

Arizona Attorneys:  
*Happier Than You*

BY PEARLETTE J. RAMOS



HILTON ARCHIVE/ette Collection © ISTOCK/011

# Think

**PEARLETTE J. RAMOS**, who has been a lawyer for more than 15 years, conducted this dissertation research (titled “Well-Being: A Study of Attorney Beliefs, Attitudes and Perceptions”) to complete her doctoral studies in psychology. The study, which was authorized by the State Bar of Arizona Board of Governors, was intended to illuminate attorney perceptions concerning well-being, clarify the factors that enhance and hinder well-being, and make meaning of lawyers’ experiences. Dr. Ramos may be reached at [pearlette@attorneywell-being.com](mailto:pearlette@attorneywell-being.com).

In the spring of this year, Arizona lawyers were asked about their well-being. More than 700 lawyers responded to survey and focus group questions. This article describes our findings.

Contrary to common perception, lawyers have a high sense of well-being. Despite facing high levels of work-related stress, many lawyers find happiness and satisfaction in their lives and careers. But as one might imagine, well-being is influenced by many personal and professional challenges that make modern law practice a precarious path to tread.

## Overall Well-Being and Satisfaction

Arizona attorneys reported experiencing a positive sense of well-being. In addition, 73.8 percent of lawyers admitted they found their lives and career as a whole satisfying, and 86.1 percent enjoyed their practice areas. However, almost as many (72.9 percent) simultaneously acknowledged that law practice is inherently stressful. Attorneys pointed to several key factors that made them feel satisfied with life despite their significant work obligations:

- **Life and Career Satisfaction:** Those who enjoyed their lives and careers were happier.
- **Autonomy:** Lawyers who had more freedom and independence at work felt a greater sense of well-being.
- **Experience (Age):** Attorneys who practiced law longer had higher well-being scores.
- **Practice Area:** Lawyers who enjoyed their practice areas and those who worked in alternative dispute resolution, medical malpractice, or as public

lawyers had higher well-being scores.

- **Stress Relief:** Lawyers were happier if they had support from family and friends, engaged in activities outside of work (e.g., volunteer, travel, social groups, creative writing, cooking), maintained healthy lifestyle habits (e.g., exercise, eating well), and relied on spiritual practices and other coping strategies during challenging times.

Before we dig into the survey results, we should explore one key question: Why bother asking at all?

## Why Examine Attorney Well-Being?

Work-related demands can wreak havoc on attorneys’ lives. Stories of successful lawyers who fall victim to the perils of a busy practice are very common. At first, lawyers under stress may start to bend the rules, take shortcuts or fail to communicate with their clients. As time demands and the pressure to perform increase, so does the level of anxiety, stress and dissatisfaction with

work. Eventually, lawyers may withdraw from family and friends, become disgruntled, and suffer from depression. Prolonged unaddressed stress can lead to severe personal and professional consequences, including malpractice allegations, substance abuse, disbarment and suicide.

The typical work demands of law practice are exacerbated when you factor in client interactions. Clients who have mental health issues, have experienced trauma, or are volatile and vindictive pose additional risks to attorney well-being. Managing difficult client situations is something most lawyers will experience at some point during their careers, although they often aren’t trained on how to manage these interactions or the stress they will likely experience as a result.

Many lawyers will de-emphasize or ignore their own emotional and mental reactions to difficult client situations. This is potentially dangerous. After awhile, even the most astute lawyer may become vulnerable to intense and sometimes overwhelming feelings (e.g., compassion, sympathy, empathetic engagement) that could disrupt their own beliefs and emotions and lead to secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, burnout, and other mental and physical impairments. (See “Depression, Substance Abuse, Career Dissatisfaction,” p. 24.)

## A Study of Arizona Attorney Well-Being

This research study was conducted in two parts using both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus groups) methods to answer the primary research question:



# Happier Than You Think

*What is the perception of well-being among Arizona Bar members?* The first part included the Psychological Well-Being Scale (“Scale”), a 54-question survey, which measured well-being across six dimensions.

Psychological Well-Being is a multifaceted construct made up of life attitudes that takes into account the dynamic process of striving toward congruence, living up to one’s potential, attaining optimal psychological growth, and finding meaning in life. The scale’s six dimensions include:

- **Self-acceptance:** An individual’s sense of self-acceptance, which is a central feature of mental health and a characteristic of self-actualization, denotes optimal functioning and maturity.
- **Positive relations with others:** The ability to love, trust and establish deep relationships with others.
- **Autonomy:** A focus inward on self-

determination, independence, with an internal locus of control.

- **Environmental mastery:** Includes the ability to choose or create environments suitable to the individual’s psychic conditions, advance in the world, and change it to meet needs.
- **Purpose in life:** The beliefs that give one the feeling of purpose and meaning in life with goals, intentions and a sense of direction.
- **Personal growth:** The ability to continue to develop one’s potential and expand as a person.

Work-related demands can wreak havoc on attorneys’ lives. Stories of successful lawyers who fall victim to the perils of a busy practice are very common.

A high autonomy score suggests that the person is self-determining and independent, is able to resist social pressure, and regulates behavior from within; a low score suggests that the person is concerned about the assessment of others, relies on others to make decisions, and obeys social pressures. In addition, high scores in other areas indicate that the person has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment (environmental mastery); has a feeling of continued development and sees the self as growing and expanding (personal growth); has warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others (positive relations with others); has goals in life and a sense of directedness (purpose in life); and has a positive attitude toward the self while acknowledging and accepting multiple aspects of the self, including good and bad qualities (self-acceptance). Low scores indicate the opposite (e.g., the participant is concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others [autonomy], has difficulty managing everyday affairs [environmental mastery]).

The second part of the research included two focus group discussions with 9 and 7 lawyers. Attorney beliefs, attitudes and perceptions were examined concerning: (1) well-being, generally; (2) the legal culture; (3) factors that contribute to or detract from satisfaction at work; (4) the impact of working with clients (e.g., listening to client problems and traumatic stories); (5) whether spirituality influences

## Depression, Substance Abuse, Career Dissatisfaction

Much research to date on lawyers has focused on depression, substance abuse and career dissatisfaction. In fact, some researchers and legal scholars consider the legal profession the most unhappy and unhealthy of all professions.

Research has shown that lawyers seem to be unhappy, and there is a relation between the practice of law and career dissatisfaction. In fact, scholars and researchers have agreed that lawyers experience higher rates of anxiety, hostility and paranoia than do other professionals; they drink to excess more than people in other occupations; and they have the highest rate of suicide of any profession.

No comprehensive studies have examined the entire legal profession; however, some studies have investigated specific conditions such as depression, suicide and substance abuse among lawyers. For example, a 1991 Johns Hopkins University study found that attorneys had the highest rates of depression among 104 occupations, and lawyers were three times as likely to suffer from depression than the norm.

Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, a nonprofit association of Boston lawyers that was created more than 30 years ago as a support group for lawyers with drinking problems, reported a rise in the stress levels of people in the profession: Depression and anxiety have equaled or surpassed alcohol and drugs in what the group called a “presenting problem” for 5 out of the past 10 years. In 2005, depression or anxiety was cited by 26 percent of all lawyers who sought counseling; alcohol and drugs were cited by 21 percent; and the number of lawyers who sought depression counseling jumped to 60 percent when the tally included those who wanted help with career and practice management assistance. In a study of Washington lawyers, 33 percent of respondents suffered from depression, a drinking problem, or cocaine abuse.

well-being; (6) how creativity is used at work; (7) how attorneys cope with adversity, stress, or change at work; and (8) suggestions for improving attorney well-being. (See “Procedure, Demographics, Other Findings,” below.)

## Understanding Attorney Experiences

Feedback from the survey and the focus groups contributed some understanding of attorney well-being; namely, attorney well-

being is affected by many internal and external factors. Members of both focus groups reported that they enjoyed their practice area, and 87.5 percent acknowledged that they felt satisfied with their life and career. Although participants acknowledged that they were inspired to become lawyers for varying reasons, there was almost unanimous agreement that a primary motivator was a desire and commitment to be of service to others. To help clients achieve their goals was a key motivator. The following three major themes emerged from the focus group discussion and provide insight concerning the survey results.

## Procedure, Demographics, Other Findings

The State Bar forwarded to each potential participant, via email, a request to participate in the survey. Of the approximate 14,494 attorneys who were sent an email asking them to complete the Psychological Well-Being Scale, 691 responded, representing a 4.7 percent response rate. At the conclusion of the survey, each participant was asked to provide demographic information (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, income range, length of time in practice, practice area). In addition, each participant answered a self-report question, on a six-point scale, regarding their satisfaction with their life and career as a lawyer.

Attorneys who responded to the scale ranged in age from 21 to more than 71 years (median = 48 years) and were mostly males (53.3 percent), married (71.6 percent), had children (65 percent), and were Caucasian (93.3 percent). Almost all the participants were practicing law when they completed the survey (98 percent). The vast majority practiced law in Maricopa County (73.1 percent), followed by Pima County (24.3 percent), Pinal County (11.6 percent), Yavapai County (7.5 percent), and Coconino County (7.2 percent). Slightly less than half the lawyers (46.4 percent) had practiced law for more than 14 years (median = 18 years), and half of them graduated from an in-state law school (50 percent). The median income was \$75,000.

Survey participants worked in various practice areas. The highest concentration of attorneys was in litigation (215 respondents, 31.1 percent), criminal law (137 respondents, 19.8 percent), business law (120 respondents, 17.4 percent), and real estate (108 respondents, 15.6 percent).

The survey results suggest there is a relationship between stress and well-being. For example, those who responded “no” to whether they considered their daily work to be stressful (27.1 percent) had higher psychological well-being. Essentially, attorneys who view their work as stress-free had a greater sense of well-being. Conversely, 73.8 percent reported that they were satisfied with their life and career as lawyers, including 30.2 percent who identified as “somewhat satisfied,” 36.5 percent who identified as “very satisfied,” and 7.1 percent who reported themselves as “completely satisfied.”

Focus group participants were recruited based on advertisements submitted to several online State Bar publications, including *eLegal*, the Bar’s online newsletter, and affiliated bars, such as the Arizona Black Bar Association, Los Abogados Hispanic Bar Association, the Arizona Asian American Bar Association, and the Native American Bar Association of Arizona. Each attorney who expressed an interest in participating in the study was contacted via email, and the purpose and scope of the study were explained. The first 20 individuals who agreed to participate were selected. Sixteen focus group participants discussed their beliefs, attitudes and perceptions concerning the dynamics that influence well-being. The first focus group included five men and four women who had a median age of 58. The second included four men and three women and had a median age of 43. The median income for both groups was \$125,000.

### 1. Lawyering Is Satisfying and Meaningful Despite the Stressful Nature of Law Practice.

There was unanimous agreement that the practice of law is riddled with work-related stressors. Some stressors are common in all practice areas, whereas others may be limited to certain specialties. Examples of everyday stressors include litigation practice, the role of sole practitioners as business owners, court maneuvering, deadlines, contentiousness among lawyers, negative public perception, the adversarial nature of law practice, billable hours, the expectation to work long hours, and client interactions within the attorney–client relationship (e.g., unreasonable expectations and time requirements, clients’ emotional demands, management and resolution of client problems, attention to client problems and traumatic stories, and personal attachments and friendship).

Some attorneys related personal examples of the routine stressors they face. For example, one lawyer said, “As a litigator, of course, it’s inherently stressful because you’ve got an opponent who’s trying to keep you and your clients from getting what the two of you are trying to get. There’s no way around it.” Another discussed the ethical dilemma and stress he has faced as a result of advocating on behalf of angry and vindictive clients:

I have clients coming to me all the time that are angry, that want to be vindictive, that part of their objective is to hurt and to cost someone money and do whatever—all negative things. Now I try and not let that influence the way



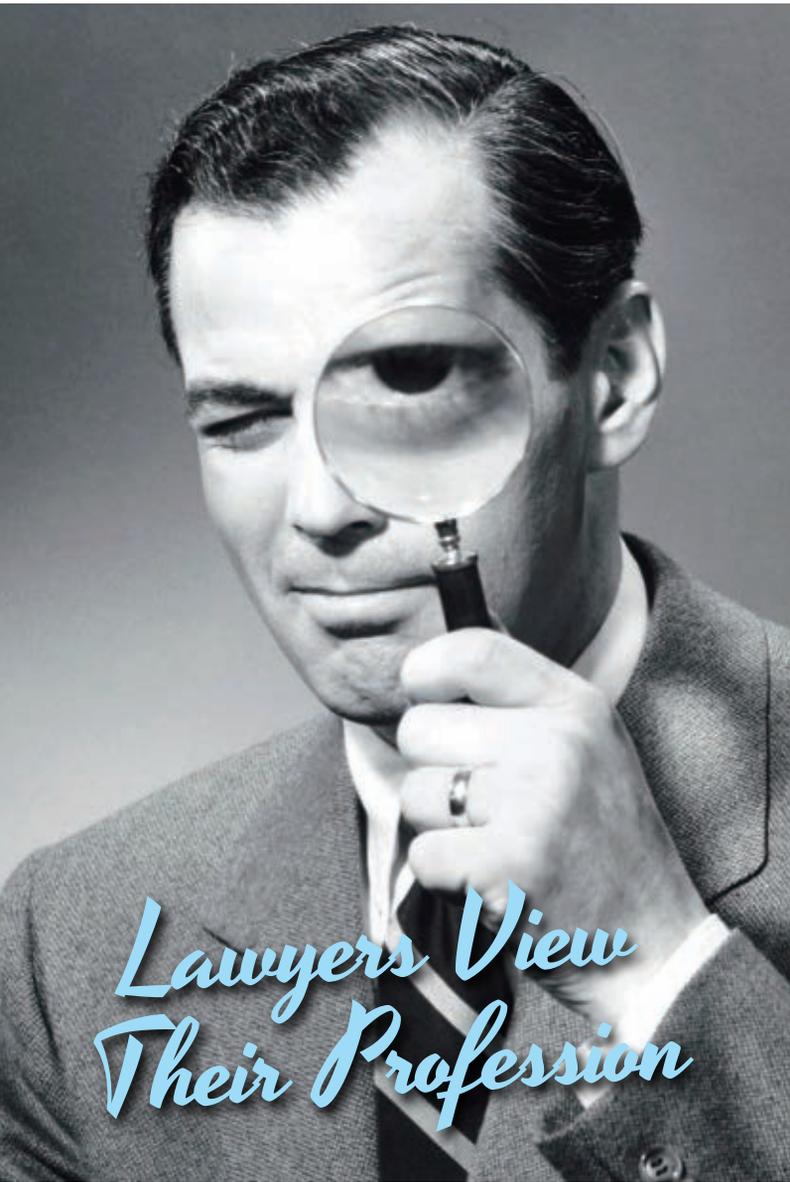
# Happier Than You Think

I run my cases, but I know at the end of the day, my clients are probably more satisfied by having someone else's life made worse than necessarily even winning. And that's just reality. I can't talk

them out of that oftentimes, and that does trouble me at points. I wonder sometimes if there's a tally sheet around.

In spite of the stressful nature of law prac-

tice, the majority of attorneys were satisfied with their lives and careers. Attorneys are resilient, and they employ various coping skills to manage their stress. In discussing their sense of satisfaction and well-being,



## Lawyers View Their Profession

The following are a sample of comments offered by lawyers in response to the survey or focus group interactions.

### Stressors

When I have a client and I'm managing a litigation matter, I go home with knots in my stomach. If I have a transactional matter, I think there's a big difference.

I represent debtors and creditors inside and outside of bankruptcy. The challenge of being a sole practitioner, being a businessman as well as an attorney, can be a grind sometimes.

- I chose not to be a litigation attorney because it makes me crazy. It puts me in so much stress. Stress is part and parcel of every high-end profession, whether you're a lawyer or a doctor.
- I used to do more civil litigation. There were so many days where I'd go in thinking I really don't want to make that phone call or I'm really hoping that other lawyer doesn't call me. I mean, it was constantly contentious.
- There are those that we refer to as e-vicious attorneys. The ones that play games. The ones who flood your fax machines starting at 4:30 p.m. on a Friday night with 97 pages knowing you're self-employed. Or the ones that send the vicious letters demanding an immediate response when they know darn well you're in trial. And sometimes it's your own client who wants to know why you are not immediately responding to their 16 emails, 14 texts, and 6 phone calls regarding some obscure issue. Being able to successfully disconnect at the end of the day is hard.
- I felt the weight of the world on me at all times, especially when I was handling some of these sex crime cases where if I screwed up, this little kid could be molested again. That was far more stressful than even my divorce clients are. When people say how on earth can you do divorce law,

when I tell you what I used to do, this is a freaking cakewalk.

- As a prosecutor, the worst thing that ever happened to me was when I won a case I thought I should have lost. The defendant brought up something and I thought, "Well, that would be reasonable doubt." And I was ready to dismiss everything, and that was really convincing. And the judge said, "Guilty." That was the worst thing that happened to me because I didn't think it was fair and, at that point, there was nothing I could do.
- A job as a prosecutor is great. Everything from the practical side of things of not having billables, merit protection, not having to worry about keeping different personalities happy.
- In the workers' comp practice, there's maybe a couple of dozen defense lawyers I'm dealing with regularly. There's a dozen judges. We all know one another. It's a small little subculture. So if there's a bad actor, you're going to be dealing with these same people time and time again and it's going to blow up in your face.
- I practiced in three different areas of law in my career, over the last 18 years, and [how lawyers are perceived] depended on what I was doing. When I was a prosecutor, I think the public percep-

participants mentioned several contributing factors: helping people achieve their goals, making a difference, solving problems, having a sense of freedom (control) over work, having good health, having amicable col-

leagues, being engaged in volunteer work, intellectually stimulating work/careers, having positive relations with family and friends, participating in recreational activities (e.g., travel), focusing on spiritual and religious

beliefs (e.g., the Golden Rule) and practices, making a good living, and using their creativity (e.g., as a form of problem-solving, artistic pursuits).

(For additional examples of lawyer com-

tion of me was sky high. I could literally do no wrong. I could explain to people what I did for a living and they would thank me for my service, and life was good. Pay was horrible but life was good. When I became a divorce attorney, the public perception, I now hid what I do for a living. When asked, I may mutter I'm an attorney. If they push, I may say I'm a family law attorney. I will avoid whenever possible mentioning the *D* word.

## Adversarial Structure

- ✦ The reason I thought about leaving [the practice of law], I was a litigator and despised the contentiousness of it. I just didn't accept that it had to be that confrontational. I also got very bored and disgusted with discovery—answering interrogatories and propounding interrogatories, admissions.
- ✦ I wake up in the middle of the night wondering if I've missed a deadline or if I've forgotten to do something, and I hate that feeling. Thank God for remote access.
- ✦ We're constantly preparing for the worst, we're preparing our clients for the worst, and we're trying to help them avoid the worst. We're always thinking that bad things are there. My goal is to keep you away from that bad thing.
- ✦ Nobody likes to lose. Nobody

wants to be in the bottom half in a two-person trial; if you lose, you're the bottom half.

- ✦ Most lawyers, because of what we do, we're not generally optimistic people. We're always protecting the downside risk, and so the perception is that generally you think attorneys are probably more glass-half-empty-type people.

## Billable Hours

- ✦ Having worked as an associate in a private firm where I put in 276 to 300 billable hours per month on top of my committee work, pro bono work, personal life, everything else, that's insane. I don't think that I was necessarily even capable of doing the best job I could with that kind of workload. So I'm not a big fan of that model.
- ✦ I'm not going to lie. When I didn't have billable hours, my life was not nearly as stressful.
- ✦ The really sad part of it is that people learn to work long hours. People don't have real lives. You can't bill 40 hours a week in 40 hours. You've got to work 60 hours a week.
- ✦ It's huge on the young ones because it teaches them to lie to begin with. Their value is based upon the number of hours on their timesheets, not the quality of the work. Therefore, they will actually lie as to how much time they

spent to do whatever it was, or they'll make it last longer so they can have higher hours. It teaches inefficiency and competition inside their own firm.

## Skill & Experience

- ✦ These kids that I call “walking malpractice cases” for the first five years of their practice are hanging their own shingles and have no mentoring, and they don't perceive of having a place to ask questions because, of course, law school taught them how to be lawyers. It didn't, but they think it did.
  - ✦ What I find is that the more experienced, older lawyers are much easier to deal with. Not always, but as a general rule. Young lawyers who don't really know what he or she is doing, or what's important, are more difficult because they're unsure of themselves, or maybe they feel they need to prove something.
  - ✦ I started out as an associate in a big law firm, and I had that feeling that I was pretty much incompetent, and that was regularly reinforced by the partners. I left after a couple of years and went to work in a smaller shop. And I work for some guys who said, “You know, we don't expect you to know everything. We expect you never to make the same mistake twice.” My mentor there said, “There's about 10,000 ways to mess up a case. Just don't make
- the same one twice. Try 10,000 cases, you'll be perfect.”

## Meaning in Practice

- ✦ I mainly see myself as someone whose goal is to help clients achieve their goals, whatever they are. I like the fact that it's intellectually diverse.
- ✦ It's a satisfying way of life because, to a large extent, you have control over what's going on.
- ✦ As a prosecutor, I have the opportunity to practice what a colleague of mine calls “pure law” without the business and the money aspects to everything. And I think that makes all the difference in the world in terms of civility. There are opposing counsel I've worked with for years, and they're some of my best friends, even though we've had many cases against each other. And not to make light of criminal offenses, but we can kind of sit back and laugh at various aspects of the process on a regular basis. We have the common bond.
- ✦ We're not doing it just for the money. We're doing it for the laughs and the companionship—the joy of those moments in your practice that give you joy.
- ✦ I think my job has a huge upside for creativity. Whether you're a prosecutor or a civil trial attorney, you have the same outlet, and every case presents an opportunity to use that storytelling side of creativity.



# Happier Than You Think

ments, see “Lawyers View Their Profession,” p. 28.)

## 2. Life and Career Satisfaction Are Indicators of Well-Being.

What seems most important for lawyers is whether they enjoy their life, career and practice area. A majority of the survey participants (73.8 percent) reported that they were somewhat satisfied (30.2 percent), very satisfied (36.5 percent), or completely satisfied (7.1 percent) with their lives and careers (see Table at right). Analogously, 87.5 percent of the focus group participants acknowledged that they felt satisfied with their lives and careers. These findings align with other studies that have found

work-related stressors and find ways to mitigate their anxiety; consequently, as time goes by, lawyers increase their skill and proficiency. In addition, more years in practice may equate to a better income and standard of living. Most of the focus-group participants (who tended to be older) indicated that younger, less-experienced attorneys are more difficult to work with because they may feel the need to prove themselves when they begin their careers. As attorneys develop their practice experience and expertise, they develop confidence in their skills and abilities, which helps to improve their well-being. One lawyer put it this way:

As you get more senior, you get more comfortable with yourself as a person. You get mature. You get more comfortable with yourself as an attorney and what you know and what you don't know. ... So you're just more in control. You can take the day off. You can go see your kid's baseball game or what have you. When you're a young associate, you don't feel you can do

that. You don't feel like you can say no. At least I didn't feel like I could say no. ... So I think it's just the amount of control you have over your personal life and your professional life.

that life satisfaction is an indicator of well-being and that evaluations of happiness or well-being are based on personal perception and the degree to which people judge the overall quality of their lives.

## 3. Experience (Age) Correlates to Well-Being.

The survey and focus group results demonstrate there is a positive correlation between the length of time attorneys have spent practicing law and psychological well-being. Lawyers who were 55 years or older had higher well-being scale scores than did their younger counterparts.

One possible explanation for this pattern might be that with more years of experience, attorneys learn to cope with

Arizona Attorney Life and Career Satisfaction

Category	Number	%
Completely dissatisfied	19	2.7
Very dissatisfied	61	8.8
Somewhat dissatisfied	101	14.6
Somewhat satisfied	209	30.2
Very satisfied	252	36.5
Completely satisfied	49	7.1

engagement).

- Provide training to young lawyers to minimize bickering and combative behavior and maximize self-confidence and professional competence.
- Develop expertise to address demanding/difficult clients, understand and cope with unique stressors, and manage excessive work demands.
- Rely on religion/spirituality for inner strength.
- Engage in volunteer activities where one's talents can be used and a difference can be made.
- Develop mentoring programs to help build skills among young lawyers and create cooperative legal processes and practice areas.
- Require new attorneys to have other relevant work experience before they can practice law.

## Future Implications

It is great news that Arizona lawyers reported an overall experience of well-being and satisfaction with their lives and careers. Yet it is significant that the same lawyers overwhelmingly acknowledged that they felt stressed about their daily work. Future research is needed to develop a better understanding of attorney experiences, particularly how cultural and practice-area attitudes and client interactions affect attorney well-being. Lawyers, like other helping professionals, are constantly engaged with client situations involving conflict, loss and trauma; therefore, attorneys may be susceptible to the stresses of burnout, boundary conflicts, secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue. Consequently, the attorney-client relationship itself and the dynamics that occur within that relationship provide an additional vantage point from which to assess attorneys' perceptions regarding well-being. 

## Attorneys Can Improve Their Experience of Well-Being

Arizona attorneys offered several suggestions to help their colleagues create more personal and professional fulfillment:

- Initiate opportunities to achieve work-life balance.
- Develop and nurture joyful and satisfying relationships and activities outside of work (e.g., travel, exercise, family/friends and social/community