

# From Field to Firm: Lessons for Lawyers from Athletes' Mental Health Playbook

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Both athletes and lawyers operate in intense environments where performance is paramount. Athletes are trained to cope with stress through mental conditioning and performance strategies. In contrast, the legal field has traditionally prioritized individual achievement, often neglecting mental wellness. Proactively creating an environment where lawyers can thrive mentally and emotionally is essential, and adopting strategies from the sports industry could help.

There is mounting evidence of mental health challenges within the legal profession. A [landmark 2016 study](#) published in the *Journal of Addiction Medicine* found that attorneys experience problematic drinking, depression, anxiety and stress at higher rates than the general population. As mental health awareness grows, law firms have an opportunity to implement healthier practices that enhance attorney well-being.

Integrating sports psychology can help legal professionals handle these pressures more effectively – particularly principles that focus on emotional literacy, resilience and individualized optimization.

## EMOTIONAL LITERACY

Emotional literacy – understanding and managing one's emotions – can improve client interactions, decision-making and the overall work environment. Programs that teach emotional intelligence skills can help lawyers regulate emotions, enhancing resilience and mental health. Fostering open conversations about emotions within law firms can help destigmatize mental health issues and create a supportive culture.

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Athletes frequently encounter setbacks, whether losing a championship or recovering from injury. Their ability to navigate adversity is crucial to their success. Lawyers also face setbacks: Losing a case is especially demoralizing. But by learning to recover and grow from challenges, lawyers can improve their emotional resilience, similar to how athletes bounce back from losses or injuries.

For decades, sports psychologists have studied the relationship between an athlete's emotional state and performance. Lawyers must understand their emotional and mental states, identifying when they are most productive. Legal education traditionally emphasizes logical reasoning, often neglecting the role emotions play in performance. Embracing emotional literacy allows attorneys to become self-aware, manage their emotions effectively and tap into their emotions for peak performance in high-stress situations.

For example, if an attorney feels like they've missed an obvious argument, they may beat themselves up, returning to their mistake over and over. Instead, attorneys should practice sitting with that uncomfortable emotion. Acknowledging disappointment can be grounding. It gives you a moment to reflect on your potential for growth, allowing you to ultimately push forward.

## RESILIENCE

Specifically, athletes engage in "eustress," a positive, adrenaline-pumping form of stress that helps them grow and develop resilience. This concept applies directly to law, where stress is a daily reality. Instead of allowing stress to turn into distress, lawyers can learn to engage with it constructively. Developing coping mechanisms and stress management techniques can help lawyers stay within a eustress zone, fostering resilience and avoiding burnout.

When stress is viewed as an opportunity for growth, it becomes a powerful tool for personal and professional development. A "stress is enhancing" mindset can improve work performance and reduce negative health outcomes. Lawyers often face isolation and criticism, making them more vulnerable to adversity. Instead of avoiding stress, attorneys should embrace it, recognizing it as an opportunity for growth. By reframing their stress responses, lawyers can unlock motivational potential, channeling it into high-stakes challenges.

Managing stress responses can also lead to physiological benefits. When stress is properly channeled, it aids in cellular repair, protein synthesis and immunity – what researchers call "physiological thriving." Athletes use stress to build mental toughness, and similarly, lawyers can grow from their challenges by viewing stress as an integral part of professional growth. Lawyers learning to embrace stressful situations and the opportunities they present can lead to stronger connections, increased self-awareness and clearer priorities.

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Athletes often refer to being "in the zone" during peak performance, a state known as "flow." Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as complete engagement in an activity where nothing else matters. Some attorneys find flow when drafting legal documents, such as summary judgment briefs. Organizing the facts and law into a compelling argument begins to feel like assembling a puzzle. After entering this zone, an attorney may look up to find several hours have passed.

Lawyers can cultivate similar flow states in their work, though the conditions that enable flow vary. What works for one lawyer may not work for another. Identifying activities and environments that foster this state is essential for bringing meaning and purpose to a lawyer's career.

## INDIVIDUALIZED OPTIMIZATION

Well-being is a team sport, with employers playing a crucial role in supporting lawyers' mental health. Improving mental health and well-being in the legal profession requires a shift from individual resilience strategies to systemic cultural changes. [Research](#) shows law firms that value employees for their skills rather than just billable hours tend to have healthier and more productive lawyers. When lawyers feel valued, they report better mental and physical health and are less likely to leave the profession. Conversely, those who feel undervalued may struggle with mental health issues and higher attrition.

Successful well-being programs recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate. Tailoring resources to accommodate different learning styles can enhance engagement. Offering various mental health resources – such as Employee Assistance Programs, online platforms, and on-demand content – ensures attorneys receive the support they need. In addition to employer-provided resources, every state has a [lawyer assistance program](#) that can provide confidential counseling and other well-being support services. Prioritizing mental health initiatives creates a culture of well-being, benefiting both employees and clients.

The legal profession often views stress as an unavoidable downside of the job, but it doesn't have to be. By learning from the sports world, where stress is harnessed for growth, attorneys can cultivate resilience, emotional fitness and physiological thriving. Stress can serve as a force for improvement, mastery, and meaning in both personal and professional realms. By embracing stress, acknowledging its challenges and using it to fuel growth, attorneys can thrive under pressure and enjoy fulfilling careers. Creating supportive environments is a crucial step toward overcoming the stigma surrounding mental health in the legal profession.

With these strategies, the legal field can begin to foster environments which permit lawyers to perform their best in their respective "game sevens," ultimately leading to figurative "championships" for everyone involved.

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