

## How Firm Leaders Can Ease COVID's Psychological Impacts

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360 (June 2, 2021, 4:23 PM EDT) -- Heightened levels of stress, anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 crisis may actually be exacerbated among lawyers, according to a Wednesday presentation by a lawyer behavior expert who offered tips on how leaders can mitigate the pandemic's negative psychological impacts in their law firms.

The pandemic has disrupted three "very fundamental" human needs, according to **Dr. Larry Richard**, a psychologist, author and consultant at LawyerBrain LLP. Those needs are the need for predictability, the need for control and the need for connection, Richard said at a webinar hosted by the **Managing Partner Forum**, a business of law forum and conference series.

When those three needs are disrupted, the brain's threat-sensing circuits begin to fire, which can trigger stress and anxiety, Richard said. And lawyers, he added, can be affected even more than the general population because they are more prone to have certain personality traits. For instance, lawyers are trained to look for issues and problems, which can create a pattern of negative thinking, he said.

How can law firm leaders help? They can't change the disruptions happening in the outside world, but they can help direct lawyers' brains toward things that are more predictable and controllable, Richard said.

One way to do that is by creating clear goals and expectations, both at the organizational level and on the individual level, and communicating them to people.

"When I have clear goals and tell you what I expect of you, that makes the world feel more predictable," he said.

Some other ways to counteract the negative consequences of the pandemic include establishing a daily routine, creating rituals and drawing people's attention to things that haven't changed and that are reliable, Richard said. In order to foster a sense of control, leaders can also make sure they are offering those working for them options and choices on a daily basis, he added.

And finally, creating social connectivity is vital to mitigating the psychological impacts of the pandemic, he said, especially for people who are at risk of social isolation or especially high levels of stress. That could be people who live alone, parents with children attending school from home, or those who are caring for a sick or aging relative.

Leaders should proactively reach out to those people to offer some human connection, support and to make sure they're doing okay, Richard said. And, while a phone call is good, research shows that making eye contact produces oxytocin and helps people feel bonded, he said. So an in-person or video call could be especially helpful, especially one without any multitasking.

"Put the phone away. Give them your full attention," he said. "They should feel like you are really taking in everything they're saying and listening to them."

--Editing by Breda Lund.