

Letter from Assist: Insight into Lawyer Well-Being Data



Loraine Champion, Executive Director, Assist

Canadian lawyers and articling students are experiencing high levels of psychological distress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, burnout, and suicidal ideation, and consumption of alcohol and drugs is at a worrying level, according to the National Study on Lawyer Well-Being, released in late October. Assist’s Board of Directors and I will be analyzing this study as we design and deploy resources to the Alberta legal community.

I want to share some initial insights from the Study.

First, here is a snapshot of Canadian lawyers’ and articling students’ rates of depressive disorder, anxiety, suicidal ideation, psychological distress, and burnout from an article published in the Law Society Quarterly Well-Being newsletter in late 2022.

	Lawyers	Articling Students	General Population	Page Reference
Major depressive disorder	28.6%	43.6%	15%	36
Generalized Anxiety Disorder	35.7%	49.8%	13%	36
Suicidal Ideation	24.1% (Since beginning practice)	19.4% (Since beginning their practice)	11.8% (Through their lifetimes)	40-41
Psychological Distress	57%	72%	40%	30
Burnout	55.9%	62.9%	Not stated	47

[27.2%](#) of survey respondents indicated that they “often to always” think about leaving the practice and [23.7%](#) “somewhat to strongly regret” pursuing law. Can our profession sustain itself and thrive with such high levels of dissatisfaction?

Secondly, different demographic segments of our population are experiencing well-being challenges at higher rates than others. For example, [61.9%](#) of legal professionals who identify as non-binary experienced suicidal ideation, much higher than the 24.1% of lawyers who have experienced suicidal ideation since commencing practice. Assist's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee will be studying how different segments of our profession are impacted with a view to ensuring that our resources and educational programs are accessible to, and valued by, all lawyers, articling students and law students.

Thirdly, articling students are struggling. Articling students, by definition, have short service in our profession, so the degree of burnout ("[the degree of fatigue and exhaustion a person experienced due to their work](#)") is noteworthy. Assist will be continuing its articling student outreach program to ensure that articling students are aware that professional counselling, peer support and community are available to them as they navigate a challenging period in their careers. Assist is currently seeking additional volunteers to help with this initiative. Please email me at executivedirector@lawyersassist.ca if you would like to join us.

Finally, the Study reveals that many lawyers who experience psychological health problems do not seek professional health ([46.8%](#)). Survey respondents provided [many reasons for not seeking psychological health support](#) with 40.5% indicating that they did not have confidence in their organization's employee assistance programs, and [36.5% did not have confidence in their law society's assistance program](#). When probed as to why they did not use their law society's assistance program, almost 40% of respondents indicated that they worried that their information would be shared with their regulator. Other notable responses were that the respondent did not know enough about the assistance program (29.8%) or that they did not believe that the assistance program could help them (34.2% - please note that respondents could provide more than one answer, so the total number exceeds 100%).

While most Canadian legal regulators contract directly with a psychological services provider to offer a lawyer assistance program (on the model of an employee assistance program but for members of the profession), Assist is not a Law Society program. We are an independent society incorporated under the Societies Act (Alberta), established by a group of lawyers in the recovery community in the 1990s as part of the Lawyers Helping Lawyers movement. We are also a registered charity under the Income Tax Act (Canada). We apply for funding from the Law Society under its third-party funding program, we receive donations from the Canadian Bar Association-Alberta and other lawyer organizations, and we fundraise. We have an independent board of directors to whom I report, and we, rather than the Law Society, contract with a provider to deliver our counselling program. As Executive Director of Assist, I do not know the identities of individuals accessing our program. Instead, each individual is assigned a unique four-digit code which is all that I see.

Our counsellors, as Registered Psychologists and Registered Social Workers, have confidentiality obligations to their clients similar to lawyers' confidentiality obligations under our Code of Conduct (i.e., danger of imminent harm to an individual.) Sharing information with the Law Society without consent would be a breach of their professional duties. Assist's program is carefully designed to protect confidentiality.

Assist provides aggregate program usage data to the Law Society of Alberta, which is available on our website, and we provide certain budget and financial information in the context of our funding application. We do not provide any personal or confidential information. Period.

Our counsellors hold Masters' degrees or PhDs and have, on average, at least ten years of clinical experience before joining our program. They have long-term and stable relationships with our provider. We have worked diligently over the last two years to ensure that our counsellors reflect the diversity of our profession.

Finally, stigma about mental health challenges remains strong in our profession, but the most powerful anti-stigma weapon we have is this: since 2008 when our current provider came on board, more than one-in-four lawyers have used our confidential and non-judgmental professional counselling program.

More than **1 in 4**
Alberta lawyers (and students)



have used our programs since 2008

One in four—surely if one in four lawyers work with counsellors to manage challenges, this is not something shameful or shocking. It shows us that many lawyers understand that they need both reactive and proactive support from time to time. If you are facing a challenge that feels overwhelming, or even just stressful, you are not alone if you seek out support. In actuality, you will become a part of a sizable group within our profession (and we don't know how many lawyers access employee assistance programs or pay for counselling privately) who know that specialized, competent and confidential services are available to help them ensure that they bring their A game to their profession and their personal lives even when facing challenges.

You can learn more about our programs at <https://lawyersassist.ca/>. Please remember that we provide 24/7 crisis counselling with a senior counsellor—just call 1-877-498-6898 and press “0”.

Lorraine

Lorraine Champion
Executive Director
Alberta Lawyers' Assistance Society