

# Building Connections to Address Lawyer Loneliness

BY ROBIN OAKS

Recently, I heard from two friends, one an attorney I know and the other my sister, how the most challenging emotional aspect of their cancer diagnosis journey was recognizing that they needed support. The most unnerving, they said, was feeling the flow of human kindness they received, even from strangers. Several legal professionals I recently coached mentioned feeling out of control because they wanted to make big changes regarding work but feared they didn't know exactly what to do. Each of these highly successful professional people described how they served others well, both clients and family, characterizing themselves as "rational thinkers," "doers," and "fixers." By their tone of voice and comments, it was clear they recognized a sense of loneliness as they faced the vulnerability of needing help.

Research has suggested that highly educated professionals, who problem solve for a living, tend to become hypervigilant for social threats and are prone to isolation. "Thinking like a lawyer" may contribute to distorted thought patterns leading to pessimism and neglecting needs - especially needs for connection. Prioritizing deep relationships in which we can be authentic and safely share our vulnerabilities and worries counters the real stressors we experience in life and in legal practice.

When we feel overwhelmed, and work in cultures in which needing support is construed as weakness, or when we feel vulnerable about sharing with another our concerns, our bodies feel this. Internal states of dissonance and chronic isolation cause stress. Hypervigilance and excessive focus on risks can lead to emphasizing the negative and dismissing the positive, and catastrophizing, that without our awareness become a worldview.

Pessimism leads to depressive thinking, which colors our experiences with permanency, pervasiveness, and no-win, all-or-nothing outlooks about others and our abilities to deal with uncertainty. Cultivating supportive connections can counteract these tendencies, positively affect physiological responses, and provide buffers to challenges we may face.<sup>1</sup>

## *Loneliness is not isolation, but a perception of something lacking*

Being alone or isolated is not synonymous with loneliness. Loneliness is an individual, personal, subjective condition that involves a sense of something lacking—lack of help, lack of options, lack of being understood or accepted, lack of someone who understands our real self and how we feel. It may be fleeting or become a chronic condition. Loneliness may arise when one feels a lack of living in alignment with one's values, or feels that work is no longer meaningful.

Often loneliness may arise from disconnection from one's body, or from a loss of something or someone who has been valued. This creates a rift in our sense of identity and place in the world. When we cannot reason our way out of challenges or control life, it may feel like there is no exit, causing other less effective coping mechanisms to arise. Toughing it out, not skillfully releasing emotions, pushing through with overcommitment to work and hyperactivity, or turning to substances for relief, may help remove us from pain, but also from the meaningful connections we need most. We may win a pyrrhic victory, but eventually lose the war.

In research conducted by the ABA in 2021 about why experienced women lawyers were exiting the legal profession, the reasons cited reflect the breakdowns in connections that matter for thriving. The study included the following reasons for why women leave law practice:<sup>2</sup>

- unfair treatment, pay, or promotion
- hypercompetitive environments that impact and erode collegiality
- isolating environments and barriers to building connection and support
- desire for more "meaningful" work
- 24/7 always-on culture affecting relationships, health, and balance

## *Loneliness impacts health, life satisfaction, and longevity*

In her graduate dissertation on loneliness in the general population and legal field, Olivia Ash, J.D., explained, "The pain of loneliness causes changes within our brain



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that correlate to increases in physical stress, i.e., survival mechanisms such as increased heart rate, blood pressure, and adrenaline and cortisol production and a hypervigilance to social threats. If people find a way to connect through efforts to repair or form a new social connection, then negative physical adjustments...are rewired. Doctors Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman, researchers responsible for the personality type labels, insist that Type A persons compensate for their loneliness with hyperactivity, but this tendency may lead to premature death from strain on the cardiovascular system.”<sup>3</sup>

In May 2023, the United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a new Surgeon General Advisory Report raising awareness about the public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in the US.<sup>4</sup> It noted, “Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. Disconnection fundamentally affects our mental, physical, and societal health. In fact, loneliness and isolation increase the risk for individuals to develop mental health challenges in their lives, and lacking connection can increase the risk for premature death to levels comparable to smoking daily.”

Loneliness is stressful. Our needs for belonging are so

deep that our bodies respond to perceptions of loneliness as if we were fighting or fleeing an external threat. Dr. Robert Waldinger, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of the new book “The Good Life,” notes that the single biggest factor contributing to health and longevity is having happy, supportive relationships. Dr. Waldinger is the current lead researcher of the longest longitudinal study (over 80 years) ever conducted of human development. That study has found a strong correlation between well-being and deep, meaningful relationships. Dr. Waldinger asks us all, “How do you nurture and cultivate such relationships?” Take a moment now to consider how you (or if you) prioritize building meaningful relationships in your life. How are you cultivating those connections to support your well-being?<sup>5</sup>

Connecting to self through learning about and practicing self-awareness and mind-body techniques, and exploring cognitive distortions and emotional self-regulation through therapy, coaching, or training, are vital to fostering well-being. An important step to building meaningful connections is to create communities where a sense of common humanity is engendered—and vulnerabilities are shared. Making mistakes or facing loss is not a failure or a sign we are not worthy. Dealing with illness, recovery, or upheaval

is not weakness. During retreats where people with common experiences can gather and grow, and in work cultures where psychological safety is prioritized, we can build supportive relationships to realize our common humanity and experience the power of connection for health and well-being.

In a recent study by Patrick Krill and others, 1962 randomly selected lawyers were questioned to identify predictors of suicidal ideation. The results showed that high levels of work overcommitment, perceived stress, loneliness as measured by the UCLA loneliness scale, and being male were all significantly associated with an increased risk of suicidal ideation.<sup>6</sup>

Legal practitioners facing demanding deadlines and heavy workloads often work in isolation, and value rational intelligence over emotional intelligence. Consciously fostering work environments that generate positive emotions, recognize accomplishments, and build psychological safety and human connection can provide valuable resources to mitigate work stress and alleviate the health risks of loneliness.

Arthur Brooks, author, researcher, and Harvard business professor, who teaches a popular course called Leadership and Happiness, has for years studied what creates work satisfaction and business success. He states that the biggest problem MBA students report to him is that they do not know how to deal with how they feel. He tells them, “So the number one skill is to treat your emotional system, the limbic system of your brain, like anything else that you would be managing. Learning how to experience your emotions...on purpose...you need to use the science to change your habits, your lifestyle...”<sup>7</sup>

Meaningful connections and building supportive, caring relationships are necessary for health and success in the practice of law. Take a break from your work and walk in nature, pet your dog when she comes to you to be touched, talk to someone you care about and whom you can trust about something bothering you, watch a funny movie and laugh out loud to flood your body with endorphins, and ask a colleague how they are and really listen with presence to their response. February is National Cancer Prevention Month and American Heart Month. Connect with your heart in whatever ways are meaningful and bring you joy—and realize you are not alone. ■

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*sions for legal professionals seeking to optimize potential, restore balance, and thrive during stressful life changes and challenges. Contact: Robin@RobinOaks.com or 805-685-6773.*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Schnall, et al., J. Exp. Soc. Psychology, 2008 Sept 1:44(5).
- 2 In Their Words: Experienced Women Lawyers Explain Why They are Leaving Law Firms and Profession, ABA Journal, May 3, 2021.
- 3 Prevalence and Effects of Loneliness, General Population, Lawyer Well-being and Survey of Law Studies; Olivia Ash, JD.
- 4 Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The US Surgeon General Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community (2023). <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>
- 5 R. Waldinger, M. Schultz, The Good Life, Lessons from the World’s Longest Scientific Study on Happiness, Simon and Schuster (2023); See also Robert Waldinger’s Ted Talk on What Makes a Good Life, and The Atlantic :article about the study at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/01/harvard-happiness-study-relationships/672753/>
- 6 Stressed, Lonely, and Overcommitted: Predictors of Lawyer Suicide Risk, Patrick R. Krill, Healthcare 2023, 11, 536. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11040536>
- 7 Build the Life you Want: The Art and Science of Getting Happier, Arthur Brooks and Oprah Winfrey (2023).

