

ASSOCIATION OF BUSINESS TRIAL LAWYERS

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REPORT

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BREAKING THE CYCLE OF INCIVILITY THROUGH WELL-BEING

Whatever the causes, the first step toward a real remedy to the incivility pandemic is recognition of the deeply destructive impact of uncivil conduct on individual lawyers who engage in it, on those subjected to it, on the bar as a whole, and ultimately on the American system of justice. It begins with recognition that civility is, and must be, the cornerstone of legal practice.



Bree Buchanan

As the old saying goes, “What goes around, comes around.” Uncivil, unprofessional, and downright hostile behavior invariably induces distress and diminished well-being of those subjected to it. Those who are low on the well-being scale can find that their distress becomes the driver of uncivil, or at least unprofessional, behavior. Throughout my years as director of a lawyers assistance program, I witnessed how substance abuse, depressive episodes, severe anxiety, misplaced aggression, and inability to sleep are routine responses by lawyers who are victimized by the bad behavior of others. (Given that you are reading this article, I expect that you could add to that list.) The distress of callers seeking our services triggered painful recollections of my earlier years as a litigator, when my own level of well-being—so often weighed down by extreme stress, alcohol abuse, and depression—impacted my level of professionalism with other lawyers.

Now, thirty years into my career and a decade into recovery from alcoholism, I find myself a leader in our country’s nascent lawyer well-being movement. Launched by the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being in 2016, this initiative defines well-being as a condition of health that

exists on a continuum, from the absence of impairments, such as substance use and mental health disorders, to robust thriving across six dimensions that include occupational, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, social, and physical. With the benefit of hindsight gained from hard-earned personal experience and a systemic view of the profession, I see that incivility and well-being (or the lack of it) are intrinsically linked.

My first decade as a lawyer coincided with the 1980’s, a time when Gordon Gekko’s adage, “greed is good,” represented the general “win at all costs” ethos of the era. I began my career as a family law attorney at legal aid, defending victims of domestic violence with a righteous vengeance. While I was on the receiving end of intimidation tactics by opposing counsel and parties, including verbal bullying, I was committed to dishing right back whatever was dished out to me. I also incorporated this behavior into my view of what, who, and how a lawyer should “be.”

Emblematic of this attitude was my century-old photograph, small yet prominently placed over the entrance to our conference room, of an abattoir in which two butchers in their bloody gear smiled ghoulishly up at the camera. At the time, I was greatly amused by this stunt and never gave a thought to what it communicated about my professionalism. Instead, I felt that I was playing along with the ethos of

family law litigation's strategic incivility in which late Friday filings with three-day notices were routine, along with mind-numbing loads of discovery intended to abusively weigh down and kill the spirit of opposing parties and their lawyers. Achieving my client's objectives should have sufficed, but "grinding my opponent down to a fine dust" was my internal modus operandi. Predictably, what I gave, I got in return. I missed more than one Christmas during my son's early years because of expedited deadlines or last-minute hearings scheduled the following day.

What of the toll that this behavior took on me? As someone subjected to incivility, and even outright bullying, I took home with me the distress, exasperation, anger, and fear that resulted from these experiences. I used our profession's most time-honored means of handling stress overload—alcohol. At first, it was two glasses of wine most nights. But consistent heavy usage, combined with a strong genetic propensity, ultimately led to an alcohol use disorder, mixed with multiple bouts of serious depression.

Having been in recovery for over nine years, I can now look back and see that I also used drinking to handle the internal distress I felt from being in "warrior mode." It allowed me to continue acting in a manner that conflicted with my inherent nature and internal values. Additionally, my drinking resulted in a diminished capacity to practice law to the best of my ability. Suffering from a hangover or dealing with the deflated energy that is a hallmark symptom of depression, I was left with a shortened fuse and lessened ability to function.

A pivotal point in my road to recovery was my experience with my state's lawyers assistance program. (This free and confidential service can be found through this directory: https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/resources/lap_programs_by_state/.) In recovery, I've learned how to better care for myself. In working towards this goal, I have also become better (but not perfect) at taking care of, and treating well, those around me. While incivility still plagues the profession, a new mindset that highly values the physical and emotional well-being of its members is on the cusp of gaining widespread support. As part of that movement, the promotion of civility and professionalism is being put forth as a valid means of improving well-being among lawyers. I believe that the promotion of well-being

can also be an effective way to intervene in the cycle of incivility. Treating one another better will result in each of us—not to mention the profession as a whole—being better .

The National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being was formed in response to back-to-back studies that demonstrated the dismal state of well-being in lawyers and law students. Patrick R. Krill, Ryan Johnson, & Linda Albert, *The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys*, 10 J. Addiction Med. 46 (2016); Jerome M. Organ, David B. Jaffe & Katherine M. Bender, *Suffering in Silence: The Survey of Law Student Well-Being and the Reluctance of Law Students to Seek Help for Substance Use and Mental Health Concerns*, 66 J. Legal Educ. 116 (2016). In 2017, it published a comprehensive report that laid out 44 recommendations for bringing about systemic change in how the profession as a whole addressed the well-being of its members. Bree Buchanan, et al., *The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change* (2017), available at www.lawyerwellbeing.net. In recognition of the integral relationship between civility and well-being, the authors put forth in Recommendation 6 the imperative that members of the legal profession "foster collegiality and respectful engagement throughout the profession." *Id.* at 15. In support, the Task Force wrote that interactions among members "can either foment a toxic culture that contributes to poor health or can foster a respectful culture that supports well-being." *Id.* Their words echoed what I found in my own years as a litigator and, later, as a lawyers assistance program director: "Chronic incivility is corrosive. It depletes energy and motivation, increases burnout, and inflicts emotional and physiological damage." *Id.* Overall, it reduces our sense of well-being and, as I found, sets the stage in too many cases for the onset of impairments that ultimately lead to the degradation of our profession.

Chronic stress and distress are natural responses to living in the crucible of high stakes, "take no prisoners" litigation and legal practice, where sarcasm, rudeness, hostility, belittlement, and even downright bullying are characteristic. These strategies are intentionally used to wear down the opposing side, and they often have the result of doing just that. Living with the resulting uncomfortable feelings can be too painful; reaching for some means to self-medicate is all too common.

The 2016 nationwide study of 13,000 lawyers mentioned above found that between 21 and 36 percent qualify as “problem drinkers.” Organ, *supra*, at 129. In the survey of law students, researchers revealed that one-quarter fell into the category of being at risk for alcoholism. As a lawyers assistance program director, I found that alcohol was the “drug of choice” for 90 percent of the individuals experiencing a substance abuse problem who called our program. In 2019, alcohol consumption is still the most widely accepted way to reduce stress, celebrate success, mourn losses, and often, simply end (or get through) each day. Over time, the anger, egotism, and selfishness experienced during inebriation begin to take over the alcoholic’s personality through all hours of the day. Brain changes begin to occur that promote impulsive and uncivil behavior. The alcoholic’s elaborate and impenetrable defense system renders impossible any insight into their actions—and any willingness to change absent the most egregious ramifications.

Lawyers are Type A, driven to succeed, and up against equally intense opposition. Attempting to achieve perfection in the midst of this dog-eat-dog world is also a perfect set-up for depression and anxiety. The lawyer study mentioned above found that more than one in four lawyers were struggling with some degree of depression. A frequent, but less recognized, manifestation of a depressed mood disorder—especially with men—is aggression, irritability, and anger. Hypersensitivity to others’ actions can lead to lashing out and over-the-top reactions to what superficially appear to be minor slights. Depression in this guise may avoid detection until the person’s condition worsens. Throughout this time, toxic incivility may become routine.



Many in the legal profession are concerned about what has been referred to as an “incivility pandemic.” Breaking this cycle of incivility requires, as Jayne Reardon rightly states, “a recognition that civility is . . . the cornerstone of legal practice.” Jayne Reardon, *Civility as the Core of Professionalism*, American Bar Association, Business Law Today, September 19, 2018, available at: https://www.americanbar.org/groups/business_law/publications/

[blt/2014/09/02_reardon/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/business_law/publications/blt/2014/09/02_reardon/). Recognition alone, however, is simply the beginning. Throughout the country, hortatory civility codes have been adopted, and these are an excellent step in that they serve to call our attention to the situation. I do believe, however, that we as a profession must look more deeply at what lies at the root.

In addition to adopting standards that promote professionalism, we must pay attention to the well-being of individual lawyers—a rising concern of firms, courts, bar associations, regulators, and law schools. While I don’t propose that maintaining consistent professionalism is a curative for alcoholism or depression, I do believe that a more civil work world can create an environment in which these disorders are less prevalent, and all lawyers can experience a heightened sense of well-being.

In our cover letter to the National Task Force’s Report, my co-chair, James Coyle, and I wrote:

We are at a crossroads. To maintain public confidence in the profession, . . . and to reduce the level of toxicity that has allowed mental health and substance use disorders to fester among our colleagues, we have to act now. Change will require a wide-eyed and candid assessment of our members’ state of being, accompanied by courageous commitment to re-envisioning what it means to live the life of a lawyer.

Well-being is intrinsically connected to collegiality, civility and professionalism. When one is diminished or improved, so follows the other. The current systemic efforts to enhance the well-being of lawyers will, I believe, have a positive impact on improving the civility of the profession. In turn —what goes around, comes around—that improved civility will foster enhanced well-being.

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