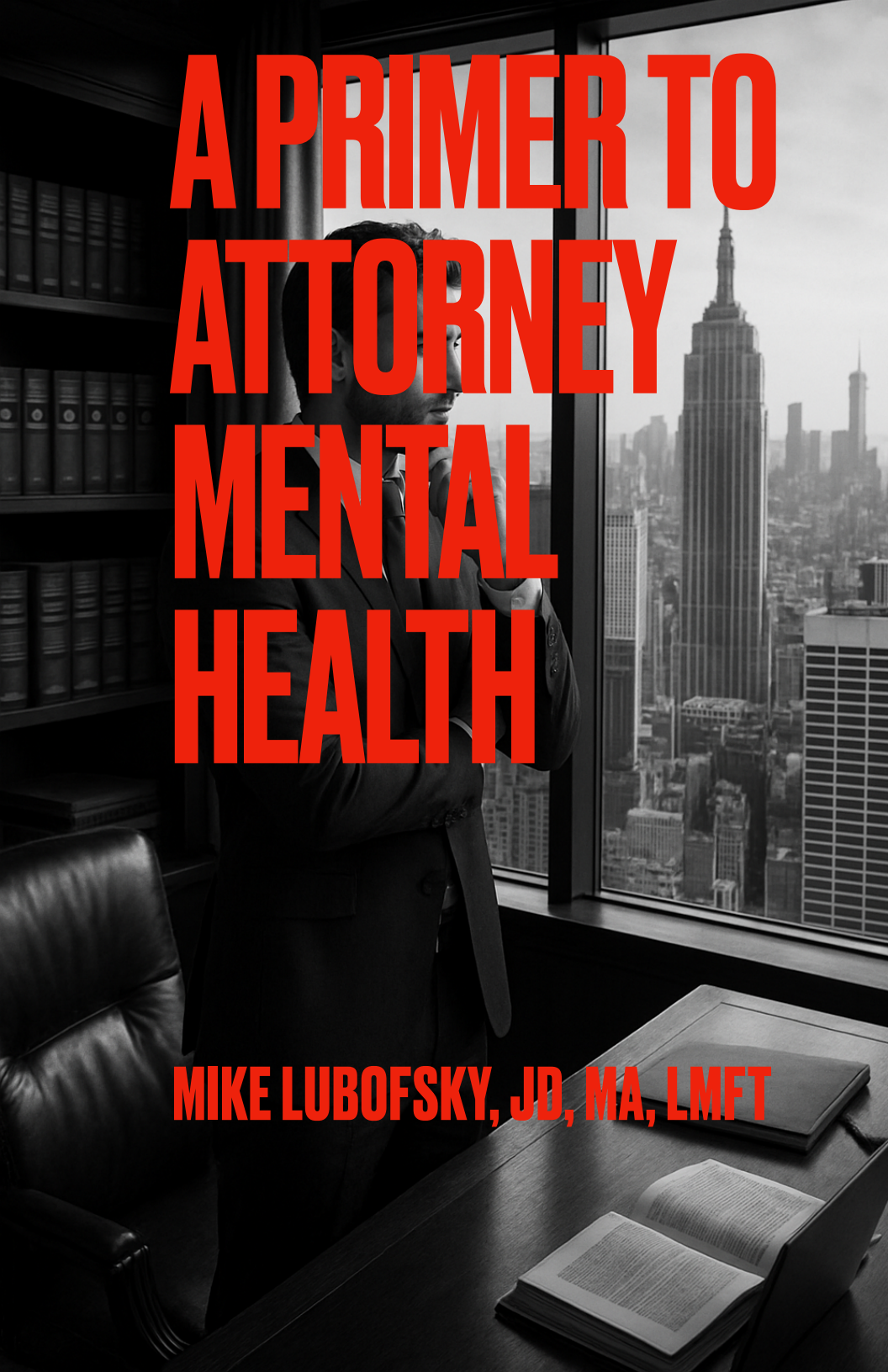


A black and white photograph of a man in a dark suit and tie, standing in a law office. He is looking out a large window at a city skyline, with the Empire State Building being the most prominent feature. To his left are bookshelves filled with law books. In the foreground, a leather office chair is partially visible, and a desk holds an open book and a closed folder. The title 'A PRIMER TO ATTORNEY MENTAL HEALTH' is overlaid in large, bold, red capital letters.

A PRIMER TO ATTORNEY MENTAL HEALTH

MIKE LUBOFSKY, JD, MA, LMFT

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INTRODUCTION

Attorneys experience **anxiety, depression, substance misuse, and burnout at rates nearly double the U.S. adult population**. As my previous article *Environmental Origins of Lawyers' Psychological Distress* explains, much of this crisis cannot be understood through workplace stressors alone—its roots stretch back to early conditioning, reinforced through legal education, and amplified in practice environments. This Guide synthesizes insights from across my previous published work to help attorneys recognize:

1. **Why mental health struggles are so common in law,**
2. **How legal training and practice shape emotional patterns,**
3. **What steps attorneys can take toward psychological well-being, and**
4. **Why choosing a psychotherapist with legal experience is transformational.**

It is also designed to encourage attorneys to visit AttorneyTherapists.com, the only directory created by attorney therapists for attorney clients seeking informed, specialized psychological help.

PART I: UNDERSTANDING WHY ATTORNEYS STRUGGLE EMOTIONALLY

1. Early Family Conditioning and the Path to Law

My extensive experience conducting professional psychotherapy with attorneys practicing in myriad environments suggest a striking pattern: **many attorneys grew up in households where emotional expression was discouraged but academic excellence was rewarded.** In such families, children often learned that achievement—not vulnerability—was the currency of safety and approval.

Over time:

- **Performance replaced authentic emotional attunement,**
- **Intellectual mastery became a coping mechanism,** and
- **Self-worth became contingent on achievement.**

These early patterns create highly capable, disciplined adults—qualities that make law school appealing and law practice attainable. But they also plant seeds for later emotional distress.

2. Intellectualization: A Strength That Becomes a Barrier

A dominant theme that has taken root in many of the attorneys with whom I have worked is that **attorneys rely excessively on the intellect as their primary mode of self-regulation.**

- They *analyze* emotions instead of *feeling* them.
- They treat personal struggles as problems to solve.
- They retreat to cognition when vulnerability arises.

This cognitive dominance is rewarded in law school, where the Socratic method and doctrinal parsing reinforce the belief that **emotional experience is irrelevant—or dangerous.**

In *Academic Performance, Emotional Deficiency, and the Attorney's Psychological Dilemma*, I note that this over-reliance on intellect can ultimately produce:

- Chronic anxiety,
- Emotional numbness,
- Strained relationships, and
- A fragile, achievement-dependent sense of self.

3. Outcome Fixation and the Legal Mind

Attorneys are conditioned—professionally and psychologically—to **fixate on outcomes:**

- Case results
- Billable hours

- Client satisfaction
- Partner approval
- Settlement figures

In *Attorney Stress and Overlap with PTSD*, I describe how this outcome-driven orientation can generate symptoms resembling PTSD, including hyper-vigilance, intrusive thinking, and emotional reactivity.

In *Letting Go of the Outcome*, I explain a deeper paradox: attorneys often feel emotionally safest when attempting to control everything—yet **their peace depends on learning to relinquish this control.**

4. Compartmentalization and the Fractured Self

Attorneys are trained to set aside personal feelings to serve client interests. Over time:

- **Compartmentalization becomes a lifestyle,**
- Emotional states become inaccessible, and
- Personal relationships suffer.

In *When Compartmentalization Becomes a Way of Life*, I posit that long-term emotional inhibition leads to fragmentation, internal disintegration, and increased reliance on substances or addictive behaviors as compensatory mechanisms.

This disintegration often manifests as:

- Emotional detachment
- A sense of “going through the motions”

- Difficulty feeling joy, connection, or purpose

5. BigLaw as a Neurobiological Conditioning System

Elite law firms, i.e., “BigLaw” often amplify the aforementioned preexisting vulnerabilities in subtle ways described below:

The Neuroscience of Status

Prestige acts like a neurochemical reward system: unpredictable praise, “important” assignments, and partnership cues trigger **dopamine surges**, creating an addictive cycle of striving.

The Mirage of Wellbeing in BigLaw

The immense rewards—compensation, status, influence—mask a psychological trap:

- Success becomes addictive.
- Personal life narrows.
- Emotional and spiritual needs go unmet.

This produces chronic anxiety, depression, and identity loss.

6. The Striving Mindset

Finally, in *The Striving Mindset in Attorneys*, I articulate perhaps the most foundational insight of all:

Attorneys equate self-worth with achievement so deeply that the idea of “not striving” feels like an existential threat.

This mindset is ego-syntonic—it feels like who the attorney *is*.

Yet it creates:

- Exhaustion
- Emotional depletion
- Difficulty experiencing joy
- Fear of slowing down
- Chronic dissatisfaction despite “success”

PART II: WHY TRADITIONAL THERAPY OFTEN FAILS ATTORNEYS

Many attorneys seek psychotherapy only after years of suffering. But as many of my attorney clients have expressed to me over the years, **traditional therapy often fails when the therapist does not deeply understand the legal mind.**

Reasons include:

- Attorneys intellectualize the work.
- They approach therapy as another productivity tool.
- They fear emotional exposure.
- They resist the ambiguity inherent in experiential therapies.
- They expect linear, outcome-based “solutions.”

In my previous article *Hourly Billing, Attorney Identity, and the Therapeutic Challenge*, I describe how attorneys often try to turn therapy into another domain for “billable-hour logic.”

This leads to:

- Premature termination,
- Superficial treatment, and
- Minimal emotional transformation.

PART III: WHY ATTORNEYS BENEFIT FROM PSYCHOTHERAPISTS WITH LEGAL EXPERIENCE

Attorneys need psychotherapists who understand the legal world from the inside.

Reasons include:

1. Lived credibility

As my article at *The Striving Mindset* notes, attorneys are skeptical of clinicians who do not grasp the pressures, hierarchies, and cultural norms of practice. Therapists with legal backgrounds immediately bypass this resistance.

2. Accurate interpretation of attorney-specific defenses

Legal intellectualization is not simple “resistance”—it is a highly adaptive survival skill. Therapist-attorneys understand its function

and know how to gently shift clients toward emotional engagement.

3. Knowledge of professional conditioning

Therapists with legal experience understand:

- Billable-hour identity structures
- Compartmentalization norms
- BigLaw prestige-conditioning
- Outcome-driven reward systems

4. Ability to help integrate the attorney identity

Therapists who have practiced law know the difference between:

- “Letting go” and “failing,”
- “Stillness” and “idleness,”
- “Vulnerability” and “weakness.”

This allows them to guide attorneys through the frightening process of rebalancing intellect with emotional presence.

5. Significantly improved therapeutic alliance

When the client believes “*this person actually gets my world,*” the work can deepen far more quickly.

PART IV: PRACTICAL STEPS ATTORNEYS CAN TAKE TO IMPROVE THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

Attorneys seeking psychological well-being should consider the following:

1. Recognize the developmental roots of distress

Understanding that patterns began in childhood reduces shame and opens space for genuine healing.

2. Begin noticing intellectualization in real time

Track moments when you analyze instead of feel.

3. Practice tolerating uncertainty and “not knowing”

Shift from outcome control to experiential presence.

4. Integrate contemplative or mindfulness-based practices

These help develop psychological flexibility and emotional capacity.

5. Reevaluate the striving mindset

Ask whether striving serves you—or whether it drives your suffering.

6. Seek therapy with a psychotherapist who understands law from the inside

This is perhaps the most impactful step of all.

PART V: HOW ATTORNEYTHERAPISTS.COM HELPS ATTORNEYS BEGIN THIS PROCESS

AttorneyTherapists.com was created for exactly this purpose.

The platform allows attorneys to:

- **Find psychotherapists who previously practiced law,**
- **Access articles and resources written by attorney-therapists,**
- **Explore legal-specific frameworks for psychotherapy,**
- **Receive specialized support tailored to the attorney psyche,**
- **Work with clinicians who understand billable-hour culture, outcome fixation, BigLaw conditioning, and intellectualization firsthand.**

Attorneys no longer need to educate their therapists about the pressures of legal life. They can begin meaningful therapeutic work from the *first* session.

CONCLUSION

Healing Is Possible—With the Right Support

Attorneys are not emotionally broken; they are conditioned.

Legal training amplifies patterns that once served a purpose but no longer do. Your body of writing makes clear that **the path forward is not about abandoning intellect or ambition—but about integrating them with emotional presence, humility, and connection.**

By working with psychotherapists who truly understand the legal profession, attorneys can:

- Reduce anxiety and depression,
- Reconnect with meaning and relationships,
- Experience internal calm,
- Develop emotional resilience,
- And ultimately live not only successfully—but fully.

To begin this process, visit AttorneyTherapists.com and connect with a qualified therapist who has walked the same professional road and understands the psychological terrain of law from the inside out.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Lubofsky, JD, MA, LMFT, is a California-licensed psychotherapist and attorney whose career uniquely bridges the legal and mental-health professions. A graduate of Boston University School of Law (J.D., with honors), the Wright Institute in Berkeley (M.A. in Psychology), and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (B.A., cum laude), Mike is widely recognized as a leading psychotherapist for attorneys in the United States. After more than two decades practicing law, he transitioned into psychotherapy to address the profound psychological challenges facing members of the legal profession. He is the founder of AttorneyTherapists.com, a national resource providing

attorney-specific mental-health information, training, and access to qualified psychotherapists who also have legal backgrounds. In addition to his private practice focused on attorneys and other high-stress professionals, Mike serves as a Mental Health Hearing Officer for the Superior Court of California, County of Alameda, and regularly consults with clinicians and law firms on the intersection of legal culture, professional identity formation, and psychological well-being. His work integrates clinical expertise, firsthand legal experience, and an ongoing commitment to improving the mental health and resilience of practicing lawyers.