>15</sup> " Peter G. Jaffe et al., Vicarious Trauma in Judges: The Personal Challenge of Dispensing Justice, 45 JUDGES J. 12, 15 (2006). <https://www.courts.state.md.us/sites/default/files/import/fccip/docs/vicarioustraumainjudges.pdf>

Advocacy work can strain family relationships due to long hours and emotional exhaustion. Lawyers often struggle to balance their personal lives with the demands of their profession, resulting in conflicts and feelings of guilt. This intense focus on work can lead them to miss valuable time with family, friends, and social gatherings.<sup>16</sup> The focus on negative issues such as crime and injustice can seep into advocates' personal lives, impacting their mental state and outlook. Constant exposure to negativity can lead to depression and isolation from positive environments and relationships<sup>17</sup>.

The National Association for Law Placement reports that over 70 percent of those surveyed struggled to find time for family, leisure, and personal or health needs.<sup>18</sup> Another study found that lawyers with high psychological distress reported lower levels of psychological well-being. It also revealed that female lawyers experienced more psychological distress than their male counterparts, due to the additional responsibilities of their profession, home, and family.<sup>19</sup>

## 6. Stress and Anxiety

The pressure to effect change can heighten stress and anxiety among advocates. This chronic stress can impact their mental and physical health.<sup>20</sup> The prevalence of mental illness and excessive alcohol consumption among attorneys is alarmingly high. Research indicates that 51.3% of lawyers exhibit signs of risky drinking, with 34% of women and 25.4% of men participating in hazardous drinking behaviors.<sup>21</sup> Another study reveals that sixty-three percent believe mental health and substance abuse issues are worsening in the legal profession, up from 55% last year. It is also found that 71.1% of the surveyed lawyers experience anxiety, while 38.2% report feelings of depression. The proportion of lawyers facing another mental health issue has more than doubled, rising from 14.6% last year to 31.2% this year. Furthermore, nearly 15% are aware of someone in the legal profession who has died by suicide in the past two years.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Smith, R. M., & Brown, J. (2019). "Family Dynamics and Work-Life Balance in Advocacy.

<sup>17</sup> McDonald, S., & O'Connor, C. (2020). "The Effects of Isolation on Mental Health.

<sup>18</sup> Carolyn Lamm, Solving the Work Life Equations, [https://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/solving\\_the\\_work-life\\_equation/news/article/do\\_you\\_volunteer\\_on\\_a\\_regular\\_basis/?utm\\_campaign=sidebar](https://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/solving_the_work-life_equation/news/article/do_you_volunteer_on_a_regular_basis/?utm_campaign=sidebar)

<sup>19</sup> Naeema Arzeen, Maryum Hamid Mubashar Shah Azad, Saima Arzeem (2022) Gender Differences in Psychological Distress and Psychological Well-Being among Lawyers, Life & Science. [10.37185/Lns.1.1.192](https://doi.org/10.37185/Lns.1.1.192)  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359978861\\_Gender\\_Differences\\_in\\_Psychological\\_Distress\\_and\\_Psychological\\_Well-Being\\_among\\_Lawyers?\\_tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGF0aW9uIjoiYm9keS99](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359978861_Gender_Differences_in_Psychological_Distress_and_Psychological_Well-Being_among_Lawyers?_tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGF0aW9uIjoiYm9keS99)

<sup>20</sup> Adams, R. E., et al. (2006). "Compassion Fatigue and Burnout in Social Workers: A Study of the Impact of Trauma Work.

<sup>21</sup> Anker, J., & Krill, P. R. (2021). Stress, drink, leave: An examination of gender-specific risk factors for mental health problems and attrition among licensed attorneys. *PLOS ONE*, 16(5), e0250563. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0250563>

<sup>22</sup> There's a Lot of Backlog to Address': Why Mental Health in the Legal Profession Is Getting Worse  
<https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/2023/05/18/theres-a-lot-of-backlog-to-address-why-mental-health-in-the-legal-profession-is-getting-worse/?slreturn=20230925174016>

A 2004 study of North Carolina lawyers found that more than half reported high levels of perceived stress, which emerged as the strongest predictor of depression among all factors examined in the study.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

The mental health challenges faced by legal professionals are profound and multifaceted. From the cathartic line of management feelings and expressions done cathartic drive to the burnout and withdrawal caused away pity and the long mental personal effects of secondary hurt advocates many bears associated with nursing obscure effect. The financial pressures combined with the demanding nature of the legal profession and the pervasive negativity inherent in the work further exacerbate these mental health problems. In addition, the effect of intimate and house spirit is positive with pine hours and cathartic enervation strain relationships and decreasing character of life.

Recognizing the high-stress levels in the legal profession, CJI Dr. Chandrachud emphasized, "It is essential for lawyers to maintain a healthy life due to the inherent pressures of their profession."<sup>24</sup> The information and search highlighted in this clause Highlight the ominous preponderance of moral health Problems in the sound community, including great levels of focus anxiety and low aboard amp heavy acculturation of exploit and cathartic inhibition. Female advocates, in particular, face compounded challenges due to societal gender expectations, which heighten their vulnerability to psychological distress.

Legal professionals should maintain strong, supportive social networks outside of work. If a lawyer works late and remains alone until bed, their brain can get stuck in a rigid feedback loop, replaying work stress. They also need to engage in meaningful hobbies and activities outside of work.<sup>25</sup>

Given the difficult role that legal professionals play in advocating for justice and societal change, it is essential to recognize and address the psychological toll of this work. support the moral health of advocates done iron self-care strategies master back webs and organisational changes inside the sound sphere get service palliate these personal effects. Cultivating an environment that prioritizes mental well-being where the pressures of the profession do not outweigh personal health is essential for the sustainability of individual advocates and the broader success of the legal profession in driving meaningful social change.

Ultimately by acknowledging the psychological burdens faced by legal professionals and providing avenues for support and recovery, we can ensure that advocates remain resilient focused and capable of continuing their invaluable work in promoting justice and equality.

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<sup>23</sup> M. H. Howerton, *The Relationship Between Attributional Style, Work Addiction, Perceived Stress, and Alcohol Abuse on Depression in Lawyers in North Carolina (2004)* (doctoral dissertation, Univ. of N.C. at Charlotte) (available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database).

<sup>24</sup> CJI advocates holistic lifestyle, yoga

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2023/Dec/13/cji-advocates-holistic-lifestyle-yoga-2641101.html#:~:text=Emphasising%20the%20significance%20of%20yoga,being%20in%20the%20legal%20community.>

<sup>25</sup> Lee Norton, M.S.W., Jennifer Johnson, Esq., & George Woods, (2016) BURNOUT AND COMPASSION FATIGUE: WHAT LAWYERS NEED TO KNOW, *University of Missouri-Kansas City Law Review*, Vol 84;4

<https://animallawconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Norton-et-al-Burnout-Compassion-Fatigue.pdf>

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