oaap Oregon Attorney Assistance Program

inSIGHT

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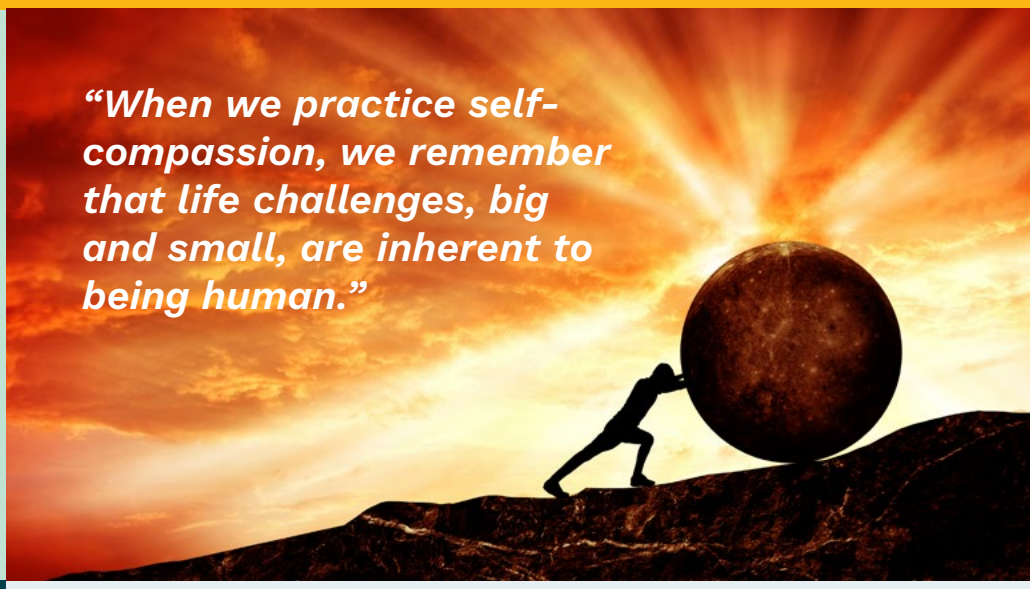
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Finding Choice and Freedom in Self-Compassion

by Bridget Donegan

A specific sense of relief comes when a friend responds to our troubles with ease: "Well, of course!" "Of course you're having a hard time sleeping with all that pressure on you!" "Of course you've lost your confidence after what they said to you!" "Of course you're overwhelmed!"

When a friend offers total, untroubled acceptance of our distress, a layer of it melts away. Our distress becomes less distressing. We are less convinced that our troubles mean we are inherently inadequate, fundamentally flawed, somehow "wrong," or "not enough." Yes, the uncomfortable truth is still true and still uncomfortable. But a compassionate, connected perspective gives us a toehold from which to choose our next step. We can move forward responsibly.

The OAAP is a confidential service of the Professional Liability Fund for all members of the Oregon legal community.

Directed inward, that same compassionate, connected response is a powerful way to support ourselves. In a flood of studies over the last twenty years, researchers are confirming what ancient wisdom traditions have long taught: self-compassion is a strengthening, healing, motivating practice; it does not weaken our resolve or dim our ambitions.[1] Instead, practicing self-compassion is a way to interrupt our stress and anxiety cycles and provide more clarity for how we want to engage with our lives.

The Elements of Self-Compassion

As legal practitioners who face many demands and stressors in our professional and personal lives, leading with self-compassion can feel dangerous—like we are letting ourselves off the hook, being undisciplined and weak, or lowering our standards. That worry stems from the fact that self-compassion, as researcher Dr. Kristin Neff explains, calls us to "stop judging and evaluating ourselves altogether."[2] If the project is figuring out what is wrong with me and fixing myself, then judging and evaluating myself feels necessary. But with self-compassion, rather than trying to "fix" ourselves so we no longer suffer (an impossible task), we kindly accept the basic fact of our current reality as part of our human experience. We stop judging and evaluating who we are in service of evaluating how we want to be and what we want to do.

With self-compassion, therefore, our standards and values remain in place. A self-compassionate lawyer is an excellent lawyer: research consistently shows that practicing self-compassion leads to more resilience, less self-defeating perfectionism, and reduced stress and anxiety.[3] Perhaps unexpectedly, a kinder acceptance of ourselves sharpens rather than dulls our edge as attorneys.

In her research, Dr. Neff has identified three elements of self-compassion: taking a *balanced awareness* of our difficulties, rather than overly identifying with or pushing down our discomfort; offering *self-kindness*, rather than criticism or judgment; and recognizing our c*ommon humanity*, understanding our predicament as part of being human, rather than feeling isolated or alienated by our pain. Any time we notice some distress, practicing any one of these can be a helpful relief and reality check.

1. Balanced Awareness

Compassion, by definition, is responsive. There is no compassion without suffering, so self-compassion is available only when we recognize our own suffering. If self-compassion feels especially tricky, it may be helpful to practice recognizing suffering in one of its milder forms, like boredom or impatience. Or perhaps practice seeing suffering in an area that carries less self-blame, such as insomnia, indignation, or disgust. The first step is only to see that our dissatisfaction or discomfort is a form of suffering. Balanced awareness speaks to the quality of how we see the suffering. With self-compassion, we neither dive headlong into the suffering nor shove it down and away. We offer simple (though not necessarily easy) awareness of our suffering without avoiding, exaggerating, or identifying with it.

In compassion, like empathy, we suffer alongside another. Where compassion differs from empathy is that compassion includes a motivation to relieve the suffering.[4] This motivation is present in self-compassion as well—we are not indulging self-pity or wallowing helplessly in our pain. And often, in our desire to relieve suffering (our own and others), we jump straight to intellectual problem solving. As lawyers, this is a comfortable mode. The element of balanced awareness, however, reminds us that the healing comfort of compassion is not in problem solving. Instead, balanced awareness means that we first allow ourselves to be caring witnesses to suffering, without trying to erase it or wrench it away.

When we do not bring balanced awareness to our pain, we tend to either identify with it or avoid it. Identifying with it can feel like being swept up in our distressful thoughts and feelings. Instead of just, *I am dreading going to work,* we may say, *I'm an anxious person* or *I can't hack this.* When a client meeting goes terribly, we start to think, *I'm terrible.* Rather than seeing our distress in a broader context, it takes on outsized authority and we begin to believe it indicates a truth about who we are.

Avoiding our pain can look like pushing through our days without acknowledging any distress. Rather than letting it be natural and okay to feel uncomfortable or angry, we power through, trying to perform how we believe we should. This can look like emphasizing our intellectual or analytical understanding of our situation, not tolerating emotions that seem irrational, or relying heavily on willpower in the face of physical signs that we need more rest or care.

Moving toward balanced awareness means catching ourselves when we start to identify with pain or run away from it, and instead experimenting with checking in with how we feel. With balanced awareness, we suffer without adding extra. According to Dr. Neff, that perspective "is the pillar on which self-compassion rests."[5] When you notice an unpleasant feeling without seizing onto it or shoving it down—just seeing it, even for a moment—you are practicing this core component of self-compassion.

2. Self-Kindness

Treating ourselves kindly is probably what first comes to mind when we think of self-compassion. If self-criticism and shaming exist at one end of a continuum, kindness is on the other. Self-kindness can be a simple acknowledgement with a kind tone: *This is hard right now. I want this so badly. I do not know what to do. This hurts.* And also, *What do I need? What can I do for myself right now?*

The kindness of self-compassion is not self-indulgence; it does not mean "anything goes." It means moving away from self-condemnation. Moving toward kindness may simply mean quieting a self-critical narrative; we may not always be able to access an affirming statement, but we can stop beating ourselves up.

Many of us have been conditioned to feel a certain amount of self-protection in being harsh with ourselves, like there is some morality in self-punishment, or we are proving to ourselves that we know how one *ought* to behave. Experimenting with self-kindness, however, reveals that accepting the simple reality of our immediate condition is different from encouraging it in the future. Like the power in naming something, when we kindly acknowledge our distress with a willingness to help, we gain some leverage for dealing with it.

3. Common Humanity

Finally, when we practice self-compassion, we shift away from our tendency to see our pains and hassles as unique flaws that set us apart from others. That isolating tendency might sound something like, *Everyone else is handling this fine. Nobody else is struggling like I am. I am too broken to belong here. I should be fine.* The feeling of being abnormal leads to disconnection and loneliness, exacerbating our suffering. When we practice self-compassion, we remember that life challenges, big and small, are inherent to being human. The way stress shows up in our lives, whether physiologically, emotionally, or cognitively, is inherent to being a human being.[6]

My experience is that most of us intellectually grasp that nobody is perfect. Everybody fails. But that abstract understanding often feels irrelevant when we are immersed in our own struggles, which are decidedly not "everybody's"; my struggles are mine and nobody else's. When I fail, it feels highly specific and textured; it hurts in a particularly pointed way, seems to hold a truth personal to me, and is not tidy or static. How could something so specific to me be universal?

Retirement Group

In early 2027, the OAAP will offer a confidential group for lawyers preparing for and navigating retirement from law practice. The group will be facilitated by **OAAP Attorney Counselor Associate Bridget Donegan**, JD, MA Candidate–PMHC. Remote and in-person options will be offered.

To express interest or learn more about the group, please contact Bridget at 503.226.4311 or bridgetd@oaap.org.



I understand this component of self-compassion on two levels. Although there is truth in the deep specificity of our individual experiences, the more we share with and listen to other people, the more we directly experience our essential similarities: we do relate to each other’s pain. That is a lesson many of us learn repeatedly, every time we dare to confide in a trusted, caring person. We are simply more similar, and more deeply so, than we tend to realize.

At the same time, the specific details, histories, and contours of our personal experiences are unique. We cannot know another person’s inner life. But that, precisely, is the universality of our predicament. We all share the experience of being not exactly the same. The specificities of my struggle, the edges of my experience that do not quite line up with yours, do not mean that I am alone; they are the essence of our common humanity.

Choosing a Path Forward

I spent many months as a practicing lawyer living with a hum of vigilance. It felt absolutely essential to maintain a constant background level of tension so I did not overlook something important, or so I could catch and fix anything that was missed. To do otherwise felt dangerous.

Through my experience in law practice and at the OAAP, I have seen that such periods of vigilance are not uncommon for lawyers. A small experiment in self-compassion might be worth a try for those of us who feel that anxious hum. We can notice the hum and the tension. And then notice whatever comes next. Notice and let go of the idea that you should feel differently, and remember that your stress is a natural human response. Perhaps then consider what you need, including talking to someone else or asking for help.

One of the greatest benefits of practicing self-compassion is more ready access to mental freedom and flexibility. Constricted thought and rigidity, on the other hand, are risks of holding tight to our vigilance. When we stop straining against our own experiences, we tend to find that the pressure releases. Dropping that struggle, and seeing our natural responses as the ongoing unfolding of life, opens up a significant amount of space for choice.

How do you want to approach your day?

– BRIDGET DONEGAN
JD, MA Candidate-PMHC
Attorney Counselor Associate, OAAP



An earlier version of this article was published in the **Oregon Business Lawyer**, *the newsletter of the Oregon State Bar Business Law Section (Bridget Donegan, “Self-Compassion for Lawyers: Interrupting Stress and Choosing our Path Forward,” March 2026). Adapted and reprinted with permission.*

Mindfulness Group

This **winter,** the OAAP will offer a group for lawyers who want to learn how to implement mindfulness–based practices in their lives. The group will be held remotely and facilitated by **OAAP Attorney Counselors Kyra Hazilla** and **Kirsten Blume.**

If you are interested in this group or for more information, please contact Kirsten at 503.226.1057 ext. 11, or kirstenb@oaap.org.

OTHER WORKS BY BRIDGET DONEGAN AT OAAP.ORG

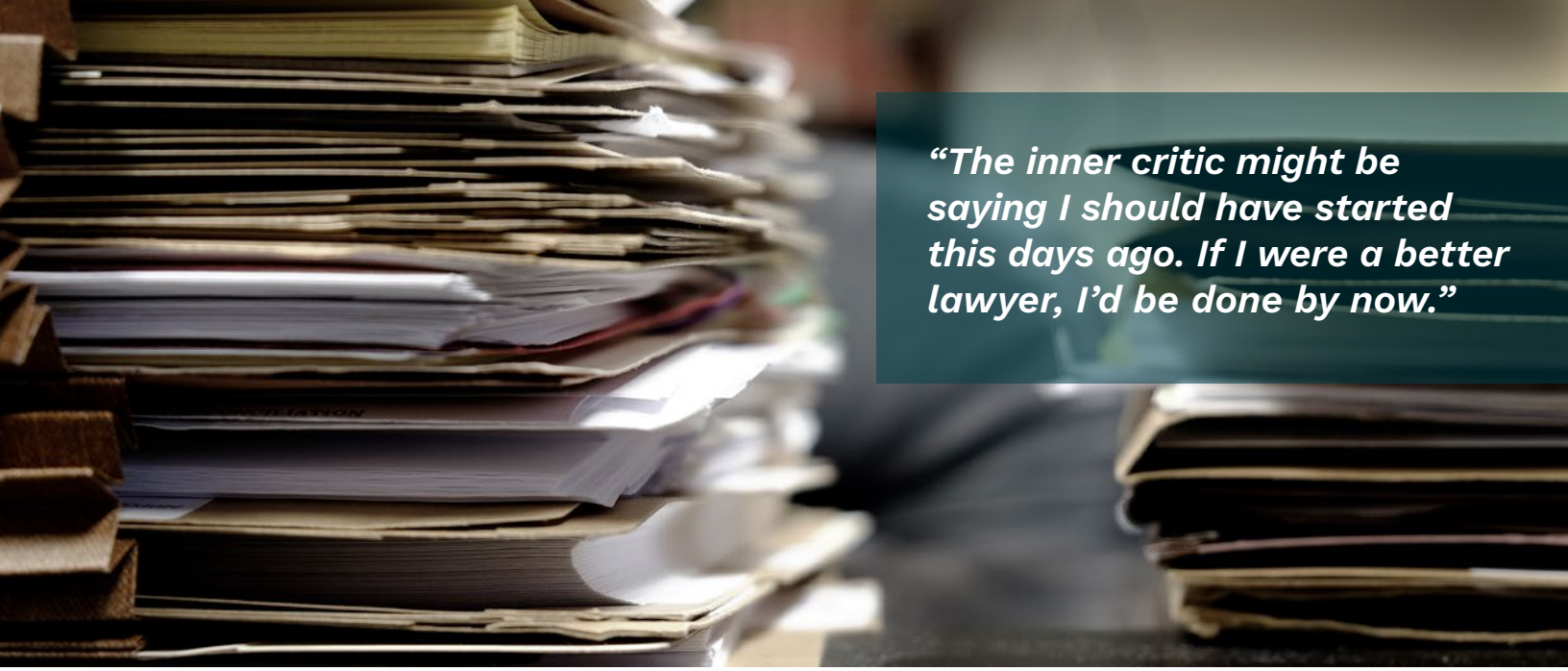
***in*Sight**

- The Tyranny of Shoulds (Fall 2025)

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Why Being Kinder to Yourself Can Help You Stop Procrastinating

by Bryan Welch

Most lawyers know the feeling. You can’t bring yourself to open the file that sits untouched on the corner of your desk. Or answer that phone call from a difficult client from last week. Or maybe get your billing done. When these things happen we often assume that this procrastination reflects a lack of discipline or motivation.

In reality, lawyers frequently delay work not because they are lazy or undisciplined, but because the task feels emotionally risky. The stakes seem high. We worry about making a mistake or producing something less than perfect. Or perhaps we want to avoid conflict or feeling “not good enough.”

Procrastination offers temporary relief from those uncomfortable feelings, but it also increases stress as deadlines approach. So we respond the way many lawyers have been trained to respond: with harsh self-criticism and by becoming even more demanding of ourselves. That in turn increases stress and anxiety, which makes it harder to start, and the delay continues.

There is a better approach. Research has consistently found that people who practice greater self-compassion are less likely to procrastinate.[1] Self-compassion reduces the shame, fear, and anxiety that often fuel avoidance and delay, making it easier to focus on the solution and take the next small step.

Psychologist Dr. Kristin Neff, defines self-compassion as treating ourselves with the same kindness, encouragement, and understanding we would offer a trusted colleague or friend. Self-compassion is not lowering standards or making excuses. It means acknowledging that mistakes, setbacks, and moments of self-doubt are part of being human rather than evidence that we are failing.[2]

Imagine you've been avoiding a complicated writing project. You know the deadline is approaching, and you know the work needs your attention, but every time you open the file, you find yourself looking for something else to do. You answer an email, check your calendar, get another cup of coffee—anything that allows you to postpone sitting down with the difficult part. Meanwhile, the deadline gets closer and your anxiety grows. Dr. Kristin Neff's three components of self-compassion can offer a better way to respond when you find yourself stuck.

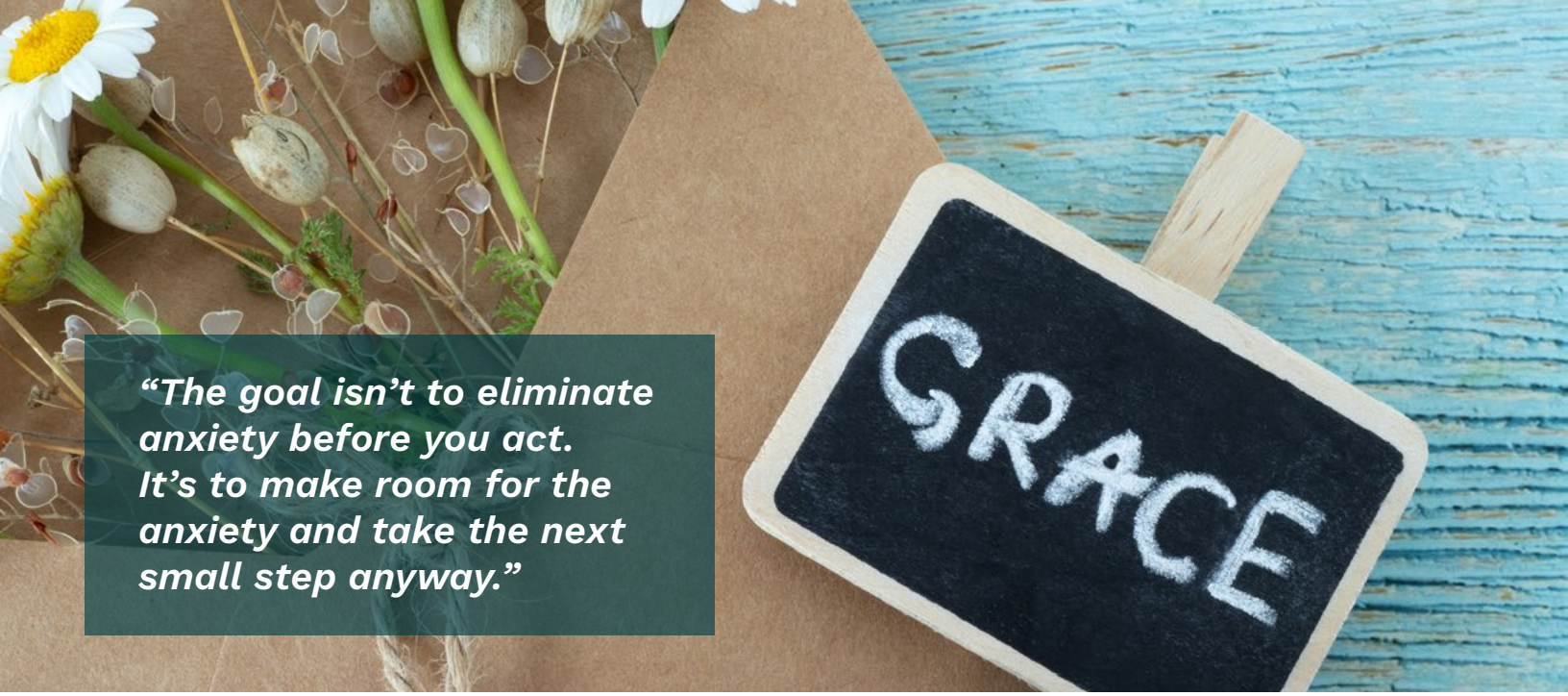
Mindfulness instead of over-identification. First, pause and notice what's happening. I'm feeling anxious because this motion is really important. I'm worried my boss won't like it. Rather than becoming absorbed in thoughts like *I'm a failure* or *I'm no good at this*, acknowledge those feelings without judgment. Mindfulness allows you to experience anxiety and self-doubt without turning them into conclusions about yourself. *I'm feeling anxious* is different from I'm an *anxious person,* and *I'm worried about my work* is different from *I'm a bad lawyer*. That small shift helps you see the emotion as something you're experiencing, rather than as a verdict about who you are.

Common humanity instead of isolation. Remember that you are not alone in this feeling. Experienced attorneys everywhere occasionally avoid difficult writing projects and feel anxious or fearful. Feeling overwhelmed does not mean they are incompetent, it simply means they are human, and so are you. Recognizing that this struggle is shared adds perspective and can reduce feelings of shame.

Kindness instead of self-judgment. Having recognized the emotion and put it into perspective, respond with kindness rather than self-criticism. The inner critic might be saying *I should have started this days ago. If I were a better lawyer, I'd be done by now. It doesn't even matter because I'll do a terrible job anyway.* Challenge that voice and instead respond to it with the same kindness you might offer a friend: *This is a difficult motion. Anyone would find it challenging. I've handled difficult cases before, and I don't have to write the entire motion today. I'm good enough. I only have to get started.* Encouragement, rather than criticism, lowers the emotional barrier to beginning.

At this point, nothing about the task itself has changed. The motion is still difficult, and the deadline is still there. What has changed is your response to the discomfort. Instead of spending more energy beating yourself up and trying to make the anxiety go away, you acknowledge it, recognize that you are not alone, and offer yourself the same encouragement you might offer a colleague or a friend. Maybe that makes it possible to ask someone for help. Maybe you finally sketch an outline or write the first paragraph. The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety before you act. It's to make room for the anxiety and take the next small step anyway.

The next time you catch yourself procrastinating, pause for a moment. Notice what you're saying to yourself. If your inner dialogue sounds harsher than anything you would ever say to a friend or colleague, try replacing criticism with compassion—and then get started.



"The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety before you act. It's to make room for the anxiety and take the next small step anyway."

Try This

The next time you find yourself avoiding a difficult task, pause and ask yourself three questions:

1. **Mindfulness:** What emotion am I trying to avoid right now?
2. **Common Humanity:** How many other competent lawyers have probably struggled with this exact thing?
3. **Kindness**: What would I say to a good friend or respected colleague in this situation?

Then ask one final question: What's the smallest next step I can take in the next five minutes?

– BRYAN WELCH
JD, M. Coun., CADC I,
Professional Counselor Associate
Attorney Counselor, OAAP



OTHER WORKS BY BRYAN WELCH AT OAAP.ORG

***in*Sight**

- Conversations with Neurodivergent Lawyers (Summer 2026)
- Recognizing Signs of Traumatic Stress in Clients (Summer 2025)
- The Case for (and Against) "Mocktails" (Fall/Winter 2024)

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2. Sirois, Fuschia M. 2014. "Procrastination and Stress: Exploring the Role of Self-Compassion." Self and Identity 13 (2): 128–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2013.763404.



A Well-Being Update: How Is Our Profession Doing?

by Douglas S. Querin

The Oregon Attorney Assistance Program (OAAP) is pleased to announce the results of the largest study to date examining mental health and well-being in the U.S. legal profession. The new study, titled, "When Demands Equal Distress: An Updated Understanding of Lawyer Mental Health and Well-Being"[1] was authored by Patrick R. Krill, JD, LLM, MA, and Justin J. Janker, PhD. This groundbreaking research is the product of an active collaboration between the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs (CoLAP)[2]—including Lawyer Assistance Program (LAP) Directors from Oregon and other states—and Krill Strategies.[3]

The September 10, 2026, report analyzes survey data collected from a random sample of approximately 37,000 actively licensed lawyers. The survey's broad jurisdictional and demographic representation—including responses from 935 Oregon lawyers—provides a substantial body of data from which meaningful observations can be drawn about longstanding concerns regarding mental health and well-being in the legal profession.

The 2026 study is the second national study of its kind in the past decade. The first national study of lawyer behavioral health, the 2016 ABA-Hazelden Betty Ford Study,[4] surveyed nearly 13,000 lawyers. It documented substantial rates of depression, anxiety, stress, and problem drinking within the legal profession. Those findings contributed to the creation of the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being[5] and its 2017 publication, "The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change."[6] The OAAP was a national leader among LAPs in encouraging and facilitating the adoption of many of the National Task Force's well-being recommendations within Oregon's legal community.

The 2026 study builds on the earlier research while significantly expanding its scope. In addition to examining the behavioral health issues addressed in 2016—including depression, anxiety, stress, and problem drinking—the current study examines additional aspects of the practice of law, including work-related burnout, work-family conflict, and the psychological consequences associated with work demands and different law practice settings.

The OAAP will be presenting the data at locations around the state in the coming months, as well as offering groups and workshops targeting the areas implicated by the findings. Keep an eye on oaap.org and your email for upcoming opportunities to learn more.

– DOUGLAS S. QUERIN
JD, LPC, CADC I
Senior Attorney Counselor, OAAP



OTHER WORKS BY DOUG QUERIN AT OAAP.ORG

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- Expanding Lawyer Well-Being: Neurodiversity in the Legal Profession (Summer 2026)
- Myth vs Reality: Neurodiversity in the Legal Workplace (Summer 2026)
- The Language of Neurodiversity (Summer 2026)

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In Case You Missed It

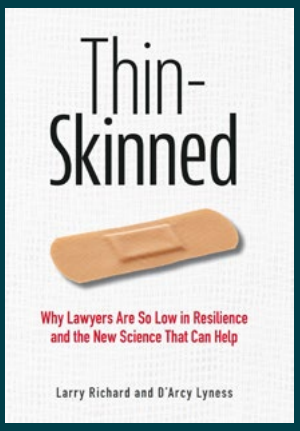
Explore these recent CLE offerings by the OAAP, now available to stream at **osbplf.org** > Services > CLEs & Resources > CLEs:



Supporting Legal Professionals At Work: Navigating the Demands of Practice

Legal practice places heavy demands on the cognitive skills that support planning, focus, time management, and follow-through—often collectively described as executive functioning. This two-part presentation brings together mental health and practice management professionals to offer complementary perspectives on these challenges. Participants hear first from the OAAP attorney counselors about the human and cognitive experience of working under pressure, followed by a presentation from the PLF practice management attorneys about practical, systems-based approaches that reduce cognitive load and support a sustainable practice.

This webinar is approved for 1 MHSU and 1 Practical Skills MCLE credits.



Built to Last: Cultivating Resilience for Law and Life

Resilience has been described as the psychological ability to adapt resourcefully to stress, adversity, setbacks, challenges, or crises—and research shows that lawyers tend to score lower on this trait than other people. Fortunately, resilience isn't immutable.

This CLE presentation offered by the Oregon Attorney Assistance Program features national keynote speaker Larry Richard, JD, PhD, an author and consultant on the psychology of lawyer behavior. Dr. Richard discusses research summarized in his new book, *Thin-Skinned*, which explains how the "lawyer personality" traits that help us practice law effectively can also make us more vulnerable to stress and uncertainty. He also outlines several evidence-based strategies that lawyers can use to increase their resilience.

This webinar is approved for 1.5 MHSU MCLE credits.

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Career Resources from the OAAP

FINDING MEANINGFUL WORK

The OAAP holds a periodic 6-session self-reflection, support, and skills group for lawyers making or contemplating job or career transitions. The group assists lawyers in identifying their professional values and priorities, discerning a purposeful path forward, and honing job search skills. To participate or for more information about the next group, please contact **Attorney Counselor Associate Bridget Donegan** at 503.226.1057 ext. 14 or bridgetd@oaap.org.

CAREER SUPPORT AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

The OAAP attorney counselors can help you assess your career opportunities and support you in your career path. If you would like information about self-assessment or career support, contact **Senior Attorney Counselor Doug Querin**, 503.226.1057 ext. 12, douglasq@oaap.org; **Director Kyra Hazilla**, ext. 13, kyrah@oaap.org; **Attorney Counselor Bryan Welch**, ext. 19, bryanw@oaap.org; **Attorney Counselor Kirsten Blume**, ext. 11, kirstenb@oaap.org; or **Attorney Counselor Associate Bridget Donegan**, ext. 14, bridgetd@oaap.org.

Accommodations

The OAAP is committed to providing accessible events. For accessibility or accommodation requests, please call the OAAP at 503.226.1057 or toll-free 800.321.6227, ext. 19, or email **Bryan Welch** at bryanw@oaap.org.