RESEARCHUPDATE

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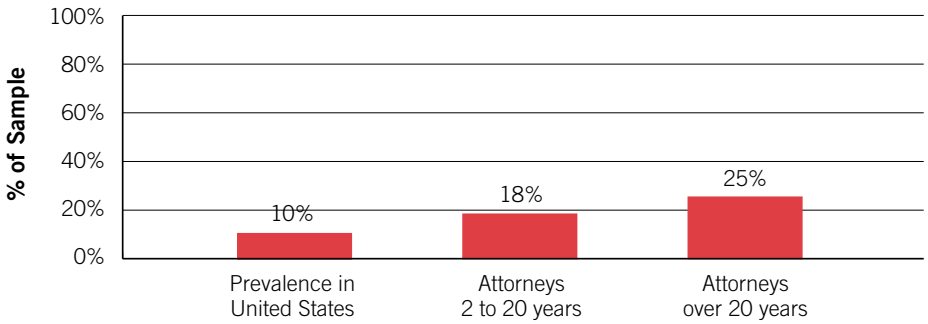
Research Update is published by the Butler Center for Research to share significant scientific findings from the field of addiction treatment research.

Attorneys and Substance Abuse

***Question:* Are attorneys at a heightened risk to develop alcohol/drug problems?**

Answer: Research indicates that attorneys are at a heightened risk to develop problems with substance abuse[1]. A study published in the International Journal of Law and Psychiatry reported that the rate of problem drinking for attorneys was 18% compared to 10% in the general population[2]. Evidence suggests that individuals in the legal profession experience problems with substance abuse early in their careers and these problems worsen over time. According to one study, 8% of prelaw students, 15% of first-year law school students, 24% of third-year law students, and 26% of alumni reported concern with alcohol problems. Furthermore, 18% of attorneys who practiced for 2 to 20 years reported drinking problems and this increased to 25% for attorneys who practiced for over 20 years[2] (see figure below).

Prevalence of Problem Drinking in Attorneys



Source: Benjamin et al. 1990

The longer attorneys with substance-related problems remain untreated the more likely they are to be defendants in malpractice suits[2]. For example, of the 100 attorneys that entered the Oregon State Bar Professional Liability attorney assistance program, 60% had a malpractice suit filed against them while suffering from substance abuse[2]. Furthermore, the American Bar Association reported that 27% of disciplinary cases involved alcohol misuse by attorneys[3]. Taken together, these data highlight the prevalence and consequences of substance abuse among legal professionals.

***Question:* Why are attorneys at a heightened risk to develop substance abuse problems?**

Answer: One possibility is that the profession contains fundamental characteristics that may facilitate the development of substance abuse[2]. These characteristics include social influences within the work environment, heavy workloads, stress attributed to working with clients, and co-occurring psychological illnesses that precede and/or exacerbate substance abuse problems.

Socio-cultural Influences within the Work Environment

Research suggests that workplace cultures that accept alcohol use (to socialize or as a means to facilitate business) are more likely to contain employees that are prone to alcohol problems[4]. Attitudes and norms within the work culture can either facilitate or limit drinking behaviors in employees through creating physical and psychological conditions of permissiveness or restriction toward drinking[5]. Reports indicate that the work culture of many law offices is highly permissive of drinking. In some practices it is acceptable and common for attorneys to drink with clients or colleagues during work hours, to drink in celebration of winning a case, or to drink alone or with a colleague to mark the end of a work day[6]. In a sample of 559 attorneys, 66% reported social drinking connected to work[7]. Similarly, Brooke (1997) reported that 77% of attorneys in the study with self-reported alcohol problems reported drinking alcohol during lunch[3].

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THE LEGAL PROFESSIONALS PROGRAM AT HAZELDEN

Primary substance abuse vulnerability factors related to the legal profession:

- Social influences that support drinking in the work environment
- Heavy workloads
- Stressful social interaction with clients
- Co-occurring psychological illness

At Hazelden, legal professionals struggling with chemical dependency find the personalized care, unparalleled expertise, and peer support they need to rebuild their lives and preserve their legal careers. Our groundbreaking Legal Professionals Program was created to help these individuals identify, share, and address the unique and career-specific issues they may face in treatment and recovery. Facilitated full-time by two attorney clinicians with extensive experience as both licensed addiction counselors and practicing attorneys, the program offers a highly valuable addition to the overall residential treatment experience of our legal professional clients. For more information, please visit **hazelden.org/legalprofessionals**.

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Attorneys and Substance Abuse

Stress within the Legal Profession as a Function of Workload and Time Constraints

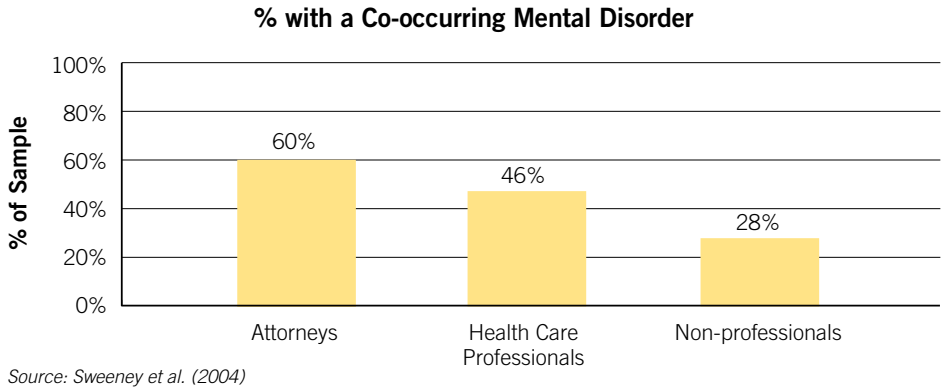
Stress is regarded as one of the most important predictors of substance abuse. The addiction literature and research indicate that attorneys and law students experience significant levels of stress[9]. Some theorists have suggested that the exceedingly high number of work hours, the unpredictability of trials, and the heavy workloads that need to be completed under tight time constraints contribute to stress in attorneys[2]. Attorneys may also experience an extraordinary amount of pressure to win cases. For example, losing a case could be highly publicized and may even result in prison or death for a client[10]. Attorneys working in the public sector experience higher levels of work-related burnout compared to individuals in the general population[11], and work-related burnout is strongly related to drug and alcohol abuse in other professions[12].

Stress within the Legal Profession Due to Exposure to Trauma-Exposed Clients

In addition to having a higher prevalence of job-related burnout, attorneys working in the public sector also experience higher levels of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) compared to individuals in the general population[11]. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a predictor of substance abuse severity[13], and research indicates that family and criminal court attorneys experience greater levels of trauma compared to individuals in other high-stress jobs[14]. The need to understand intimate details of a client's trauma history is sometimes required of criminal attorneys and can lead to the formation of Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)[14]. Symptoms of STS mimic those of PTSD[15] and despite the high prevalence of this disorder in attorneys[14], STS has largely been overlooked by the research community[16]. In a study by Levin et al. (2011), criminal litigation attorneys were compared to a group of legal administrative support staff members on several stress-related measures. Compared to administrative staff members, attorneys were significantly more likely to meet the criteria for STS (10% vs. 34%), PTSD (1% vs. 11%), and depression (19% vs. 40%). Furthermore, attorneys with more frequent, prolonged contact with trauma-exposed clients experienced more stress, burnout, and functional impairment[14]. In summary, workload and frequent exposure to tense social interactions may increase stress and lead to increased drug abuse vulnerability in attorneys.

Co-occurring Psychological Illness and Social Relations in Attorneys

Research indicates that the presence of a co-occurring psychological illness can drastically increase the severity of substance abuse[17]. Compared to individuals from other professions, attorneys with substance abuse are also more likely to have an additional psychological disorder and they are three times as likely to struggle with depression as the general population. The following figure, adapted from Sweeney et al. (2004), shows the percentage of attorneys, health care professionals, and non-professionals with a co-occurring mental disorder that attended a recovery center specializing in the care of impaired professionals[18].



Source: Sweeney et al. (2004)

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The Butler Center for Research informs and improves recovery services and produces research that benefits the field of addiction treatment. We are dedicated to conducting clinical research, collaborating with external researchers, and communicating scientific findings.

Justin J. Anker, Ph.D., Research Scientist

If you have questions, or would like to request copies of Research Update, please call 800-257-7800, ext. 4405, email butlerresearch@hazelden.org, or write BC 4, P.O. Box 11, Center City, MN 55012-0011.

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