LAWYERS CONCERNED FOR LAWYERS

Confidential Support for Legal Professionals

Perfecting Without Perfectionism: How to Strive for Excellence Without Stressing Out Over Unattainable Ideals

CLE Materials Packet

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LAWYERS CONCERNED FOR LAWYERS

How LCL Can Help

Areas of Support	Services Offered
❖ Stress	❖ Short-Term Counseling
❖ Anxiety	❖ 24-Hour Hotline
❖ Depression	❖ Peer Support
❖ Alcohol/Substance Use	❖ Group Support
❖ Grief	❖ Coaching
❖ Eating Disorders	❖ CLE Programming
❖ Toxic Workplaces	❖ Intervention Support
❖ **Anything** causing stress or distress	❖ Well-being Resources

LCL Support Groups: Solo/Small Practice Connections Group; ADHD Support Group; Autism Support Group; Discipline and Practice Group; Well-Being Group; Family Support Group; Parenting Group

ALL SUPPORT IS FREE & CONFIDENTIAL

LCL offers Free and Confidential support to all Minnesota lawyers, judges, law students, legal staff and their immediate family members for any issue that causes stress or distress.

2550 University Ave W Suite 313N, St. Paul, MN 55114 • 651-646-5590 • 866-525-6466 • help@mnlcl.org • www.mnlcl.org

Perfectionism Resources

Natasha Frost, *The Problem with Perfectionists*, BBC July 16, 2020.

Rebecca Knight, *How to Manage Your Perfectionism*, (2019)

Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset, The New Psychology of Success* (2006)

NCLAP, *Maladaptive Perfectionism*, (2022)

Perfectionism and Performance: The Double Edged Sword, Family Psychology Associated (2018)

Morey Stetner, *Perfectionism Isn't Making You Perfect—Far From It* (2019)

Quickly accessible options for anyone that's interested in taking a deeper dive into well-being.

From Kristin Neff: Self-Compassion by Kristin Neff: Join the Community Now

An article on the benefits of a Gratitude practice: Gratitude: A Habit Worth Developing and Sustaining

155 Gratitude prompts for those wanting to work on a gratitude practice:
155 Gratitude Journal Prompts to Become More Grateful

A *free* app that improves mindfulness and positive reframing: Wellbeing Tools | Science-Based Mental Health Resources

A good book on the formation of habits and the habit loop: Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones: 9781847941848: Amazon.com: Books

An article on building a pause into your day: Bench & Bar of Minnesota

A short article on the benefits of connection with others: The Health Benefits of Connection | Psychology Today

https://insighttimer.com/

https://www.uclahealth.org/uclamindful/guided-meditations



THE PERFECTIONIST PARADOX

Report on the 2024 Lawyer Perfectionism & Well-Being Survey

By Patrick Krill, Jordana Confino, and Jens Näsström

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Executive Summary

As the legal profession continues its efforts to improve mental health and well-being among lawyers and law students, the search for potential solutions is often hampered by insufficient empirical guidance about the specific factors that may contribute to the mental health challenges faced by these populations. Recognizing the need for additional data in this realm, we designed the present study to explore the relationship between perfectionism and mental health among lawyers practicing in a private setting, an area where very little published research currently exists. We sought to determine whether the link between maladaptive perfectionism and negative mental health and performance-based outcomes observed in other populations applies similarly to lawyers.

Our findings suggest that lawyers are negatively impacted by the effects of perfectionism, including stress, depression, workaholism, resistance to feedback, and reduced engagement, motivation, and longevity. Indeed, it appears that the tendencies that many lawyers believe are critical for success may be doing more harm than good when it comes to both mental health and professional performance.

Because maladaptive perfectionism is a changeable cognitive-behavioral pattern rather than a fixed trait, it presents an effective and promising target for intervention. However, it is neither fair nor realistic to expect lawyers to undertake such efforts while operating in an environment that seemingly glorifies and mandates perfectionism. Accordingly, we recommend that law firms consider a twofold approach that includes both top-down reform of team dynamics in a way that supports sustainable high-performance and bottom-up support for lawyers who are struggling with or susceptible to perfectionistic tendencies.

This research project was conducted by Krill Strategies, JC Coaching & Consulting, and Ambitionprofile in partnership with NALP. The authors would like to extend their deep gratitude to the NALP team for their collaboration, the Institute for Well-Being in Law (IWIL) team for their support of the project, and all other organizations and individuals who participated.

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Introduction

As the legal profession continues its efforts to improve mental health and well-being among lawyers and law students, the search for potential solutions is often hampered by insufficient empirical guidance about the specific factors that may contribute to the mental health challenges faced by these populations. This is especially true in the context of personal risk factors such as attitudes, beliefs, personality traits, and behaviors.

Recognizing the need for additional data in this realm, we sought to explore the relationship between perfectionism and mental health among lawyers practicing in a private setting, an area where very little published research currently exists. Since our study was intended to be a pilot project aimed at forming an initial impression of whether there was any "there, there," we decided to limit the survey to lawyers working in similar work environments (i.e., private settings such as law firms) in order to streamline the data analysis and establish whether we would uncover any results warranting deeper exploration among a wider cross-section of the legal profession. Our results suggest that there is indeed a relationship between perfectionistic tendencies and mental health status, and we therefore hope and expect that subsequent studies will delve into this topic more deeply with a larger and more professionally diverse sample.

Why We Chose to Focus on Perfectionism

The legal profession is one where precision, detail, and accuracy are not just appreciated but expected. The stakes are often high, involving significant financial implications, corporate and personal reputations, and even personal liberties and freedoms. As a result, the pressure to get everything right is immense and avoiding mistakes is of fundamental importance. It's no surprise then that perfectionism is a valued and seemingly valuable disposition in lawyers. Indeed, many lawyers wear their perfectionism as a badge of honor, citing it as an essential source of their success. But for some lawyers who find themselves chronically consumed with worry and stress about their performance and results, perfectionistic tendencies can become maladaptive in nature, leading to a host of unwanted outcomes and otherwise avoidable distress.

Understanding the various features of the legal profession that make lawyers perhaps particularly susceptible to perfectionism can provide insight into how we might better mitigate the stress that perfectionistic tendencies create:

Complexity and Volume of Work

Lawyers deal with complex legal issues that require a deep understanding of various statutes, regulations, case laws, and legal precedents. The sheer volume of information they need to process, analyze, and apply to specific cases often demands meticulous attention to detail. Missing a critical piece of information or misinterpreting a legal statute can lead to disastrous outcomes, reinforcing the perceived need for perfectionism.

Client Expectations

Clients expect their lawyers to provide the highest level of service and expertise. They rely on lawyers to navigate complex legal landscapes and deliver positive outcomes. This expectation creates additional pressure on lawyers to perform flawlessly. They often feel that their reputation and future business depend on their ability to meet these high standards.

Professional Standards and Ethics

The legal profession is governed by strict ethical standards and professional codes of conduct. Lawyers are expected to uphold these standards, which include diligence, competence, and the avoidance of conflicts of interest. Any deviation from these standards can result in disciplinary action, damage to one's professional reputation, and even disbarment. This strict regulatory environment also fosters a culture of perfectionism among lawyers.

Personal Traits and Education

Many individuals who pursue a career in law already possess perfectionistic tendencies. The competitive nature of law school and the rigorous training involved in becoming a lawyer attract individuals who are detail-oriented, hardworking, and determined to excel. These traits, which are often equated with perfectionism, are further reinforced during these individuals' education and early careers, where the focus on precision and accuracy is often paramount.

Peer Pressure and Competition

The legal profession is highly competitive. Lawyers often compete for prestigious positions, high-profile cases, and client retention. This competitive environment can exacerbate perfectionistic tendencies, as lawyers strive to outperform their peers and achieve recognition and success within the profession.

Technological Advancements

Advancements in legal technology have also contributed to the pressure for perfection. E-discovery tools, legal research databases, and practice management software have increased the efficiency and accuracy of legal work. However, they have also raised the bar for what is considered acceptable performance. Lawyers are expected to leverage these tools to achieve near-perfect results, adding to the existing stress they may feel to produce flawless work product.

Mental Health Implications

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to assess the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and negative mental health and performance-based outcomes in a lawyer-specific population. However, outside of law there is a substantial body of research on the relationship between perfectionism and mental health problems. Studies consistently show that perfectionism is linked to a range of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and burnout – all of which are known to be highly prevalent in the legal profession.

Increased Risk of Anxiety and Depression

Research indicates that perfectionism is strongly associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression. Perfectionists often set excessively high standards for themselves and experience significant distress when they fail to meet those standards. This chronic self-criticism and fear of failure can lead to persistent feelings of anxiety and depression.

Burnout and Exhaustion

Perfectionism is also linked to burnout, particularly in high-pressure professions like law, medicine, and academia. The relentless pursuit of perfection in these industries can lead to chronic stress and emotional exhaustion, making individuals more susceptible to burnout. This is especially true for individuals who feel they must meet unrealistic expectations imposed by both themselves and others.

Negative Self-Evaluation

Perfectionists tend to engage in negative self-evaluation, constantly comparing themselves to others and finding themselves lacking. This negative self-talk can erode self-esteem and

contribute to feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth. Over time, this can exacerbate mental health problems.

Impact on Physical Health

The mind-body connection is quite real, and the stress associated with perfectionism can also have physical health consequences. Chronic stress can lead to a range of physical health issues, including cardiovascular problems, weakened immune function, gastrointestinal issues, migraines, and metabolic dysregulation.

Performance Implications

In addition to being linked with negative mental health outcomes, perfectionism has also been shown to be correlated with a variety of tendencies that may impede professional performance.

Fixed Mindset & Reduced Self-Efficacy

Perfectionism has been found to be strongly associated with fixed mindset (the belief that one's intelligence, skills, and abilities are static and cannot be significantly increased). This leads many perfectionists to be more concerned with self-presentation (i.e., how they appear to others) than they are with learning and expanding their skills – because they do not truly believe that improvement is possible. As a result, perfectionists are often inclined to avoid challenges and feedback, viewing them as threats to their reputation and feelings of self-worth, rather than as opportunities to gain valuable insights and further develop their capabilities. They are also more likely to avoid acknowledging their mistakes, which may result in missed learning opportunities and even ethical violations.

Procrastination

Perfectionism has also been shown to be linked with procrastination or "perfectionist paralysis." Perfectionists' intense fear of failure (which, in their mind, involves not doing something flawlessly on the very first try) often causes them to delay or avoid starting tasks, resulting in inefficiency and missed deadlines.

Difficulty Delegating

Studies suggest a strong connection between perfectionism and difficulty delegating, as

perfectionists often struggle to trust others' abilities to meet their high standards. This can lead perfectionists to feel that they must maintain control over every aspect of a project, resulting in micromanagement, increased workload and stress for the perfectionist, and lower engagement and morale for team members who are deprived of meaningful opportunities to learn and contribute.

Lower Levels of Grit

Studies indicate that maladaptive perfectionism is also negatively associated with grit (i.e., perseverance in the face of setbacks and challenges and passion for pursuing long-term goals). Driven by their intense fear of failure, perfectionists are more likely to give up in the face of obstacles and setbacks rather than risking the possibility of stumbling and jeopardizing their reputation or feelings of self-worth. This results in stunted professional development and prevents perfectionists from maximizing their contributions and reaching their highest professional potential.

The Good News: Maladaptive Perfectionistic Tendencies Can Be Mitigated While Retaining Drive and Commitment to Excellence

Unlike more stable personality traits with greater genetic footing, maladaptive perfectionism is a changeable disposition of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Decades of research support the efficacy of strategies from cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), an evidence-based psychological approach that helps individuals identify and reframe unhelpful thinking patterns, in addressing perfectionism—while coaching has also shown promising anecdotal results. Studies consistently demonstrate that targeted interventions can help individuals modify perfectionistic thinking, develop self-compassion, and establish healthier standards. Moreover, the research indicates that engaging in such training will not, as many lawyers fear, make them “lose their edge.” To the contrary, training in self-compassion and resilience is linked with higher levels of motivation, engagement, and longevity. This malleability makes perfectionism an ideal target for interventions to improve lawyer well-being and performance.

Methods

This study employed a cross-sectional survey to investigate the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and workplace outcomes among legal professionals.

The survey was promoted via the NALP listserv and circulated to the members of various other groups focused on professional development and well-being in the legal profession.

The assessment battery included four validated psychometric instruments:

Ambitionprofile: A psychometric tool measuring maladaptive perfectionism in professional settings. Sample items include:

- When I make a mistake, I feel like a failure.
- If I fail at something, it means I am a failure as a person.

K6 (Kessler Psychological Distress Scale): A 6-item screening tool for psychological distress

PHQ-2 (Patient Health Questionnaire-2): A 2-item instrument for depression screening

AUDIT-C (Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test-Consumption): A 3-item screening tool assessing alcohol consumption patterns and risky drinking behaviors

To explore additional constructs while maintaining brevity, we developed custom items addressing self-leadership, performance, and collaboration variables. These supplementary measures, though not independently validated, were designed to assess specific workplace behaviors and attitudes hypothesized to correlate with maladaptive perfectionism, such as boldness, ambition, workaholism, feedback, work-life balance, and prioritization skills. To maintain a reasonable survey length while examining a comprehensive range of factors, we employed single-item measures for supplementary constructs. While this approach introduces methodological limitations that warrant treating these specific findings as preliminary and indicative rather than definitive, the data consistently align with established research in the field.

The following results paint a detailed picture of how perfectionism relates to various aspects of lawyer well-being and performance, offering insights into potential intervention strategies.

Results

764 lawyers participated in the survey (56.2% women, 42.3% men, 1.5% gender identity not specified). Due to the limited number of responses from participants identifying as non-white, analyses by race were not statistically viable.

The data revealed that younger lawyers and those with shorter tenure report higher levels of maladaptive perfectionism, stress, and depression, aligning with the link between perfectionism and turnover. Women in the sample also exhibited higher perfectionism, stress, and depression than men. These findings suggest that younger lawyers and women may be particularly affected by the negative impacts of perfectionism, highlighting a need for further research on how seniority and firm culture influence these patterns.[1]

Variable	Perfectionism		Depressive Symptoms		Stress Levels	
	r	p	r	p	r	p
Age	-.30	.000	-.26	.000	-.35	.000
Years with current organization	-.21	.000	-.17	.000	-.30	.000
Gender	.29	.000	.15	.002	.20	.000
Intention to quit	.35	.000	.49	.000	.44	.000

To clearly present the correlation between perfectionism and various factors, participants were divided into three groups based on their maladaptive perfectionism scores: the lowest 15% (those with minimal perfectionistic tendencies), the middle 70% (representing the average range), and the highest 15% (those with elevated perfectionistic tendencies). This 15-70-15 distribution, which closely follows the normal distribution ("bell curve"), allowed for comparison of outcomes across the spectrum of perfectionism, from low to high.

[1] "r" refers to the correlation coefficient, which indicates the strength of the relationship between two variables. Higher values indicate stronger relationships. "p" refers to statistical significance; a p-value less than .05 suggests the result is unlikely to have occurred by chance.

Mental Health

Research shows a strong correlation between perfectionism and mental health challenges, including stress and burnout. The data from the present study reinforced these findings.

Stress

Key Insight: Lawyers with high levels of maladaptive perfectionism experience significantly greater stress. In this study, the "high-perfectionism" lawyers had an average stress score of 3.01, while lawyers with low perfectionism scored only 1.51. The correlation was strong and statistically reliant ($r = .45$, $p < .000$).

Why It Matters: Chronic stress causes burnout, disengagement, and productivity losses. Targeted interventions for high-risk individuals (especially maladaptive perfectionists) yield better outcomes than diluted organization-wide approaches, maximizing impact with limited resources.

Depression

Key Insight: High-perfectionism lawyers are more likely to experience depressive symptoms. The study found that those with high maladaptive perfectionism had a PHQ-2 depression score of 1.04, compared to 0.26 in the low-perfectionism group. The correlation was very strong and statistically reliable ($r = .56$, $p < .000$).

Why It Matters: Depression significantly undermines motivation, engagement, and well-being. When rooted in modifiable thought patterns like maladaptive perfectionism, targeted interventions can effectively prevent its development and reduce its impact.

Working Style

Lawyers with high levels of maladaptive perfectionism tend to exhibit distinct work habits that can impact both their well-being and productivity. These professionals often struggle with workaholism, work-life balance, and workload management. While their relentless self-imposed standards can lead to impressive results, they may also contribute to inefficiencies, overwork, and burnout.

Workaholism

Key Insight: Perfectionistic lawyers exhibit a higher tendency toward workaholism. The high-perfectionism group had a workaholism score of 3.59, compared to 2.44 in the low-perfectionism group.

Why It Matters: Workaholism can significantly contribute to burnout, which arises from the interplay between workplace demands and individual response patterns. Addressing overcommitment and maladaptive perfectionism can help organizations prevent burnout before it takes hold. Notably, workaholism is not merely about "working hard," but also about a diminished ability to disengage, rest, and recover, making it a critical risk factor for long-term exhaustion and reduced performance.

Work-Life Balance

Key Insight: Lawyers with high perfectionistic tendencies struggle significantly more with work-life balance. The high-perfectionism group scored 2.36, compared to 3.33 in the low-perfectionism group.

Why It Matters: The “always on” mindset erodes work-life balance, restricting the essential rest and recovery needed to prevent burnout. As technology continues to blur the boundaries between work and personal life, strengthening self-leadership is crucial — especially in law firms, where these challenges are particularly acute.

Managing Workload

Key Insight: Highly perfectionistic lawyers report more difficulty managing their workload. The high-perfectionism group scored 3.58 on workload management difficulties, compared to 2.52 for low-perfectionists.

Why It Matters: Poor workload management amplifies stress, reduces efficiency, and heightens the risk of burnout. The fact that there is a correlation between psychological disposition and workload implies that perfectionism shapes how lawyers perceive, approach, and handle their workload.

Prioritization

Key Insight: Perfectionist lawyers find it harder to prioritize tasks. The high-perfectionism group scored 3.14, while the low-perfectionism group scored 1.88.

Why It Matters: Difficulty prioritizing tasks can lead to inefficiency, excessive workload, and heightened stress. Without clear prioritization, perfectionist lawyers may focus on less critical details at the expense of high-impact work.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a key aspect of legal practice, yet maladaptive perfectionists often face challenges working effectively with others. Their heightened sensitivity to feedback and hesitancy in providing direct input may hinder their ability to engage in effective teamwork and mentorship. Fostering a culture that encourages constructive dialogue and psychological safety can improve professional relationships and performance.

Receiving Feedback

Key Insight: Lawyers with high perfectionism experience more anxiety around feedback. Their feedback sensitivity score was 4.08, compared to 1.93 for low-perfectionists.

Why It Matters: Fear of feedback inhibits development and weakens collaboration. While firm culture plays a role, individual dispositions also shape how feedback is received. Fostering psychological safety and helping lawyers reframe feedback as a growth tool can improve both personal and organizational effectiveness.

Giving Feedback

Key Insight: Perfectionist lawyers struggle with giving direct feedback. Their score on avoiding honest feedback was 3.04, compared to 2.31 in the low-perfectionism group.

Why It Matters: Reluctance to deliver honest feedback weakens teamwork and efficiency. While culture plays a role, individual disposition also shapes communication. Building confidence in delivering direct, constructive feedback enhances collaboration.

Motivation and Engagement

A common misconception pits insecure overachieving (driven by maladaptive perfectionism) against secure underachieving or complacency. This false dichotomy overlooks a viable third option: sustainable high-performance. This approach balances professional excellence with psychological flexibility and resilience, enabling lawyers to maintain high standards without sacrificing well-being, efficiency, or other favorable outcomes. Sustainable high-performers establish effective boundaries, prioritize strategically, and employ rational self-assessment — recognizing that occasional imperfection is part of professional growth rather than evidence of inadequacy.

Aspiration and Personal Agency

Key Insight: Lawyers with low perfectionism express significantly stronger aspirations to "do amazing things with my life" (scoring 4.23) compared to their highly perfectionistic colleagues (3.75). This counterintuitive finding suggests that excessive perfectionism may actually constrain rather than enhance aspirational thinking.

Why It Matters: This pattern reveals how maladaptive perfectionism can paradoxically limit lawyers' sense of possibility while increasing their day-to-day stress. By focusing intensely on avoiding immediate mistakes, perfectionists often lose connection with broader, more meaningful career aspirations.

Ambition

Key Insight: Lawyers across perfectionism levels maintain high ambition, though the relationship is nuanced. While highly perfectionistic lawyers report high ambition (scoring 4.09 on "I am ambitious"), those with low perfectionism scored even higher (4.34). In other words, perfectionists are not necessarily the most ambitious.

Why It Matters: Ambition doesn't require perfectionism — in fact, our data show lawyers with low perfectionism scored higher on ambition measures (4.34) than their highly perfectionistic colleagues (4.09). This suggests that professionals can maintain strong drive while avoiding the psychological costs associated with maladaptive perfectionism.

Boldness

Key Insight: Highly perfectionistic lawyers exhibit significantly lower boldness scores. The high-perfectionism group scored 3.49 on "I am always up for a challenge," while the low-perfectionism group scored 4.04.

Why It Matters: Lower boldness among perfectionists reflects their fear of making mistakes, potentially leading to excessive caution and missed opportunities. Law firms can address this by fostering psychological safety and creating a culture that reframes setbacks as valuable learning experiences rather than personal failures.

Desire *to Win at Any Cost*

Key Insight: Perfectionists demonstrate a stronger competitive drive, with high-perfectionism lawyers scoring 2.80 on "I want to win at any cost" compared to 2.22 in the low-perfectionism group. This win-at-all-costs mentality contributes to both their success and their stress.

Why It Matters: While healthy competition drives excellence, excessive focus on winning — which we found to be significantly higher among perfectionistic lawyers — can lead to ethical compromises and burnout. This demonstrates how maladaptive perfectionism transforms ambition into self-defeating behavior. Encouraging competition balanced with growth mindset and a commitment to ethical conduct and collaboration yields better outcomes.

Disengagement

Key Insight: Perfectionist lawyers show higher disengagement from work. Their disengagement score was 2.89, compared to 1.77 in the low-perfectionism group.

Why It Matters: Disengagement not only reduces productivity and job satisfaction but also contributes to higher turnover, which can be costly for law firms. Staff departures lead to lost productivity, increased hiring and onboarding expenses, decreased client satisfaction, and the erosion of institutional knowledge.

Career Trajectory Pattern

Career progression in the legal profession is often seen as a linear path shaped by ambition, expertise, and dedication. However, this study suggests that underlying psychological factors

may also play a role.

Intention to Quit

Key Insight: Highly perfectionistic lawyers are more likely to consider leaving their jobs. Their intention-to-quit score was 3.78, compared to 2.31 in the low-perfectionism group.

Why It Matters: A higher intention to quit may signal deeper job dissatisfaction and disengagement, both of which can drive turnover. Losing experienced lawyers disrupts productivity, increases hiring costs, and affects client relationships.

Years with the Organization

Key Insight: Perfectionist lawyers tend to have shorter tenures at their firms. Those with high perfectionism had an average tenure of 5.3 years, compared to 8.4 years for low-perfectionists. The data indicate that women in our sample reported higher levels of maladaptive perfectionism, stress, and intention to quit compared to men. While we cannot draw definitive conclusions about causality, this pattern suggests that perfectionism may be a contributing factor to elevated turnover risk among women lawyers.

Why It Matters: While perfectionism tends to mellow with age, the correlation with higher turnover persists. Shorter tenures can disrupt workflows and increase hiring costs. The fact that women lawyers display higher levels of both perfectionism and intention to quit than men suggests that concerns relating to diversity may also be implicated. Firms can improve retention by fostering greater self-leadership among lawyers and equipping firm leaders to support them. When combined, this creates a co-leadership dynamic where both leaders and team members take shared responsibility for promoting sustainable work practices that help maladaptive perfectionists thrive.

Substance Misuse

Substance misuse is a well-documented concern in the legal profession. This study examined the correlation between maladaptive perfectionism and alcohol consumption, as well as other substances used to manage stress.

Alcohol Use–AUDIT C

Our findings reveal concerning patterns of alcohol use among lawyers, with more than half reporting drinking at risky levels (53.7% of women scoring ≥3 and 51% of men scoring ≥4 on the AUDIT-C). These findings, including that women are drinking slightly more riskily than men, are consistent with other recent research on alcohol use in the legal profession, providing validation for our sample's representativeness. Notably, 30-40% of respondents demonstrated hazardous or disordered drinking patterns, highlighting a significant health concern that continues to warrant remedial action in this population.

AUDIT-C risky level drinking by Position and Gender

Position	Men ≥ 4	Women ≥ 3
Junior associate	51.0%	53.7%
Senior associate	55.2%	56.9%
Partner	47.3%	52.0%

Interestingly, while maladaptive perfectionism strongly correlates with stress and depression in our sample, it shows a weak or inconsistent relationship with alcohol use — an unexpected divergence from patterns seen with other mental health indicators.

One possible explanation for this divergence is that the maladaptive perfectionists in our sample, despite experiencing higher stress levels, may tend to avoid or underreport substance use due to their strong need for control — a hallmark characteristic of perfectionism.

Discussion

Given the pervasiveness of mental health challenges among lawyers and the culture of perfectionism that seemingly permeates the profession, this study was designed to determine whether the link between maladaptive perfectionism and negative mental health outcomes observed in other populations applies similarly to lawyers. Our findings suggest that lawyers are indeed negatively impacted by the effects of perfectionism, and that the tendencies that many lawyers believe are critical for success may be doing more harm than good when it comes to both mental health and professional performance.

Mental Health Challenges, Workaholism, and Burnout

Stress and Depression

Our first notable finding was that, consistent with research in other populations, there is a clear relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and mental health challenges among lawyers. Sixty-two percent of high-perfectionism lawyers reported high stress levels, compared to only 4.9% of lawyers in the low-perfectionism group. The average stress score also increased steadily from 1.51 among low-perfectionism lawyers to 3.01 among high-perfectionism lawyers, demonstrating that as perfectionistic tendencies increase, so too does psychological distress.

We observed a similarly prominent pattern with depression indicators. Among high-perfectionism lawyers, 50.6% showed elevated depression scores (PHQ-2 ≥ 3), compared to just 7.1% in the low-perfectionism group. This nearly sevenfold increase suggests that maladaptive perfectionism may be a significant risk factor for depressive symptoms as well as stress among lawyers with high perfectionism.

Notably, the relationship between perfectionism and depression appeared to be most prominent among more junior lawyers, with 53.6% of highly perfectionistic junior associates reporting elevated depression scores compared to 38.5% percent of highly perfectionistic partners. It may be that factors such as greater autonomy, control, experience, and financial security mitigate the harmful effects of perfectionism among partners. However, as discussed below, we observed a negative correlation between perfectionism and longevity, suggesting that high-perfectionism lawyers may be less likely to remain at their firms long enough to enjoy any such mitigating factors.

Workaholism and Work-Life Balance

The data also revealed a positive relationship between perfectionism and workaholism, with average workaholism scores increasing from 2.63 among low-perfectionism lawyers to 3.87 among lawyers in the high-perfectionism group. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we observed a corresponding negative relationship between perfectionism and work-life balance: Average work-life balance scores decreased from 3.33 among low-perfectionism lawyers to 2.36 among lawyers in the high-perfectionism group. This suggests that highly perfectionistic lawyers – likely driven by their workaholism – experience greater struggle maintaining healthy boundaries between their work and personal life.

Given the link between workaholism and burnout documented in other populations, it is likely that perfectionism is a key driver of lawyer burnout, as well. Indeed, this conclusion is supported

by our finding, discussed further below, that high-perfectionism lawyers reported considerably shorter professional tenure and stronger intentions to quit compared to low-perfectionism lawyers. This suggests that perfectionistic lawyers' tendency to burn the candle at both ends is not sustainable and may ultimately backfire by causing these lawyers to flame out earlier than their low-perfectionism counterparts.

The strength of the relationship between perfectionism and negative mental health outcomes suggests that targeting perfectionism would be a worthwhile component of law firms' mental health and well-being offerings. As discussed further below, we believe that a twofold approach that includes both top-down cultural reform and bottom-up support for lawyers who are struggling with or susceptible to perfectionistic tendencies will be necessary to meaningfully address this issue.

The strength of the relationship between perfectionism and negative mental health outcomes suggests that targeting perfectionism would be a worthwhile component of law firms' mental health and well-being offerings.

Impediments to Professional Performance and Longevity

In addition to demonstrating a strong relationship between perfectionism and negative mental health outcomes, our study indicated that perfectionism is also linked with working styles that impede lawyers' professional performance and longevity. This comports with prior research demonstrating similar effects among workers in other industries, suggesting that when it comes to professional performance, perfectionism may be more of a double-edged sword than the "secret sauce" that many lawyers believe it to be.

Time and Project Management Challenges

Contrary to the "more is better" mentality that seemingly pervades the legal profession, our data indicate that the workaholism displayed by high-perfectionism lawyers is not necessarily correlated with higher levels of productivity or performance. To the contrary, high-perfectionism lawyers reported significantly more difficulty managing their workload (average score of 3.58) compared to those with low perfectionism (2.52). High-perfectionism lawyers also reported greater difficulty prioritizing objectives (average score of 3.14) compared to lawyers in the low-perfectionism group (1.88).

These findings are consistent with prior studies demonstrating a positive correlation between perfectionism and procrastination in other populations, whereby highly perfectionistic individuals – driven by their fear of failure – avoid starting tasks altogether. The data also comport with studies demonstrating a strong link between perfectionism and overcommitment, whereby perfectionists – terrified of disappointing others or failing to meet expectations – assume more responsibilities than they can handle.

In addition to contributing to exhaustion and burnout, perfectionists' tendency to overcommit also impedes their ability to prioritize: By refusing to accept the finite nature of their time and energy, perfectionists do not actually expand their capacity to get more done or avoid making tradeoffs. Instead, they prevent themselves from navigating any necessary tradeoffs intentionally by allocating their mental and physical resources to the most important projects, as opposed to stubbornly plowing forward in the hopes that they will somehow get it all done.

Lower Drive and Engagement

We also found that high levels of perfectionism was linked with slightly lower ambition scores among lawyers (average score of 4.09 among high-perfectionists compared to 4.34 among low-perfectionists), as well as significantly greater professional disengagement (2.89 among high-perfectionists compared to 1.77 among low-perfectionists). These findings suggest that – contrary to what many lawyers believe – perfectionism is not necessarily synonymous with drive and determination. Rather, it is likely that perfectionists' increased susceptibility to workaholism and burnout may end up reducing their engagement over time.

On the other hand, high-perfectionism lawyers demonstrated a stronger desire to "win at any cost" (average score 2.80) compared to low-perfectionism lawyers (2.22). While perhaps seemingly paradoxical, this finding may be reconciled with the lower ambition and engagement scores to the extent that perfectionists' fervid desire to win reflects an extrinsically-driven yearning to appear capable as opposed to an intrinsic goal of producing the highest quality work. This presents possible ethical implications to the extent it suggests that high-perfectionism lawyers may be more inclined to abrogate the rules of professional responsibility to preserve appearances and secure a win for their client.

Reduced Openness to Feedback and Learning Opportunities

The data suggest that perfectionism may further impede lawyers' professional development and performance by hampering their ability to embrace learning opportunities and challenges.

Lawyers in the high-perfectionism group reported substantially greater fear of receiving negative feedback (average score 4.08) compared to those in the low-perfectionism group (1.93). High-perfectionism lawyers also reported lower levels of boldness (average score 3.49) than low-perfectionism lawyers (4.04), suggesting that perfectionism may inhibit lawyers' willingness to take on challenges.

These findings are consistent with numerous studies demonstrating that perfectionists tend to exhibit a fixed mindset (i.e., the belief that their intelligence, skills, and abilities are static and cannot be significantly increased) and, in turn, an aversion to undertaking challenges and receiving constructive feedback: Dubious of their ability to learn and improve, perfectionists are more likely to view such challenges and feedback as threats to their reputation and feelings of self-worth, rather than as valuable opportunities to gain valuable insights and further develop their skills.

Notably, we found that high-perfectionism lawyers are also more likely to "sugar-coat" feedback to others (average score 3.73) than low-perfectionism lawyers (2.15). This suggests that, in addition to compromising their own professional development, lawyers' perfectionistic tendencies may impede their leadership skills and ability to support others in their professional growth.

When it comes to professional performance, perfectionism may be more of a double-edged sword than the "secret sauce" that many lawyers believe it to be.

Reduced Professional Longevity

Finally, the data indicate that, in addition to compromising lawyers' mental health and professional performance, perfectionism may increase lawyers' haste and desire to leave their roles. We observed a strong inverse relationship between perfectionism and organizational tenure: Lawyers with low perfectionism reported an average of 12.35 years with their current organization, while those with high perfectionism averaged just 5.06 years. High-perfectionism lawyers also reported stronger intentions to quit, indicating a link between maladaptive perfectionism and turnover.

The causal mechanisms at play here remain unclear. Perfectionistic lawyers may leave their firms because they are experiencing heightened stress and burnout, or they may leave because their firms do not meet their elevated expectations. Or both. Further research is needed to clarify the causal relations between these factors.

Due to the small number of non-white respondents, we could not analyze racial patterns in perfectionism or turnover. Future research should explore whether underrepresented racial groups are more affected. Given the higher perfectionism and turnover intention among women in our sample, further study is also needed to clarify whether perfectionism plays a causal role in women's attrition.

Recommendations

The findings of the present study indicate that interventions aimed at mitigating the effects of maladaptive perfectionism would be worthwhile pursuits for law firms hoping to enhance both the well-being and professional success of their lawyers.

The strength of the relationship we observed between perfectionism and stress, depression, and workaholism suggests that targeting this risk factor would appear to be a worthy consideration for legal employers seeking to improve mental health. However, the data further indicate that maladaptive perfectionism is not just a personal struggle, but may also have far-reaching professional costs for both individual lawyers and their law firm employers. Specifically, our findings indicate that perfectionism may impede lawyers' professional performance by hampering their ability to prioritize and effectively manage their heavy workloads, as well as give and receive constructive feedback. We also found that perfectionism is correlated with lower levels of work engagement and boldness, which may result in lawyers' reduced willingness to undertake challenges and stretch themselves in the ways necessary to learn and grow. Perhaps even more concerning, it is conceivable that maladaptive perfectionism could lead to ethical lapses to the extent that the trait is linked with lawyers' desire to "win at all costs" in order to preserve their veneer of perfection. Finally, it appears that perfectionism may pose concerns for retention insofar as high-perfectionism lawyers – likely suffering from the weight of some or all of the aforementioned effects – exhibit shorter professional longevity and greater intentions to quit than their low-perfectionism counterparts. These findings suggest that measures targeting perfectionism are relevant not only to a law firm's mental health initiatives, but possibly to their professional development and retention efforts as well.

The data indicate that maladaptive perfectionism is not just a personal struggle, but may also have far-reaching professional costs for both individual lawyers and their law firm employers.

We recognize that this suggestion is likely to be met with resistance by stakeholders who believe that maintaining a culture of perfectionism is essential to maximize the firm's bottom line. As discussed above, there is a compelling argument that perfectionism is at best an asset and at worst a necessary evil if lawyers are to be able to generate the volume and quality of work product that their clients expect. There are likely many lawyers that feel the personal toll that their perfectionism is taking but nonetheless deem it necessary to perform at an elite level.

Here, an examination of the precise tendencies and characteristics of perfectionism is illuminating. Importantly, lawyers who are high in maladaptive perfectionism do not necessarily hold higher standards for themselves or experience fewer mistakes or failures than their low-perfectionism counterparts. Instead, they possess a much greater fear of making mistakes or deviating from their extremely high standards, viewing any such missteps as a personal failing and signifier of inadequacy. Ironically, as our data show, rather than propelling lawyers forward, this fear often ends up reducing drive and engagement and may thus prevent lawyers from taking the steps necessary to maximize their potential.

The good news is that the hallmarks of maladaptive perfectionism are distinct from the positive qualities that make for exceptional lawyering, such as drive, commitment to excellence, and meticulous attention to detail. This suggests that lawyers may take steps to curtail the perfectionistic tendencies that are harming them without "losing their edge."

Moreover, research shows that the cognitive and behavioral dispositions that characterize maladaptive perfectionism are changeable, unlike more stable personality traits with greater genetic footing. Indeed, decades of research support the efficacy of strategies from cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) in addressing perfectionism. These strategies, which include techniques for reducing self-criticism and unrealistic expectations, cultivating self-compassion and growth mindset, and harnessing values as opposed to fear-based motivation can be effectively taught through coaching and appropriately-designed trainings, and thus lend themselves to application in a law firm setting.

Studies conducted with other populations indicate that such interventions may produce tangible personal and professional benefits including increased job satisfaction and longevity, greater confidence and willingness to take constructive risks, improved communication and ability to effectively manage others, and greater overall fulfillment. The findings of the present study provide support for the conclusion that individual-based interventions targeting perfectionism may confer similar benefits on lawyers, as well.

That said, it is neither fair nor realistic to expect lawyers to undertake such efforts while operating in an environment that seemingly glorifies and mandates perfectionism. This is especially true for those lawyers with the most deeply-ingrained perfectionistic tendencies who stand to gain the most from such interventions. Accordingly, it is important that law firms also explore more systemic changes that can be made to shift the organizational culture toward one that reduces rather than reinforces perfectionism. This can be achieved in several ways, including through the development and delivery of leadership training programs that educate more senior lawyers about the perils of perfectionism and strategies they can deploy to mitigate these negative effects while preserving their teams' commitment to producing the highest quality work product. Such strategies might include supporting team members in setting realistic goals, fostering an environment of psychological safety in which team members feel comfortable trying new things and sharing ideas without fear of judgment, encouraging team members to "fail forward" by viewing their inevitable occasional mistakes as learning opportunities, and modeling growth mindset and self-compassion by sharing about their own missteps and imperfections. Members of the firm's recruiting team might also be trained on how to discern positive qualities like growth mindset and intrinsically-based motivation from maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies, and encouraged to treat the former – but not the latter – as points weighing in the applicant's favor.

It is neither fair nor realistic to expect lawyers to undertake such efforts while operating in an environment that seemingly glorifies and mandates perfectionism.

Given the deeply entrenched nature of perfectionism in the legal profession, it is inevitable that any efforts to shift law firm cultures in ways that meaningfully mitigate this issue will be gradual and protracted. But it is our hope that by shining a light on the personal and professional costs of perfectionism, this study will serve as a key first step toward positive change.

Limitations, Future Directions, and the Case for Ongoing Research

This exploratory study provides valuable insights into the effects of maladaptive perfectionism among lawyers, but several limitations warrant consideration. While we used validated psychometric scales for core measurements, some exploratory single-item measures (i.e., prioritization, ambition, etc.) should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive. Nevertheless, these results align with established research on perfectionism, suggesting reasonable validity.

The response rate represents a more significant limitation. Despite reaching a large pool of potential participants, only a fraction completed the survey, raising questions about representativeness. While broadly reflective of the profession in some respects, the racial and ethnic makeup of our sample skews more heavily white than the U.S. legal population overall. In particular, Black and Hispanic lawyers were underrepresented, limiting our ability to analyze subgroup patterns by race.

We propose several avenues for future research to validate and complement the present study:

- *Establishing causality:* Our study identifies strong correlations between perfectionism and various outcomes but cannot definitively establish causal relationships. Future research should employ experimental designs and advanced statistical methods to determine whether perfectionism directly causes stress and burnout, or if other intervening variables play crucial roles in these relationships.

- *Intervention validation:* Developing and rigorously validating scalable interventions tailored to lawyers' unique challenges would be valuable, offering a practical pathway to measurably improve mental health outcomes across law firms while respecting the profession's demanding nature.

- *Prevalence of perfectionism:* While observation suggests that perfectionism is pervasive in the legal profession, future research is necessary to empirically measure the prevalence of this disposition among lawyers.

- *Organizational factors:* Investigating how firm culture, billable hour requirements, and leadership styles interact with individual perfectionism could reveal systemic factors that exacerbate or mitigate stress.

- Performance correlation: Further research should examine the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and actual (rather than perceived) performance to better understand the true costs and benefits of perfectionistic tendencies.

- Demographic representation: Future research with greater and more racially diverse samples will be essential to exploring how perfectionism and its impacts may differ across racial and ethnic groups.

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Appendix

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Correlations

Variable	*Depression (PHQ2)*		*Stress (K6)*		*Alcohol use (AUDIT-C)*	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Overcommitment	-.12	.10	-.08	.27**	-.01	-.03
Workaholism	.40**	.34**	.47**	.43**	-.13*	-.01
Work-life balance	-.44**	-.43**	-.54**	-.45**	-.03	-.02
Disengagement	.55**	.39**	.50**	.29**	.11	.19**
Intention to quit	.57**	.46**	.49**	.40**	.06	.16**

*p < .05. **p < .01.

“r” refers to the correlation coefficient, which indicates the strength of the relationship between two variables. Higher values indicate stronger relationships. “p” refers to statistical significance; a p-value less than .05 suggests the result is unlikely to have occurred by chance.

Variable	*Depression (PHQ2)*		*Stress (K6)*		*Alcohol use (AUDIT-C)*	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Overcommitment	-.12	.10	-.08	.27**	-.01	-.03
Workaholism	.40**	.34**	.47**	.43**	-.13*	-.01
Work-life balance	-.44**	-.43**	-.54**	-.45**	-.03	-.02
Disengagement	.55**	.39**	.50**	.29**	.11	.19**
Intention to quit	.57**	.46**	.49**	.40**	.06	.16**

*p < .05. **p < .01.

The AUDIT-C (Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test - Consumption) is a brief, 3-question screening tool used to assess alcohol consumption and potential risky drinking behavior. It distinguishes between men and women in interpreting scores, with scores of 4 or higher in men and 3 or higher in women indicating a positive screen for potential hazardous drinking

Variable	Maladaptive perfectionism					
	15%		15% - 85%		85%	
	AUDIT-C					
	Men ≥ 4	Women ≥ 3	Men ≥ 4	Women ≥ 3	Men ≥ 4	Women ≥ 3
Depression (PHQ2) ≥ 3	13.6%	7.7%	28.8%	24.3%	33.3 %	62.1%
Stress (K6) ≥ 16	14.3%	7.7%	26.8%	35.1%	22.2 %	72.4%

*p < .05. **p < .01.

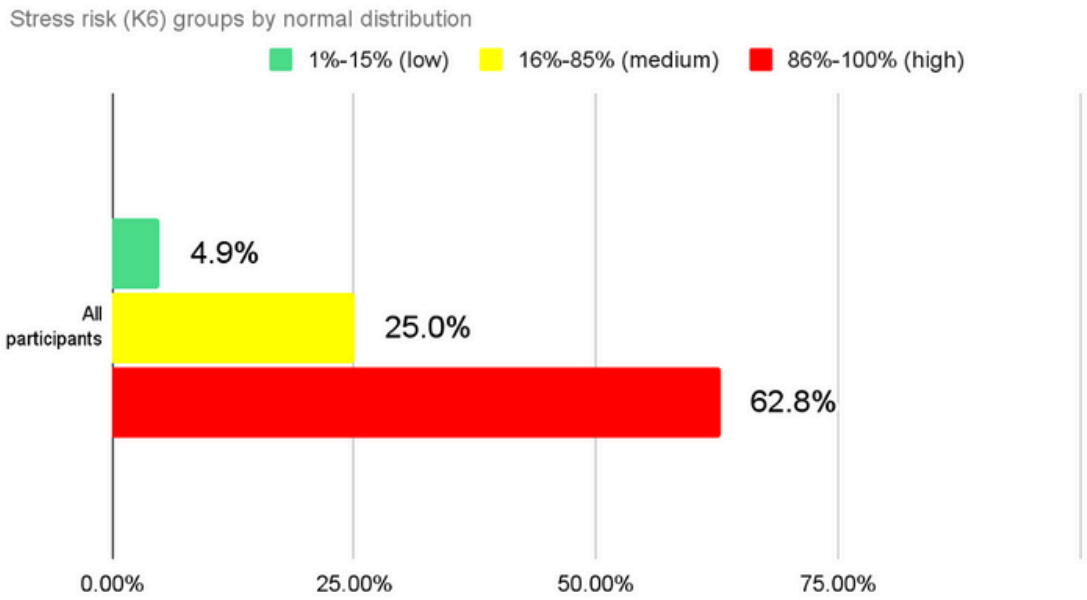
Position	*N*	Mean	*SD*	Min	Max
All participants	535	1.05	0.74	0	3.67
Junior associate - all	135	1.04	0.76	0	3.67
Junior associate - men	49	1.20	0.87	0	3.67
Junior associate - women	82	0.97	0.67	0	3.67
Senior associate - all	82	1.07	0.67	0	3
Senior associate - men	29	1.26	0.75	0	3
Senior associate - women	51	0.98	0.61	0	2.67
Partner - all	217	1.09	0.74	0	3
Partner – men	110	1.19	0.76	0	3
Partner - women	102	0.95	0.71	0	3

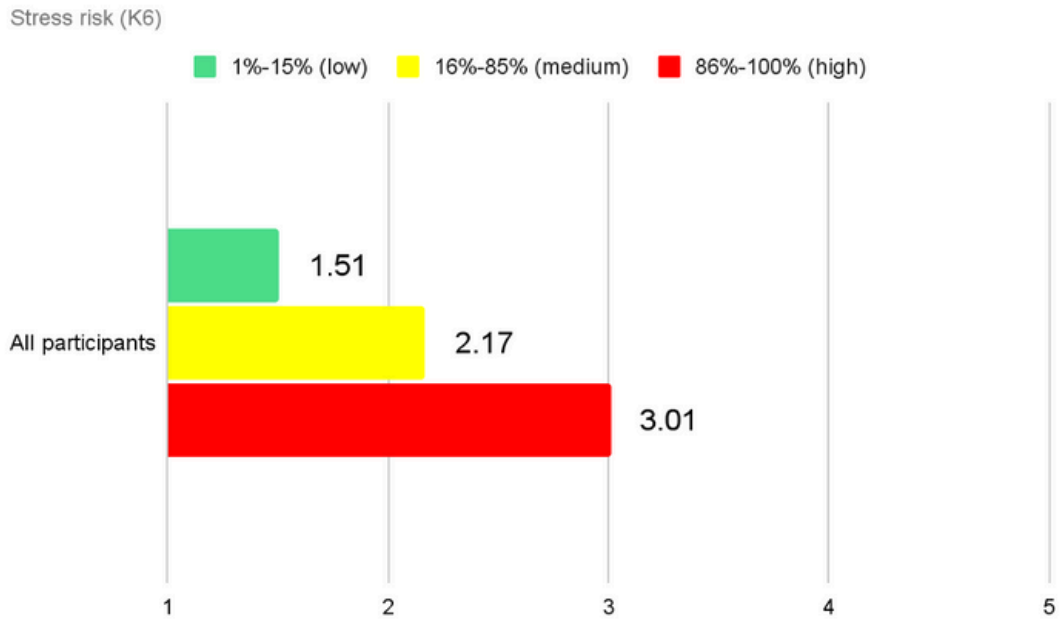
AUDIT-C Scale score	Junior associate		Senior associate		Partner	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
0	12.2%	12.2%	6.9%	7.8%	6.4%	10.8%
1	16.3%	14.6%	10.3%	19.6%	12.6%	19.6%
2	6.1%	19.5%	17.3%	15.7%	18.2%	17.6%
3	14.3%	15.9%	10.3%	13.7%	15.5%	20.6%
4	20.5%	14.6%	10.3%	25.5%	16.4%	10.8%
5	10.2%	14.6%	24.2%	9.8%	9.1%	9.8%
6	8.2%	7.4%	10.3%	5.9%	9.1%	3.9%
7	2.0%	—	6.9%	—	7.3%	2.9%
8	4.1%	—	—	2.0%	2.7%	2.0%
9	4.1%	—	3.5%	—	2.7%	2.0%
10	2.0%	1.2%	—	—	—	—
Women ≥ 3		53.7%		56.9%		52.0%
Men ≥ 4	51%		55.2%		47.3%	

Substance use (In the past year, have you used any substances (other than alcohol) to manage stress, unwind, or relax?):

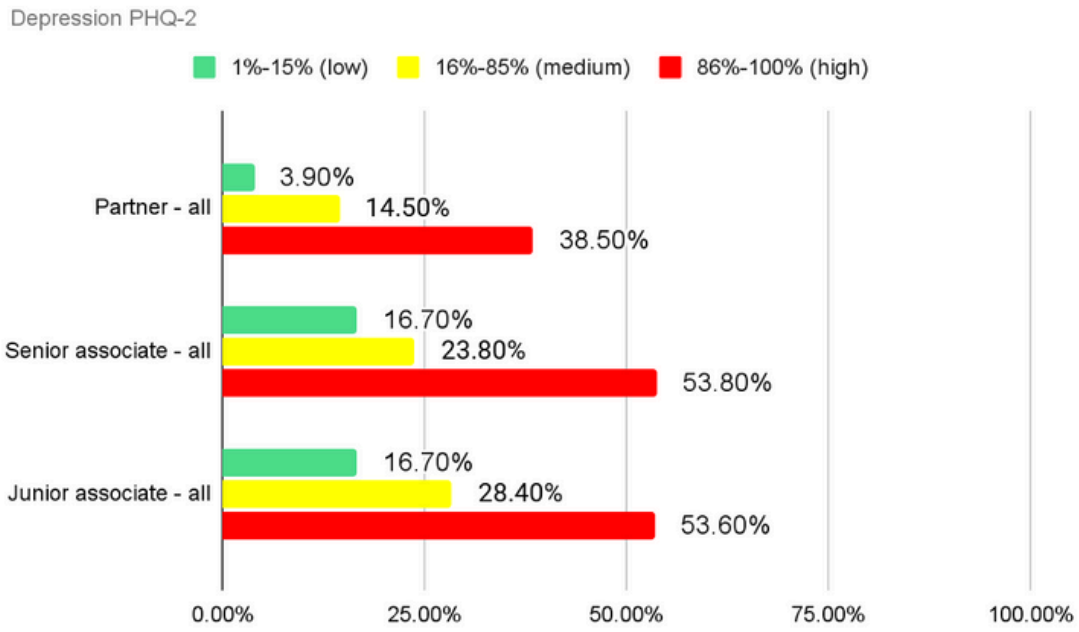
- Correlation with maladaptive perfectionism: r = -.16, p = .001
- For the new dataset: r = -.17, p = .000; men r = -.15, p = .036; women r = -.16, p = .008
- Junior associates: r = .02, p = .854; men r = -.03, p = .853; women: r = .16, p = .158
- Senior associates: r = -.17, p = .149; men: r = .17, p = .408; women (n = 49): r = -.35, p = .014
- Partner (n = 207): r = -.20, p = .004; men (n = 106): r = -.27, p = .005; women: r = -.12, p = .227
- Counsel: r = -.13, p = .313; men: r = .03, p = .892; women: r = -.20, p = .225
- Position Other: r = -.56, p = .000; men (n = 10): r = -.74, p = .015; women (n = 28): r = -.56, p = .002
- Age 20-24: could not be computed; Age 25-29: r = -.01, p = .950; Age 30-34: r = -.05, p = .652; Age 35-39: r = -.10, p = .339; Age 40-44 (n = 65): r = -.28, p = .022; Age 45-49: r = -.08, p = .582; Age 50-54: r = -.11, p = .423; Age 55-59: r = -.45, p = .059; Age 60-64: r = -.20, p = .334; Age 65+: r = .11, p = .626

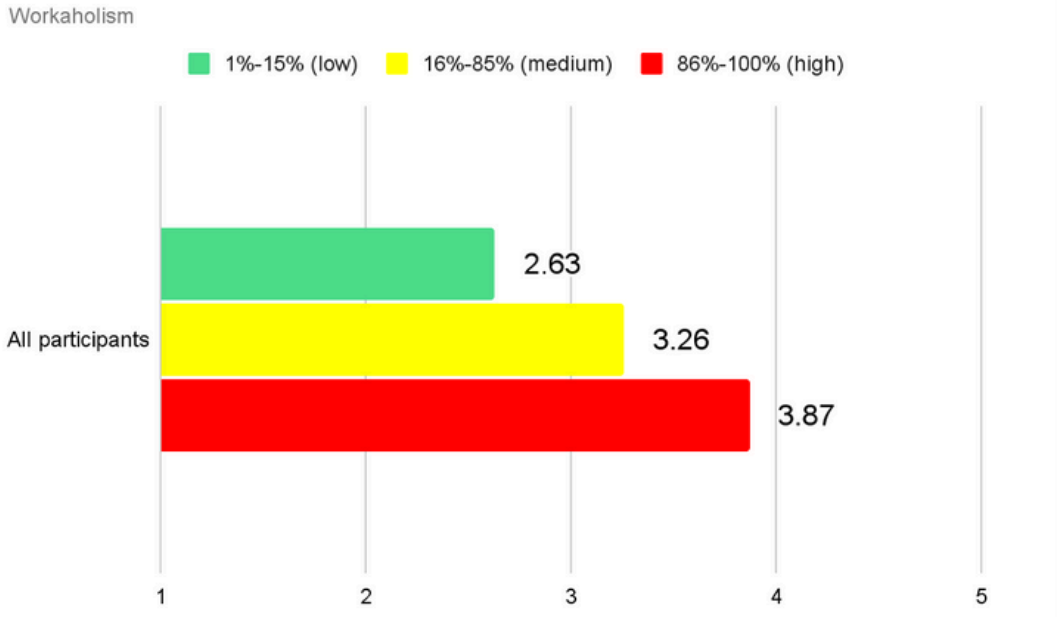
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Patrick Krill is a lawyer, licensed and board-certified addiction counselor, and researcher who has initiated and helped lead many of the legal profession's efforts to improve mental health over the last decade. Widely regarded as a leading authority on the mental health and wellbeing of lawyers, he is the founder of Krill Strategies, a behavioral health consulting firm exclusively for the legal profession. In that role, he serves as a trusted advisor and educator to discerning legal employers, including a majority of AmLaw 100 firms. Patrick is the former director of the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation's Legal Professionals Program, a leading clinical treatment program for lawyers, judges and law students struggling with addiction and mental health problems. Patrick regularly publishes cutting edge, peer-reviewed research on lawyer mental health, has authored approximately eighty published articles related to addiction and mental health, and is frequently quoted in both print and broadcast media. He can be reached at Patrick@prkrill.com.

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8 min read

THE PERILS OF PERFECTIONISM:

WHY LAWYERS NEED TO RETHINK THEIR "BADGE OF HONOR"

By Patrick Krill, Jordana Confino, and Jens Näsström

In the high-stakes world of law, perfectionism is often celebrated as a virtue — a driving force behind meticulous briefs, airtight arguments, and victorious outcomes. Lawyers wear it as a badge of honor, a testament to their commitment to excellence in a profession where the margin for error is often razor-thin. But what if this cherished trait is also a double-edged sword, undermining mental health and professional longevity as much as it elevates performance? Our recent pilot study of 764 private-practice lawyers suggests just that, revealing a troubling link between maladaptive perfectionism and a host of negative outcomes including stress, depression, burnout, and even career stagnation. For

reasons on which we'll elaborate, it is time for the legal profession to stop romanticizing perfectionism and start acknowledging its costs.

The results of the *Lawyer Perfectionism & Well-Being Survey,* an exploratory effort to document perfectionism's impact on lawyers, paint a stark picture. Lawyers with high perfectionistic tendencies — those who equate mistakes with personal failure — reported stress levels twice as high as their less perfection-driven peers (3.01 vs. 1.51 on the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale). Depression followed a similar pattern, with 50% of high-perfectionism lawyers showing elevated symptoms compared to just 7% of low-perfectionists. These numbers aren't just statistics; they're also arrows pointing the way to improvement. The legal profession has long grappled with elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and substance misuse. A culture that glorifies an unattainable ideal may only be exacerbating those problems.

Why Does Perfectionism Hit Lawyers so Hard?

The answer often lies in the profession itself. Law demands precision — miss a deadline, misinterpret a statute, or overlook a precedent, and the consequences can be catastrophic. Clients expect excellent service, ethical standards loom large, and competition for business and prestige is fierce. Technology, too, has raised the bar, with tools like e-discovery amplifying expectations for fast, error-free results. Many lawyers also enter the field with perfectionistic tendencies already in place, and they are further honed by the grueling gauntlet of law school and reinforced by a culture that equates success with flawlessness.

To be clear, not all perfectionism is harmful. Adaptive perfectionism is flexible and fueled by a growth mindset. It allows for high standards without compromising self-worth or resilience. When perfectionism is purpose-driven and flexible, it becomes a tool — not a trap. Maladaptive perfectionism, by contrast, is rigid, identity-defining, and fear-driven — it equates mistakes with personal failings and deploys self-criticism as motivation. And when perfectionism becomes maladaptive, when it's driven by a need for approval and fear of failure rather than a pursuit of excellence — it turns toxic.

The Mental Health Toll is Steep

Our study aligns with broader research outside of law linking perfectionism to anxiety, depression, and burnout — conditions all too familiar to lawyers. High-perfectionism lawyers don't just feel stressed, they're also trapped in a cycle of self-criticism and unrealistic expectations. A mistake isn't just a misstep — it's felt as a personal indictment. And this chronic distress doesn't stop at the mind, it spills over into physical health, with numerous stress-related issues like migraines, weakened immune systems, and cardiovascular problems lurking as silent threats. For a profession that prides itself on resilience, this vulnerability is a bitter irony.

Perfectionists, the study found, are trapped in a cycle of self-imposed pressure and chronic self-criticism. They set impossibly high standards, then beat themselves up when they inevitably fall short. This isn't just stressful, it's exhausting. High-perfectionism lawyers scored higher on workaholism and struggled more with work-life balance, painting a picture of professionals who can't switch off even when pushing forward is no longer fruitful.

The Damage Isn't Limited to Well-Being

Perfectionism also undermines the very performance it's supposed to enhance. Our study found that high-perfectionism lawyers struggle with procrastination, workload management, and delegation — habits that erode efficiency. This aligns with what psychologist's call "perfectionist paralysis" — a fear of failure so intense it leads to procrastination or spending excessive time worrying about a task without actually getting started. Instead of working smarter, perfectionists drown in details, micromanage, and resist delegating, convinced no one else can meet their standards.



Our survey suggests they're also less bold, scoring lower on willingness to tackle challenges, and more disengaged. Perfectionists' fear of feedback — both giving and receiving — stifles growth and collaboration, while a "win at any cost" mentality hints at potential ethical risks. Far from being the secret to success, perfectionism can paralyze lawyers, locking them into a fixed mindset where learning takes a backseat to appearances.

Also noteworthy is the impact on retention. High-perfectionism lawyers in our study averaged just 5.3 years at their firms, compared to 8.4 years for their low-perfectionism counterparts. Their intention to quit is also markedly higher, especially among younger lawyers and women, who report elevated perfectionism and stress. In some cases, this turnover isn't just a personal loss, it's an organizational loss, as well, draining institutional knowledge and hiking recruitment costs. It is unfortunate that those most obsessed with proving their worth may be the first to flame out.

Here's the Silver Lining

Unlike innate traits, maladaptive perfectionism is malleable. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) offers proven tools — reframing self-criticism, building self-compassion, and setting realistic goals, that can dial back its worst effects. Coaching, too, shows promise.

It is our belief, backed by significant research outside of law, that lawyers can shed these harmful tendencies without losing their edge. Imagine lawyers who strive for excellence but don't crumble under self-doubt, who take risks without fearing failure, who collaborate without controlling. That's not a pipe dream – it's a possibility grounded in science.

Of course, individual fixes alone won't cut it. The profession's perfectionist culture, often including unrelenting expectations and a sink-or-swim ethos, fuels the problem. The legal culture that glorifies perfectionism needs an overhaul. Firms must stop rewarding workaholism and start training leaders to foster psychological safety — spaces where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities, not career-enders — and model growth over flawlessness. These changes won't happen overnight, but they are worthy pursuits deserving of attention.

Critics might argue that perfectionism is non-negotiable in a field where the stakes are sky-high. Clients won't tolerate errors, and firms can't afford to loosen standards. But our study challenges this logic and suggests that perfectionists aren't inherently better performers, they're just more stressed and less adaptable. Excellence doesn't demand self-flagellation, and clinging to this perfectionist myth creates more risk than benefit.

To be clear, our pilot study is neither perfect nor conclusive. Its findings highlight the need for additional research to further explore and confirm the trends we observed, investigate causality, and test interventions designed to help lawyers make improvements in this realm. At the same time, however, our findings echo decades of research on perfectionism outside of law and suggest that the more universally observed lessons about the perils of perfectionism apply equally to lawyers.

For now, the message seems obvious: Perfectionism isn't the superpower lawyers think it is. In fact, it's sometimes a liability masquerading as a strength, exacting a steep toll on our minds, bodies, and careers. Rather than continuing to polish this tarnished badge, it's time to trade it for resilience, flexibility, and a healthier path to success.



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Self-Assessment Perfectionism Screening Test

By Bill Gaultiere © 2000, 2012

Perfectionism is a response to anxiety that can be damaging to your relationships and your performance. The following test can help you assess if you're struggling with perfectionism.

Perfectionism Test

For each question below answer "yes" if it's generally true of you and "no" if it's generally *not* true of you. (You may want to ask a close family or friend to confirm your answers to be sure you're being realistic in your self-assessment.)

1.	Yes	No	I often think that I should've done better than I did.
2.	Yes	No	I tend to put things off if I don't have the time to do them perfectly.
3.	Yes	No	I'm afraid to fail when working on an important project.
4.	Yes	No	I strive to impress others with my best qualities or accomplishments.
5.	Yes	No	I think less of myself if I repeat a mistake.
6.	Yes	No	I strive to maintain control of my emotions at all times.
7.	Yes	No	I get upset when things don't go as planned.
8.	Yes	No	I am often disappointed in the quality of other people's work.
9.	Yes	No	I feel that my standards couldn't be too high.
10.	Yes	No	I'm afraid that people will think less of me if I fail.
11.	Yes	No	I'm constantly trying to improve myself.
12.	Yes	No	I'm unhappy if anything I do is considered average.
13.	Yes	No	My home and office need to be clean and orderly always.
14.	Yes	No	I feel inferior to others who are more intelligent, attractive, or successful than I.
15.	Yes	No	I must look my very best whenever I'm out in public.

Scoring: Five or more yes answers suggest a potential problem with perfectionism. (This is a screening test only. For an accurate diagnoses, consult a qualified professional.)