



LAWYERS CONCERNED FOR LAWYERS

Confidential Support for Legal Professionals

From Isolation to Connection: Supporting Mental Health in the Legal Profession

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Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers – How Can LCL Help?

- LCL provides free, confidential peer and professional assistance to Minnesota lawyers, judges, law students, other legal professionals, and their immediate family members on any issue that causes stress or distress. This includes up to four free counseling sessions, a 24/7 hotline, support groups, and referrals to resources.
- LCL is a statewide program and is absolutely confidential.
- LCL partners with bars, Minnesota CLE, legal employers, law schools, and other organizations to offer programs on well-being, impairment, stress management and other topics, often for Mental Health, Elimination of Bias or Ethics credit.
- LCL provides coaching on how to reach out or support a friend or colleague who may be struggling. We can help address general concerns, make supervisory referrals, suggest community resources, discuss interventions, and much more.
- LCL can provide critical incident response if a tragedy or crisis impacts a firm, organization, or family.
- LCL can help with access to treatment and related services. We have a need-based fund to help lawyers and law students pay for substance use and mental health treatment and related services.
- LCL, founded in 1976, helps approximately 400 new clients every year and is funded through lawyer license fees and donations. We truly appreciate your support!
- LCL volunteers are the lifeblood of our service to the profession. Contact us to learn more or join LCL.
- LCL is committed to well-being in our profession and supports our colleagues and their families in recovery from any issue. Call us, we can help!

Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers Myths & Facts

MYTH: LCL will report me to the Minnesota Board of Law Examiners or the Office of Lawyers Professional Responsibility.

FACT: LCL does not and will not report to any licensing board, employer, or agency, even if information is requested by those sources or our clients request that we do so.

MYTH: You can do it yourself.

FACT: Isolation is the enemy of recovery. The likelihood of being successful in recovery from any issue greatly increases with appropriate professional and peer support in place.

MYTH: LCL only helps with alcohol issues.

FACT: While LCL does provide services and support regarding drug and alcohol issues, we offer so much more. We also assist with stress and mental health matters such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and problem gambling, along with aging and retirement, couples and family , career, financial, and practice concerns, and any other issues that may cause stress or distress.

MYTH: LCL is a Twin Cities program.

FACT: LCL is a statewide program that serves lawyers, judges, law students, other legal professionals, and their families throughout Minnesota.

MYTH: I can use my employer's Employee Assistance Program with the same result.

FACT: Your employer's EAP can be a great resource. LCL counselors understand the stress of the legal profession and LCL offers ongoing connections, peer support and other services and resources.



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Selected Sources/Resources **Isolation, Connection, Loneliness & Well-Being**

- Shawn Achor, Gabriella Rosen Kellerman, Andrew Reece and Alexi Robichaux [“America’s Loneliest Workers According to Research”](#) Harvard Business Review (March 19 2018)
- Paula Davis, [“Engaged & Exhausted: The Burnout Profile Leaders Need to Monitor”](#) (Forbes Feb. 6, 2023)
- Rachel Fry [“Why is Law the Loneliest Profession in America?”](#) (LinkedIn Oct. 2, 2020)
- Lawrence Krieger, [“The surprising Master Key to Happiness and Satisfaction According to Lawyer Research”](#) (Florida Bar Journal 92:1 Jan. 2018)
- Patrick R. Krill, Nikki Degeneffe, Kelly Ochocki, Justin J. Anker, [“People, Professionals, and Profit Centers: The Connection between Lawyer Well-being and Employer Values”](#) (MDPI Behavioral Sciences, Vol. 12(6) (June 3, 2022)
- Patrick R. Krill, Hannah M. Thomas, Meaghyn R. Kramer, Nikki Degeneffe, and Justin J. Anker [“Stressed, Lonely, and Overcommitted: Predictors of Lawyer Suicide Risk”](#) (Healthcare 2023, 11(4), 536 (February 2023)
- Liz Mineo, [“Good Genes are Nice, but Joy is Better”](#) Harvard Gazette (April 11, 2017)
- Natalie Netzel, [“Better Together: Toward a Mutual-Care Approach to Practicing Law”](#) (Minnesota Bench & Bar, Vol. 30(9) 19 (November 2023)
- Dr. Larry Richard, [“Herding Cats: The Lawyer Personality Revealed”](#) (Lawyer Brain)

- Neha Sampat, Esq., “[Walking a Minefield without a Map: The Explosive Intersection of Well-Being and Belonging](#)” *Belong Blog* (2022)
- “[Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation](#)” the U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community (2023)
- ALM Intelligence “Mental Health & Substance Abuse Survey” (May 2023) available for download [here](#)



What I've learned about loneliness, isolation, and the legal profession through my recovery

BY JON M. TYNJALA

One of the hallmarks of addiction is what many in long term recovery call “terminal uniqueness.” For a long time, particularly at the nadir of my drinking career, I didn’t think anybody else understood how I felt or why I drank. I was different. There was no solution to my problem. Sure, all those treatments and “programs” worked for others, but they were not for me. My problems were deeper, more complex. I was a rock. I was an island. I was alone. And I certainly didn’t need you or your help, thank you very much.

It was a self-defeating and arrogant attitude that kept me from getting help. And, as I found out, I was not the only one who felt that way.

According to a recent report by the United States Surgeon General, 40 percent of Americans report being lonely.¹ That percentage has been increasing over the last several decades. But what does it mean to be “lonely?” The report defines loneliness as a perceived or subjective feeling of isolation based on a perceived or subjective feeling that the quality or quantity of relationships we need is not being met.² It is a purely subjective standard that differs from person to person. How many close friendships I need might be very different from your experience. But if we feel ourselves lacking in some way, we will experience loneliness. During the years of my active addiction, I often felt alone and isolated. Since entering recovery, I find that I do not feel that way anymore.

There is emotional pain associated with being lonely. Loneliness activates the same neural pathways as physical pain. Worse still, loneliness and isolation can have significant negative impacts on our physical and mental health. They are associated with a 26 percent increase in the risk of early death and a 30 percent increase in the risk of heart attack or stroke.³ The risk of depression doubles, as does the risk of dementia. Loneliness has the same impact on our physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day—making it worse than obesity, lack of physical activity, and the negative effects of pollution combined.⁴

According to one survey, at least, the practice of law may be the loneliest profession.⁵ Lawyers are therefore at even greater risk for the negative physical and mental health consequences of loneliness and isolation. The reasons may seem quite familiar to many of us: the relentless drive for more billable hours; the constant and sometimes seemingly unreasonable demands of partners and clients; the need to work long hours to get it all done;

the competitive nature of the work (not just between opposing counsel, but often within our own organizations); the need to be seen as competent and capable; and perfectionism (which seems like a positive trait for keeping us from being sued for malpractice). When you add the perceived stigma of admitting weakness by asking for help or confessing the existence of an addiction or other mental health condition, you have the ingredients for a toxic soup of isolation and loneliness.

All of this, left unaddressed, often leads to increased stress, burnout, a decrease in work performance, higher rates of quitting, decreased job satisfaction, and strained professional and personal relationships. We may then reach for unhealthy coping mechanisms to relieve the pain like drugs, alcohol, gambling, or sexual compulsivity, among others. We may also suffer from mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, and other conditions that affect lawyers at much greater rates than the general population. If you are a leader or a person of influence in a legal organization, you should be very concerned about whether your most valuable assets are at risk—because they are. Addressing the risks associated with loneliness and isolation is not just the right thing to do, though it is certainly that; it is also a really good business decision. That’s in part because addressing loneliness may also reduce the incidence of substance-use and other mental health issues in the workplace.

Welcome to Rat Park

The so-called War on Drugs began in the early 1970s under then-President Richard Nixon in response to the perceived epidemic of drug addiction in the United States. It was predicated on the assumption that certain kinds of drugs were inherently and irresistibly addictive and that the only way to win the war was to stop the supply and punish the user. It was an understandable approach given what people thought at the time about the nature of addiction, much of which was based on research with rats.

In the 1960s, researchers placed experimental rats in so-called Skinner Boxes, where they were completely isolated and alone. They were given no opportunity for exercise or social interaction with their fellow rats (don’t scoff—rats are highly social animals). They were given a choice between water and heroin-laced water. Not surprisingly, given the choice between heroin and plain water, the rats chose heroin. The scientists concluded that drugs were irresistibly addictive and anyone who used them would become an addict.

Bruce Alexander, a psychologist who studied addiction, thought that something didn't quite add up.⁶ So he decided to see what would happen if these same rats were introduced to a more pleasing environment with plenty of food and opportunities for recreation and social interaction with other rats. It was a little like Jurassic Park—only smaller, less deadly to humans, and more fun for the rats. Welcome to Rat Park! And unlike the rats placed in isolation, the rats in Rat Park consumed less drugs than the rats in Skinner Boxes. Much less. It was almost as if the rats in isolation took the drugs *because* they were alone. Painfully alone.

In my own recovery I have often heard it said that the opposite of addiction is connection. It turns out that we actually do need each other. The most effective recovery programs (such as AA, SMART Recovery, and LifeRing, among others) all include a component of robust mutual support. So it may be that the Rat Park study showed that drugs are only irresistible when our opportunities for a supportive social existence are deficient or non-existent. With a whole universe of social media at our fingertips today, that would seem impossible. But as far as your physical and mental health are concerned, 10,000 followers on Instagram all giving you a thumbs up is no substitute for a conversation over coffee with a trusted friend.

Advances in modern technology (social media, virtual conferencing, etc.) that hold such promise for bringing us closer together often have the opposite effect—serving mainly to exacerbate the problem of disconnection. And they often serve as another unhealthy coping mechanism. Doom scrolling, and other varieties of internet addiction, are some of the unhealthy ways we sometimes cope.

As a result, our society has become hyper-individualized, hyper-competitive, more frantic, and driven from crisis to crisis (real or imagined), all of which contributes to social and cultural isolation. Our houses keep getting bigger while our “communities” get smaller and less inclusive. When we experience the pain of chronic isolation and loneliness, we seek relief. Lacking other alternatives (real or perceived), drugs and alcohol (or other addictive behaviors) often provide that relief, even if it is only temporary. Addictive behaviors become the substitute for a full and engaged life.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development

For over 80 years, Harvard has been conducting what is now the longest-running continuous longitudinal study of adult life ever attempted.⁷ Designed to learn what it takes to live a longer, happier, and healthier life, the Harvard Study of Adult Development has been collecting personal information every year about the health and lives of its participants—a cohort that has now moved into the third and fourth generations from the original members.⁸ The data collected includes both objective and subjective measures about each participant's physical and mental health. It is a goldmine

of information for researchers looking at markers and drivers of human health and well-being as we age—a remarkable undertaking that has revealed profound insights.

The original study started with an all-male cohort from Harvard (Harvard was male-only at that time) that included John F. Kennedy and long-time Washington Post editor Ben Bradlee.⁹ The study was later expanded to include a cohort of disadvantaged boys from inner-city Boston.¹⁰ (Regrettably, if not surprisingly for its time, the study's insights were limited by its being restricted to male subjects.) The two cohorts, on the surface at least, could not have been more different. You would be forgiven if you thought that the results of the research would have different outcomes between the groups. However, the results of the study were consistent between the groups on at least one measure. It turns out that the key to happiness is not money, fame, or intellectual or professional success. It is, in a word, connections. Meaningful and supportive connections.

Weighing the respective experiences of the rats in Rat Park and the Harvard study participants underscores a profound bit of wisdom about connection. It can be summarized in the words of Clarence, the hapless angel looking to get his wings in *It's a Wonderful Life*, when he tells George Bailey, “No man is a failure who has friends.”

Connection, service, and resilience in the practice of law

And what exactly do Rat Park and the Harvard study have to do with loneliness and isolation in the practice of law? The Rat Park study showed that isolation does not just make addiction worse: It may in fact be a primary causal factor. The Harvard study concluded that the key to happiness is connection. Thus, fostering and creating opportunities for supportive and meaningful connections is one of the vital prescriptions for our epidemic of loneliness.

Of course my path out of loneliness may not look much like yours. But the specific and individual solutions we pursue are less important than that we continue to focus on creating more opportunities for personal and professional connection. When we create those opportunities, the entire profession benefits, as do those we serve. Here are a few suggestions for building opportunities in our personal and professional lives.

Find your people.

Finding your people at work and in your personal life can help to forge the connections that are so important for our long-term physical and mental health. Cultivating supportive connections within your organization can help you both professionally and personally. Being active in your state, local, and/or affinity bar associations can be a great way to meet like-minded people. You can also seek out groups that are centered on a hobby or activity, or, as in my case, on your recovery. I also play in a



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17-piece jazz band. Music allows me to exercise my brain and engage in the moment. I have also met many incredible people. What you do depends on what you are interested in and what gets you jazzed up (pun intended).

Find volunteer and service opportunities.

Engaging in volunteer work around something that you are passionate about can be a great way to find personal meaning as well as meaningful and supportive connections. I have been a long-term volunteer with Minnesota Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL). My decision to work at LCL and help other lawyers with substance use, mental health, and other concerns was one of the best decisions of my life. I love the work that I do and have found tremendous personal satisfaction and meaning from helping fellow lawyers and legal professionals and their families find the recovery help they need.

I have had many people reach out after a CLE on substance use and mental health issues to tell me that they could identify with some or all of what I said—that I was telling their story. That is connection! And it has had the gratifying effect of making the work in my business law practice (which I have continued) more meaningful and rewarding. Service can also be a part of how we earn a living; I now see my legal work from a more service-oriented perspective. I have greater empathy for my clients, and I believe it has made me a better lawyer.

Attend to your well-being.

Some additional strategies for overcoming the personal distress caused by our isolation and loneliness include meditation, yoga, exercise, and journaling, among others. Engaging in therapy is always a good idea. You do not need to be in crisis to benefit from therapy. Indeed, a good therapist can help you develop tools to employ when the stress of practice and life gets out of hand or feels like it is too much to handle. If you are looking to find a therapist, LCL can help. We provide up to four free counseling sessions per issue. Beyond those four sessions, we can also help you find a therapist who meets your individual needs.

There is no magic-bullet solution. And there is no preordained number of connections that will help me or you to overcome our sense of isolation or loneliness. It depends on the individual. But we can find ways to support each other in our efforts as individuals and organizations to foster the professional and personal connections that make life worth living. We work really hard to earn a living yet often forget that it is intended to allow us to live a life. One that is rich with the joy of sharing our time and our talents with others.

Final words

When I finally made my decision to get sober, my first call was to LCL. The phone had never been so heavy. To my great surprise and relief, what I found was support without judgment. LCL offered

me hope for a solution that I could not seem to find on my own. I owe a debt that I can never truly repay. I can only give away what was so freely given to me. If you or someone you know is suffering from a substance-use or mental health issue, LCL is here for you wherever you may be on your personal journey to recovery.

I will be working on my own recovery for the rest of my life. Likewise, the solutions to the issue of isolation and loneliness in this country and in our profession will take time. But that should neither frighten us nor cause us to throw up our hands in the face of a seemingly hopeless task. We can solve this. We are lawyers, after all—problem solvers. We are a helping profession. We just need to be better stewards of our own health and wellness, as well as that of our colleagues. Which, in turn, benefits and strengthens the firms and organizations we work for and the clients we serve. If we do that, we will be better stewards of our profession as a whole.

The words of an Indian proverb are apt: “Blessed are they who plant trees under whose shade they will never sit.” We do this work not only for ourselves and those around us, but likewise the future generations of lawyers who will benefit from these efforts.

In my recovery, I have found that meaningful and supportive connections seem to be the key ingredient in staying sober. To that I would add acceptance and gratitude, service to others, and resilience. A journey of recovery is not easy. And it does not happen overnight. It has been said that happiness is found in the pursuit, not the capture—the journey and not the destination, as they say. And while this may be a cliché, clichés often hold profound truth.

I will leave you with the words of the famous Indian poet and writer, Rabindranath Tagore: “I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and, behold, service was joy.” Take care of yourself, and then get out there and take care of each other. ▲

NOTES

¹ United States Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation* (2023); <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Harvard Business Review, *America's Loneliest Workers According to Research*, 3/19/2018; <https://hbr.org/2018/03/americas-loneliest-workers-according-to-research>

⁶ *Addiction: The View from Rat Park* (2010), Bruce K. Alexander, Professor Emeritus, Simon Fraser University; <https://www.brucealexander.com/articles-speeches/rat-park/148-addiction-the-view-from-rat-park>

⁷ The Harvard Gazette, *Good genes are nice, but joy is better*, 4/11/2017; <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/over-nearly-80-years-harvard-study-has-been-showing-how-to-live-a-healthy-and-happy-life/>

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*



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SOMEONE
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