


# 8 Ways to Manage Your Mental Health as In-house Counsel

**Career Development**





The pandemic has been rough, especially for lawyers who already face high levels of anxiety. With the emotional stress of long work hours coupled with being locked down for the past two months, mental health in the legal field is a waning commodity, much like hand sanitizer.

But the mental well-being of in-house counsel has been top-of-mind for ACC long before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Thirty-three percent of lawyers have been diagnosed with a mental illness, ranging from anxiety to depression and bipolar disorder to schizophrenia. While these numbers are disquieting, there are ways in-house counsel can alleviate these symptoms.

In honor of Mental Health Awareness month, we've compiled the top eight pieces of advice in-house counsel can use to manage their mental health during and after the pandemic. Keep in mind that these tips are not meant to replace therapy, but they can help make the obstacles you may be facing more surmountable.

## 1. Make time for yourself

Between your massive workload and never-ending to-do list at home, the last thing you have time for is yourself. But taking care of yourself is not selfish. You need to be at the top of your mental game to deliver consistently in all areas of your life.

To avoid burnout, dedicate 10-15 minutes each day to doing something fun that recharges you, whether it's gardening or learning new tricks on Photoshop. While it seems counterintuitive, taking a break from writing contracts — even if only for a few minutes — can help your productivity and well-being.

## 2. Set boundaries

Don't let work seep into your personal life and drain you when you're off the clock. If you admit that you have a hard time unplugging your laptop or not checking your emails after hours, talk to your boss and HR department. Discuss what time you plan to disconnect every day and when you'll start working the next day. That way, you can relax at night and wake up with a more positive mindset.

## 3. Be mindful

Whether it's hearing incessant email alerts or multitasking while a colleague is talking, it's easy to get distracted and overwhelmed at work. In fact, research has shown that multitasking reduces productivity by 40 percent. To save yourself time, try the beloved stress-reliever for lawyers: mindfulness. It teaches you how to tune out those distractions to observe what's happening in the moment.

Taking mindfulness a step further, meditation clears your thoughts while focusing on your breathing and your body's response to anxiety. Is your jaw clenched? Are your brows furrowed? Are your shoulders tense? Noticing that you're tensed and relaxing those muscles helps relieve your mind (and body) from unnecessary stress.

If you're hesitant, learn about the different meditation methods in addition to mindfulness, like focused or spiritual. Once you've found one that works best for you, test different meditation apps or video tutorials to soothe your worries.

## 4. Stay active

Mental and physical health often go hand in hand. To boost your mood, stay active even if you don't have a gym membership or if your city's still under lockdown. YouTube has

countless equipment-free workout videos to keep you moving when you're feeling stuck indoors, physically or metaphorically. Follow these wellness steps to turn this routine into a healthy habit.

## 5. Be kind to yourself

Law is a highly competitive field. Success earns kudos from your coworkers and praise from your boss. But what happens when you make a mistake? Ideally, you learn from the stumble and keep going. Perfectionists, however, often ruminate on their mistakes, unwilling to forgive and forget their own faults.

Negative self-talk is untenable, as it perpetuates a downward spiral and thwarts any potential growth. To get yourself out of this hole, go easy on yourself. That doesn't mean slack off, but don't let perfectionism distract you from the learning opportunity at hand.

Instead, re-evaluate the mistake through a neutral lens — not a self-defeating or defensive one — for a clearer picture. Most importantly, focus your energy on what you can do now to fix the current problem and what you can do better next time.

## 6. Limit the alcohol

The sporadic cocktail with coworkers (even if it's during a Zoom happy hour) won't put you over the edge. However, relying on alcohol several nights a week to help you unwind is veering into dangerous territory. Considering how stressful the legal industry is, it's no surprise that 18 percent of lawyers are alcoholics in the United States, which is double the national average.

Apart from the bad hangovers and headaches, alcohol abuse can affect your mood after the ephemeral buzz wears off. And you don't have to be addicted for it to impact you. Studies show that excessive drinking can lead to psychiatric disorders (e.g., anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, etc.) or exacerbate existing ones.

Cutting back on alcohol isn't easy when it's ingrained in your social circle, but over time, it should improve your mental health. If you need professional help in reducing your intake or quitting altogether, consider contacting a substance abuse hotline for resources or signing up for a web support group.

## 7. Stay connected

Mental illnesses have made people feel isolated long before lockdowns were put in place. That's why it's critical to reach out to friends when depression or anxiety creep in.

It doesn't have to be a makeshift therapy session, but simply texting "Hey, how have you been?" to a good friend can be a distraction from your problems or be the open ear you need.

Schedule weekly FaceTime or Zoom chats with different friends and family members. Once the quarantines are lifted and social gatherings are no longer banned, go to lunch with colleagues or start a well-being movement with your ACC chapter.

## 8. Ask for help

If you've tried these tips but continue to struggle with symptoms of depression or anxiety that are interfering with your life, consider going to therapy. Although there used to be a stigma with seeking out mental health services (and there sometimes still is), the demand for virtual counseling has soared during the pandemic and made it more commonplace and acceptable.

The first step to seeking help is often the hardest: realizing that you need help. The good news is that by reading this article, you're part of the way there. Keep the momentum going and download a therapy app like Happify or Self-Help for Anxiety Management. If you prefer face-to-face interactions (while practicing social distancing), there's Online Counseling, which offers therapists around the world.

Whichever app or specialist you choose, their expert advice can give you the tools you need to improve your mental health or manage the challenges you're facing.

If your mood continues to sink and you're experiencing suicidal thoughts, call one of these international hotlines. Unfortunately, the suicide rate for lawyers is double that of the general population, so this is an issue to always take seriously.

Remember: You don't have to face these problems alone. There are friends, family members, and professionals who can help you during difficult times.

---

**For more well-being tips, visit the ACC In-house & Wellness Support page. For more advice and resources on coping during the pandemic, go to the ACC Coronavirus Resource page.**

Karmen Fox



Web Content Editor

ACC