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***in*SIGHT**

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“Law firms both large and small are uniquely positioned to provide support, structure, and resources for legal professionals practicing abstinence from alcohol.”

How to Be an Ally for Nondrinkers

By Kyra Hazilla

Our legal community’s relationship with alcohol in the profession is changing. Employers and staff are asking what they can do to support shifting the culture around drinking norms in our profession. The attorney counselors at the OAAP have published many articles about the research on attorneys and problem substance use in the *inSight* over the years.¹ The most recent statistics from Bloomberg Law’s 2024 Attorney Well-Being Report² reveal that 13% of lawyers do not drink. Another 25% reported drinking heavily in varying degrees. Lastly, 14% have increased their alcohol use over the past year. For organizations and individuals without a personal alcohol use concern, how can we support our colleagues?

Whether a person is in recovery, “sober curious,” or simply a nondrinker for the myriad reasons individuals make that choice, law firms both large and small are uniquely positioned to provide support, structure, and resources for legal professionals practicing abstinence from alcohol. Individuals in the legal community can also become allies and play a vital role in fostering an inclusive environment for people choosing not to drink.

The ABA in conjunction with Hazelden/Betty Ford endeavored to study the challenges facing our profession through research on 13,000 attorneys across the U.S. In response to the results from that survey, the ABA created a National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being in 2016 and released an oft-cited report the following year entitled, “The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change.”³ The ABA has also developed a framework called the Well-Being pledge⁴ to guide firms in taking action to support attorney well-being. These resources identify the following areas for initiating change in the legal community:

Education

Legal employers need to educate everyone in their organization—attorneys and non-attorney staff alike—to reduce stigma surrounding substance use disorders. This effort includes training staff to recognize signs and symptoms of problematic substance use and how to engage in compassionate conversations on difficult subjects. Stigma and fear of negative professional repercussions have long posed a barrier to lawyers getting help for substance misuse and have resulted in lawyers feeling apprehensive about sharing their recovery stories. Making nondrinking and recovery an explicitly recognized organizational value serves all employees. The OAAP is readily available, as are other experts, to train your staff on awareness, signs and symptoms, combatting stigma, and having challenging conversations. Note: OAAP presentations often qualify for the mandatory Mental Health / Substance Use MCLE credit. You can also educate yourself through books and conversations with colleagues who have different relationships with alcohol than your own.

Workplace Culture

Create a healthy environment for nondrinkers, people in recovery, and those seeking help for substance use disorders. Limit drinking-based work functions and offer appealing nonalcoholic alternatives. Many of us have been in situations where there is only one nonalcoholic alternative—and it’s Coca-Cola. That communicates a lack of regard for individuals opting out of the drinking culture. Be aware that mocktails and nonalcoholic faux beverages can be triggering to some folks in recovery.⁵ Ask what people would like and provide choices. Take a hard look at drinking norms within your organization—firm-wide and within departments and teams, as well as in networking environments with clients and stakeholders. Individuals can also support this cultural shift by being a safe place to discuss concerns about drinking norms. Consider offering to be a sober ally to a colleague in recovery at any drinking-focused networking or firm events.

Supportive Policies

Establish supportive workplace policies, including flexible schedules to allow for self-care, meetings, therapy sessions, and treatment. Encourage everyone in your organization to use resources like the OAAP, workplace benefits such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and insurance-provided mental health and treatment benefits. Offer confidential support wherever possible.

Looking for help with crafting a policy for your organization? The Institute for Well-Being in Law has a framework⁶ to get you started. Have more questions? Feel free to reach out to the OAAP for support. We provide resources for firms and individuals looking to change their approach to the legal community’s drinking culture.

– **KYRA HAZILLA**
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OTHER WORKS BY KYRA HAZILLA AT OAAP.ORG

inSight

- Voices of Well-Being in the Legal Community (Summer 2024)
- Well-Being Month in Law: Recapping 2024 (Summer 2024)
- Parental Burnout Primer for Legal Professionals (Spring 2024)
- Fostering Connection in a Lonely Profession (Winter 2023)
- Meaningful Connections at Work (Winter 2023)

Thriving Today

- Well-Being Week in Law: 2023 Preview (April 28, 2023)
- If You Aren't Feeling Buoyed by Resilience, Post-Traumatic Growth May Be on the Horizon (September 1, 2022)

ENDNOTES

1. www.osbplf.org > Services > CLEs & Resources > *inSight*
2. Bloomberg Law. "2024 Attorney Well-Being Report: The Divide Between Health & the Legal Industry." Available at https://assets.bbhub.io/bna/sites/18/2024/09/BLAW_2024_Well-Being-Report.pdf
3. National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being. "THE PATH TO LAWYER WELL-BEING: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change." August 2017. Available at: www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/images/abanews/ThePathToLawyerWellBeingReportRevFINAL.pdf.
4. American Bar Association. "Well-Being Pledge." Available at www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/well-being-in-the-legal-profession/well-being-pledge-campaign/.
5. See article in this issue of *inSight*, "The Case for (and Against) Mocktails."
6. American Bar Association. "Well-Being Template for Legal Employers." Available at www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/lawyer_assistance/well-being-template-for-legal-employers-final-3-19.pdf.