

# dri™ The Voice™

April 2023 | Vol. 22, Issue 4

**FROM THE DRI FOR LIFE COMMITTEE**

## Highlighting National Lawyer Well-Being Week

**By Lori O'Tool**

Well-being is a significant part of your success as an attorney. The DRI for Life's Committee's charge from the DRI Foundation is to support its members to lead healthy, balanced and productive lives through wellness activities, support programs and mentoring. Coinciding with May being Mental Health Awareness month and that May 1-5 is National Lawyer Well-being Week, this article highlights the Committee's goals for expanding wellness offerings and information, encouraging law firms to allow for healthy lifestyles and eliminating the stigma associated for those seeking help.

A personally impactful wellness presentation at the 2019 Washington Defense Trial Lawyers Annual Meeting on "The Hazards of Practicing Law" led to more than one "aha" moment for me. Like most in the audience, I had read and heard statistics on the elevated rates of stress, substance abuse, addiction, depression and suicide affecting attorneys relative to the general population. What was eye-opening about this presentation was information provided on some of the "whys" specific to trial attorneys.

As trial attorneys we are continuously rewarded for spinning facts favorable to our client's position while doing our best to minimize bad facts. Our relentless questioning of the opposing side's story, negative interpretations and judgmental approach to cases often rewards us with a silver bullet that may win the day or significantly reduce the value of a case. But no attorney is able to achieve perceived wins on every case, so this roller coaster ride of a profession often leads to feeling like a hero one moment and a zero the next. The positive reinforcement of our spin doctoring and not wanting to appear

vulnerable to opposing counsel can predictably bleed over into our personal lives. We end up not sharing our own bad facts with friends, colleagues and loved ones when we are struggling, and we do not seek help given the stigma of such behaviors. Hearing the “whys” in the presentation made me think “well that explains a lot” in recognizing the need to be much more authentic with those that are close to me and to not automatically presume someone’s ill-intent.

Not long after hearing this wellness presentation, I was appointed to the DRI for Life Committee, and I often come back to the power of understanding root causes for these elevated rates of mental health issues impacting attorneys. This year as Chair of the DRI for Life Committee, we are focusing on the following objectives:

### **DRI for Life Guidelines for Programming and Activities.**

The Committee fosters and promotes DRI for Life events that focus on health and well-being at the DRI Annual Meeting and our seminars. The Committee has drafted a planning guide and timeline for DRI for Life activities and programs that will be added to the Substantive Law Committee Toolkit. Note that healthy living, wellness, life balance and mental health programming may meet State’s ethics, substance abuse awareness, mental health and wellness CLE requirements. The Committee is also working to expand the DRI Speaker List to include more DRI members to present on wellness topics.

### **Webinars.**

As part of National Lawyer Well-Being Week on May 2 at noon CT, DRI for Life Committee Co-Chair Ricardo Woods will be moderating a webinar on “Warning Signs v. Well-Being: How law firms are effectively focusing on wellness.” In this Town Hall format, we will be discussing how impactful leaders in the legal industry have mental health, physical well-being and overall wellness on their minds. With the alarming rates of depression, anxiety and substance abuse, our legal organizations cannot afford to overlook these key issues if they want to maintain healthy and productive teams. In a post-pandemic workplace proactively addressing these issues is an essential component to maximizing productivity, retention and organizational sustainability. This program will focus on providing lawyers, law firm leaders and the people invested in the well-being of their organizations with a framework to help recognize, manage and prioritize the wellness of the people

who make up the organization. This webinar is FREE to all DRI members and we encourage setting up a watch party at your firm.

Also, as part of your registration for any DRI seminar in 2023, you have access to the FREE on-demand program “Lessons for Lawyers from the Science of Well Being.” This presentation from Emma Ross and Shayna Cook of Goldman Ismail Tomaselli Brennan & Baum LLP focuses on the practical steps that attorneys can take as individuals to improve well-being, drawing on recent research from cognitive science and beginning with the preface that happiness can be learned and applied. Specifically, they will provide an evidence-based arsenal of practical tools that lawyers can apply in their own lives to improve well-being.

## **Publications and Resources.**

Committee members will continue to submit wellness articles to [The Voice](#) and we are soliciting writings from our DRI members. DRI has a [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Resource Center website page](#) and further promotes wellness on our social media platforms. Additionally, all states have lawyer mental health assistance programs and law firms are urged to distribute [this resource](#).

## **Promoting National Lawyer Well-Being Week.**

There will be daily campaigns focusing on:

- Monday, 5/01: Stay Strong (Physical)
- Tuesday, 5/02: Align (Spiritual)
- Wednesday, 5/03: Engage & Grow (Career & Intellectual)
- Thursday, 5/04: Connect (Social)
- Friday, 5/05: Feel Well (Emotional)

A supportive work environment is critical to well-being as it is associated with lower rates of burnout, anxiety, and depression and greater satisfaction with life. So consider having your law firm planning its own activities and programs during the Lawyer Well-Being Week. Reported successes from past years include: firmwide sharing of a well-being article or Ted talk and discussing strategies for maintaining a healthy mind and body; distributing a firm-specific coloring page, brain teaser, or word search and awarding gift cards for participants; organizing walking/standing meetings, mindfulness and meditation exercises; and connecting in-person or by video with someone you haven't

spoken with recently or thanking someone who has made your life a little better. And be sure to share your Lawyer Well-Being activities on social media!

Sadly, studies continue to identify an alarming gap between lawyers who self-report suffering from mental health and/or substance abuse issues and those who actually seek care. Such stigma barriers include loss of dignity, embarrassment, injury to pride, not acknowledging their own need for care, or family, friends or colleagues finding out. See, [Lawyer Well-/Being in Massachusetts Final Report](#), 2-01-2023. The DRI Foundation through the DRI for Life Committee endeavors to offer wellness programs, activities, webinars and resources for facilitating change in the legal industry, promoting self-care and reducing stigma that will hopefully lead to your own “aha” moments in your wellness journey.



*Lori O'Tool is a partner with Preg O'Donnell & Gillett. She is the DRI for Life Chair.*