

Navigating Perfectionism, Stigma, and Shame

A Lawyer-Therapist's Perspective on Staying Well in Trauma-Exposed Work

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Who Am I?

Law School Graduation
June 1994

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Our Goals for Today...

- Let's talk about lawyers, their mental health struggles, and solutions.
- How do we stay well when bearing witness to suffering?
- What is the impact of hearing, seeing, and reading about trauma daily, particularly on legal professionals?
- What are their personal risk factors for secondary traumatic stress and empathic strain?
- What strategies can we use to take stock, reduce trauma exposure, and reset?

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Justice Patrick Lesage

Former Chief Justice of the Ontario Superior Court of Justice

Image Source: https://professionallyspeaking.oct.ca/december_2011/ps/

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The Lawyer Personality

The Good Stuff:

- Intelligent
- Persistent
- Autonomous
- Problem solvers/helpers/fixers

The Not-So-Good Stuff:

- Self-judging and shameful
- Isolating
- Perfectionistic
- Reluctant to seek help when needed



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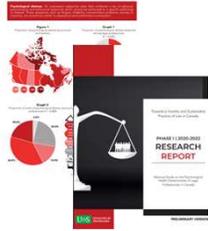
The Impact

National Study on the Mental Health of the Legal Profession in Canada found:

Psychological Distress

Overall, **59.4%** of legal professionals experience psychological distress.

- Groups experiencing the highest levels of distress:
- Women legal professionals - 63.7%
- Legal professionals with fewer than 10 years' experience - 70.8%
- Legal professionals living with a disability - 74.3%
- Legal professionals who identify as LGBTQ2S+ - 69.3%



Calderon, N., Calderon, L., Grinin, M., Fourrier, P. L., Caya, O., Craggan, M., & Gaboriau, J. (2022). Towards a healthy and sustainable practice of law in Canada: National study on the psychological health determinants of legal professionals in Canada. *ibid* (1 (2020-2022)).

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The Impact

Depression

Overall, **28.6%** of legal professionals experience "moderate to severe" depression disorder.
General public (measured in late 2020) **15%**.

Groups experiencing the highest levels of depression:

- > Legal professionals with fewer than 10 years' experience – 36.4%
- > Indigenous legal professionals – 33.3%
- > Legal professionals working in the education sector – 31.4%



Photo by CIRA/CA

Cadieux, N., Cadieux, J., Couin, M., Fournier, P. L., Caya, O., Giguere, M., & Gauthier, J. (2022). Towards a healthy and sustainable practice of law in Canada: National study on the psychological health determinants of legal professionals in Canada, phase 1 (2020-2022).

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The Impact

Anxiety

Overall, **35.7%** of legal professionals experience anxiety disorder.
General public (measured in late 2020) **13%**.

Groups experiencing the highest levels of anxiety:

- > Legal professionals with fewer than 15 years' experience – 45.2%
- > Women legal professionals – 42.6%
- > Legal professionals in private practice – 36.8%



Cadieux, N., Cadieux, J., Couin, M., Fournier, P. L., Caya, O., Giguere, M., & Gauthier, J. (2022). Towards a healthy and sustainable practice of law in Canada: National study on the psychological health determinants of legal professionals in Canada, phase 1 (2020-2022).

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The Impact

Suicidal Ideation

Overall, **24.1%** of legal professionals reported having had suicidal thoughts during their practice.

11.8% of Canadians reported having suicidal thoughts at some point in their lives.

In 2016, **11.5%** of US lawyers reported having had suicidal thoughts during their careers.



Cadieux, N., Cadieux, J., Couin, M., Fournier, P. L., Caya, O., Giguere, M., & Gauthier, J. (2022). Towards a healthy and sustainable practice of law in Canada: National study on the psychological health determinants of legal professionals in Canada, phase 1 (2020-2022).

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The Impact

Burnout

Overall, **55.9%** of legal professionals experienced moderate to severe burnout.

Groups experiencing the highest levels of burnout:

- > Women legal professionals under 40: 67.4%
- > Legal professionals living with a disability: 69.8%
- > Legal professionals identifying as LGBTQ2S+: 62.7%
- > Legal Professionals in Nunavut: 81.2%



Collopy, N., Cadieux, J., Gauthier, M., Fournier, P. L., Goye, O., Giguere, M., & Collopy, J. (2022). Towards a healthy and sustainable practice of law in Canada: National study on the psychological health determinants of legal professionals in Canada, phase 1 (2020-2022).

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Using the term *burnout* as an umbrella term is a **mistake**

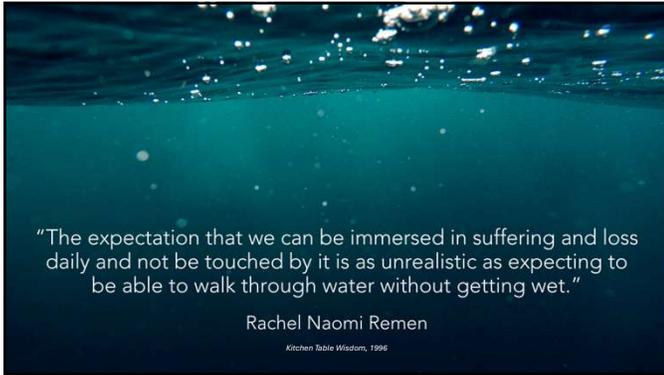


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What is the sweet spot between caring **too much** and **not at all**?

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We prefer *Empathic Strain*

COMPASSION FATIGUE

Some experts believe that compassion fatigue is a misnomer because it is not fatiguing to extend compassion to others.⁷

<https://www.canadianveterinarians.net/media/twzch4en/recognizing-the-signs-of-burnout-and-compassion-fatigue.pdf>

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<p>Empathy</p> <p>The capacity to share the feelings of others.</p> <p>“Feeling with”</p>	<p>Compassion</p> <p>Concern for another’s suffering accompanied by a motivation to alleviate that suffering</p> <p>“How can I help?”</p>
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Singer, T., & Killackey, D. M. (2014). Empathy and compassion. *Current Biology*, 24(18), R875–R876. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.06.054>

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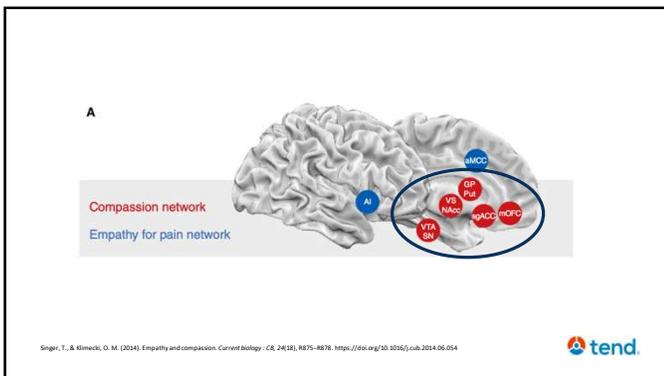


Compassion is a **verb**.

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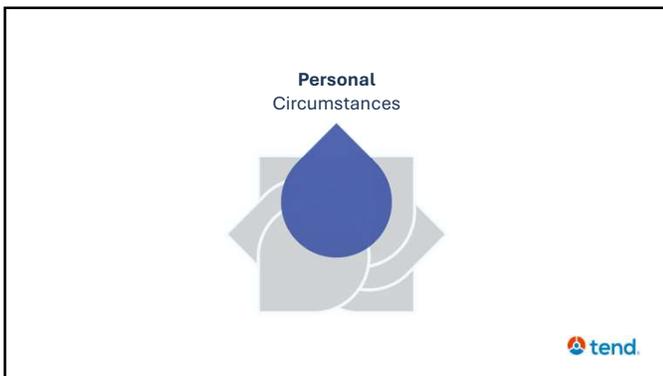
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Contributing Factors

Personal Circumstances

- Caregiving demands.
- Navigating a challenging family crisis.
- Mental or physical health challenges.



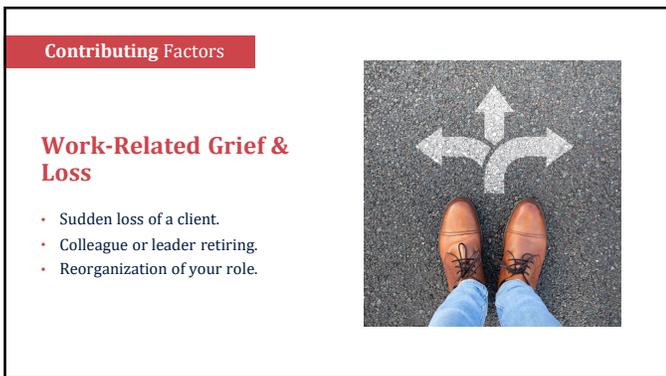
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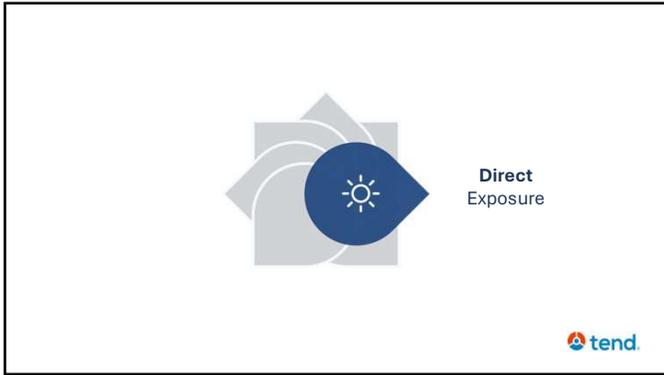
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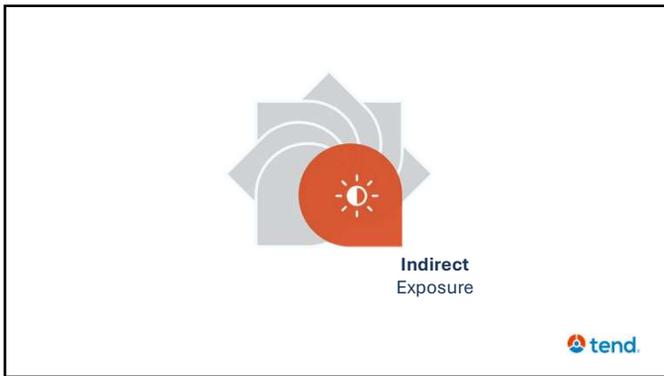
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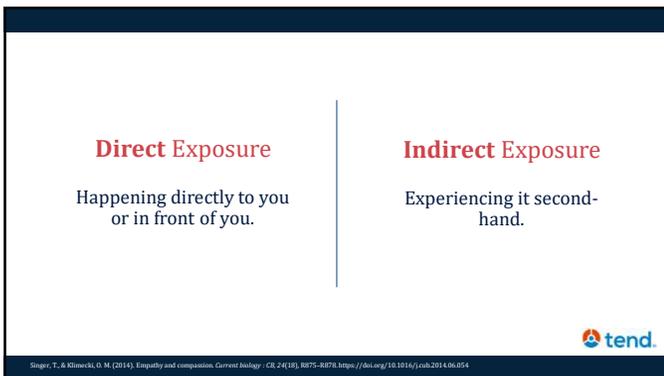
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Secondary Traumatic Stress
(also known as vicarious traumatization)

The experience of being traumatized by **second-hand trauma exposure**.

These experiences are often those that haunt you or seem to "hitch a ride with you" after hearing, seeing, or reading about them.



Secondary Traumatic Stress Consortium, <https://www.stsconsortium.com/what-is-sts>

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System Challenges



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Contributing Factors

System Challenges

- Barriers to service like frustrating court staff.
- Unreasonable judges.
- Self-represented opposing party.
- Unjust or frustration policies or procedures.



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Moral Distress

Inconsistencies between a helpers' beliefs and their actions in practice.

When policies or routines conflict with beliefs about service provision.



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Moral distress can happen when we know what the "right thing" to do is – **but we are unable to act on it.**

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Working
Conditions



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Contributing Factors

Working Conditions

- Unmanageable workloads.
- Low compensation.
- Lack of flexible schedules.
- Quality of relationships with supervisors and peers.



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Socio-Cultural
Context



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Contributing Factors

Socio-Cultural Context

- Current crisis or cultural shift.
- Being asked to do things outside of your scope of work due to your race, language, or identity, e.g., Tokenism.
- Lack of representation.
- DEI misinterpretations.



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Fatigue, strain, and “wear & tear” can **amplify**



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Step #2
Assess Where
You Are



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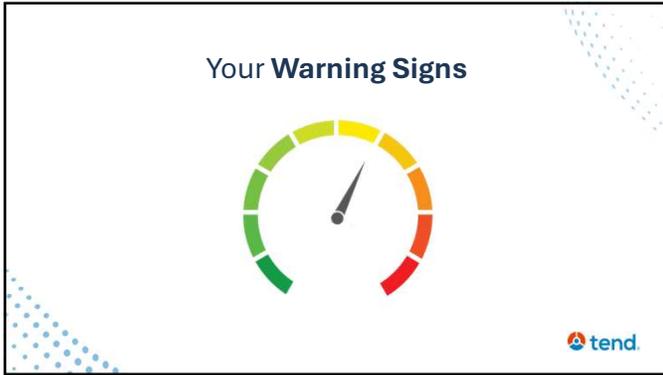
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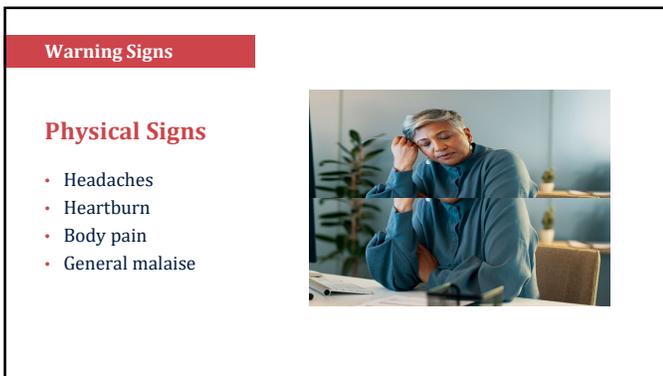
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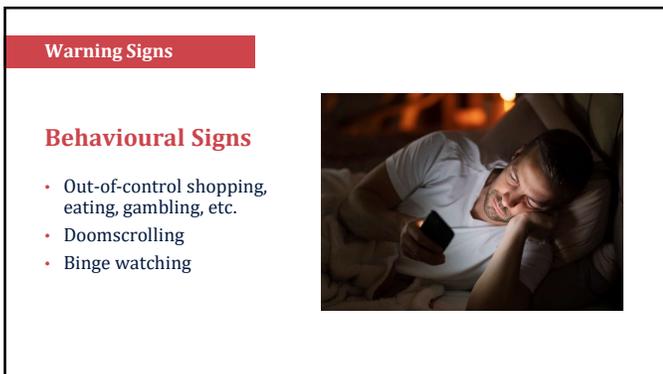
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Warning Signs

Psychological / Emotional Signs

- Anger
- Irritability
- Numbing out
- Cynicism



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What are your big three warning signs?

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How do your **loved ones** know when you're in the yellow zone?

How can they help?



Photo by CIRA/CA

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How do your **colleagues** know when you're in the yellow zone?

How can they help?



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Step #4
Examine Your Rituals



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Start of the Day

- What am I grateful for?
- What can I let go of?
- What is my intention today?



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End of the Day

- What went well today and how did I contribute?
- What did not go so well and how can I let it be?
- Where do I need to focus my attention now to be more present as I transition home?



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Other Suggestions

- Sleep Hygiene
- News/Social Media Diet
- Radical Self-Compassion
- Serenity Prayer
- Boundaries – Learning to say “No”
- Peer support/mentorship
- Leader vulnerability and kindness



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Key Takeaways from Today...

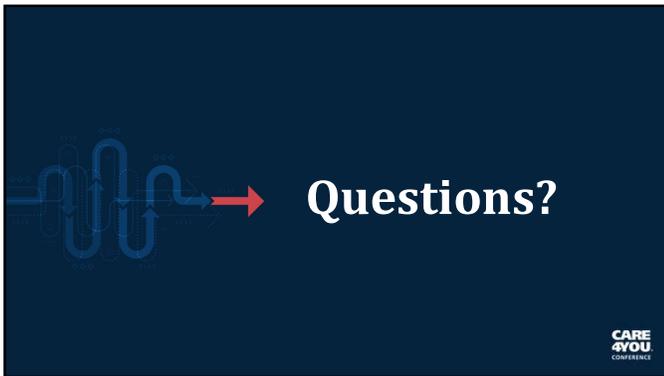


- Recognize your contributing factors.
- Identify your warning signs.
- Let your loved ones and colleagues know what we need.
- Understand the impact of wear and tear.
- Social support, breaks, and flexibility!

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