



# Improving the Well-Being of Lawyers with ADHD

By Casey Dixon

“Amanda” is a second-year associate at a large law firm and is a typical young lawyer: bright, driven to succeed and dedicated to her work. She is also a typical young lawyer in that she struggles with her well-being. Before we began our work together, this is how Amanda described her professional life: “I find myself having a really hard time working in a steady, consistent, nonpanicked way. I have a difficult time getting started, fall into a spiral of procrastination, anxiety and avoidance. I tend to work in huge bursts at the last minute, after having put off a big assignment for as long as possible, and usually end up feeling frustrated and disappointed in my work product. I can’t stay away from distractions, especially the internet.”

Amanda is a lawyer with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). Amanda is not alone. The landmark American Bar Association (ABA)/Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation study on the state of mental health of U.S. attorneys revealed

mental health problems for lawyers at significantly higher rates than the general population, with 61 percent reporting anxiety, 45 percent reporting depression and 12.5 percent reporting ADHD sometime over the span of their careers. Problematic drinking was also reported by more than 20 percent of respondents. In *ADHD in Adults: What the Science Says*, the book’s authors note that about 80 percent of the time, ADHD co-occurs with anxiety, depression, addiction or other mental health conditions. This means that lawyers who are experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety or problematic drinking might also be experiencing ADHD.

The poor state of lawyer mental health prompted the ABA to launch its National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being and adopt a resolution on well-being as a call to action for the legal profession to address the needs and reduce the stigma associated with mental health concerns. In order to help Amanda and other lawyers like her, it is essential to understand what ADHD really is and what strategies can help restore well-being.

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## An Understanding of ADHD

ADHD is a complex system of neurological executive function impairments that causes problems with the brain's ability to manage itself. ADHD significantly interferes with functioning in many aspects of daily life: work, home, relationships and health.

The executive function impairments of ADHD make it difficult for the adult with ADHD to:

- Resist distractions
- Get organized
- Get started on tasks
- Focus on tasks and shift focus from one task to another
- Regulate sleep and alertness
- Sustain effort
- Process information efficiently and make decisions
- Manage frustration and emotion
- Use working memory and access long-term recall
- Monitor and self-regulate their own actions

## What Does ADHD Have to Do with Being a Lawyer?

The landmark ABA study indicated that 12.5 percent of U.S. attorneys — approximately 167,000 lawyers — self-reported ADHD, more than two and a half times that of the general adult population. But why is the rate of ADHD among U.S. lawyers so high? When I ask this question of my clients, they report that people who have ADHD and also do well in school are highly likely to go into law because they crave the high-stimulation environment,

love to create logical connections or arguments and have a tendency to rely on the sense of urgency that legal work provides to get things done. Sounds perfect, right?

Unfortunately, as many lawyers with ADHD get further along in their careers, the more being a lawyer can exacerbate ADHD symptoms, as the once-effective coping skills of youth become overwhelmed by increased demands. Amanda became aware of her ADHD symptoms for the first time in law school. The demands of her coursework became difficult for her to manage for the first time in her life. Other lawyers might not get a diagnosis until even later in life or they might simply “self-diagnose” when they learn about ADHD and recognize themselves.

Lawyers are especially vulnerable to high-demands and distractions. They are often expected to be available 24/7, respond to emails immediately, hop from task to task with ease and accept every interruption. I recently spoke to a room of 250 lawyers at a CLE event. When I told them about a report from legal practice management software provider Clio that indicated that most lawyers are being distracted six or more times per day, they laughed (or scoffed) because they felt that number to be too low. They reported being distracted “constantly” and “never” having uninterrupted time. All of these demands and interruptions add up to a state of high stress and chronic distraction.

When you consider that Amanda’s brain was having difficulty with critical executive functions, including resisting distractions, you can see how it felt nearly impossible for her to manage her work in a way that

helped her to create and maintain health, well-being and fulfillment. She needed a new strategy — one that included a change in her perspective, getting support and implementing some helpful tactics.

### **A New Strategy for Lawyers with ADHD**

#### **Changing Perspective**

If you are a lawyer with ADHD or ADHD-like traits, it might help to change your perspective.

*Believe that you can be a lawyer and have a healthy, fulfilling life.*

Like many other lawyers, Amanda embraced the prevailing mindset of many attorneys that there is never enough time, everything is urgent (or due yesterday) and being overwhelmed means you’re doing a good job. One of the most powerful steps an attorney with ADHD-like problems can take is to decide that having balance is not only possible, it’s necessary to do your best work. It is essential for the lawyer with ADHD to shift his or her mindset and to embrace the idea that being an attorney does not have to be so difficult that it severely compromises all other areas of life.

*Focus on your strengths and interests.*

Lawyers with ADHD often find themselves feeling stuck on tasks unless the tasks are ones that have especially strong interest for them. Spend most of your time and energy on those tasks that are highly interesting to you and your ADHD symptoms will decrease. Practice handing off less-interesting tasks to paralegals or assistants and spend less of your time on mundane

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chores. Intentionally create automatic habits around timekeeping and logging, document handling, email triage and other not-so-fun aspects of being a lawyer. Remember that you became a lawyer because of your natural strengths and abilities. Identify what you want to be known for at work and focus most of your time and energy on that.

#### **Getting Support**

Enlisting support is a powerful route to improving your well-being. Here are two ways:

*Learn about ADHD.*

Knowing how to define ADHD is a good start, but if you have ADHD, it will help you to keep learning. There are many ways for you to deepen your understanding. Join local and national organizations dedicated to serving those with ADHD and sign up for webinars and conferences. Read or listen to books and podcasts. Working with an ADHD coach will also help to advance your understanding of ADHD.

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#### *Get a diagnosis and treatment for ADHD.*

If you think you might have ADHD, you should start by learning more about ADHD, taking an ADHD screening test (the Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale is a good one) and having a conversation with your doctor about treatment options. Medication is the most effective treatment for ADHD. Studies have shown that ADHD medications substantially improve the functioning of 70-95 percent of ADHD sufferers. “Improve” is the key word for medication. Amanda reported to me that her meds helped her to get things done, but did not “erase” her ADHD symptoms. In addition to medication, working with a certified coach or therapist that specializes in adult ADHD is also an effective way to get support, develop coping strategies and learn how to implement necessary behavior changes. If you can find someone who is also familiar with the legal field, then that is even better. Interventions for lawyers with ADHD are more effective if they are targeted to the profession.

#### **Helpful Tactics**

Here are three helpful tactics you can try to reduce negative ADHD symptoms:

#### *Optimize your brain with self-care.*

Take care of yourself with healthy eating, good sleep, regular aerobic exercise and practicing mindfulness. These habits help to improve executive functions in your brain and reduce stress, helping you to become more focused and productive. For busy lawyers with ADHD, it can be especially hard to prioritize self-care. Like many lawyers, Amanda would sacrifice sleep to work — pulling all-nighters whenever she

had an urgent deadline. Unfortunately, the result of these nights with little or no sleep was typically a poor work product and raging ADHD symptoms over the next several days. Choosing to sacrifice sleep comes at a very high price. Creating intentional daily routines and supports that help you follow through with self-care is essential to optimize your brain’s functioning so that you can get more done.

#### *Reduce your cognitive load.*

When you have ADHD, your brain’s executive function system tires easily. In order to reduce how much you are carrying around in your head, capture your thoughts externally using lists, journals, reminders and plans as much as possible. Many lawyers feel as if they cannot plan their days because of all of the demands of others and the interruptions they must handle. But making a plan, even if you cannot follow most of it, will help to reduce your cognitive load and free up critical brain power.

#### *Avoid distractions.*

Lawyers are especially susceptible to distractions due to the nature of their work. But that doesn’t mean that you need to allow distractions to drive your day. Put yourself back in the driver’s seat by identifying patterns of disruptions and distractions and intentionally setting up blockers. For example, turn off all digital notifications, put your phone on “do not disturb,” close your office door and set browser blockers to limit your time on social media and other distracting websites. Don’t check your email first thing in the morning — wait until you have planned your day.

## Succeeding as a Lawyer with ADHD

With the rate of ADHD at 12.5 percent for lawyers, it is critical for the legal community to gain a better understanding of how ADHD impacts lawyer well-being. With more awareness and reduced stigma surrounding the disorder, a greater number of lawyers will be able to get the help they need in order to thrive in their work and life. Through changing her perspective and getting support with ADHD treatment and coaching, Amanda was able to discover

what tactics were essential and helpful to her and apply them until they became habitual. After implementing these tactics, she told me, “I’ve regained my sense of confidence and competence. I don’t feel like I am pretending to be a ‘bright, young lawyer’ anymore because I can bring my whole self to my work. When I fall out of good habits, I know how to re-establish them. I used to fantasize about working at Starbucks, but now I know I am in the right career.”



Casey Dixon, M.S. Ed., PCC, is a life coach specializing in coaching for lawyers and other professionals with ADHD. She facilitates the Focused Lawyer Coaching Group for lawyers with ADHD. Dixon is certified through the International Coach Federation and through CCE-Global.

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