

Thriving Through Change: Building Trauma-Informed Legal Practices

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Lita Abella, Coaching, Consulting, & Mediation Services

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LACBA Lawyer Well-Being Project Presentation

Nov. 5, 2025

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Bio



- 20 years in law enforcement
- 25 years as a licensed private investigator/entrepreneur
- 25 years in the health/wellness/fitness industry
- 12 years with the State Bar of California
 - Office of Chief Trial Counsel
 - Office of Professional Competence
- Certified mediator
- JD



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Objectives



- Examine how trauma and other mental health concerns can impact an attorney's competence.
- Explore the areas of practice most prone to these types of mental health concerns.
- Introduce the principles of trauma-informed practices for legal professionals.
- Review a self-assessment on these conditions.
- Provide resources available for legal professionals in these areas.

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Poll #1

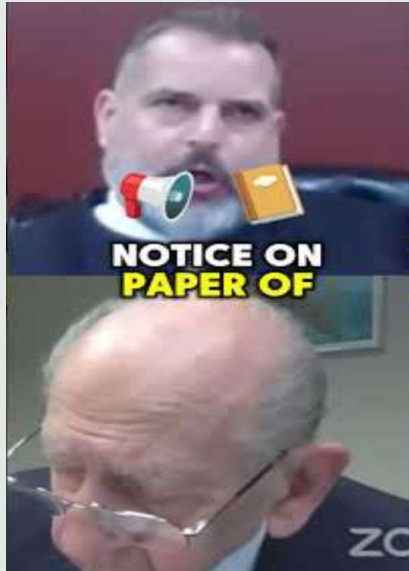
Are you a:

- a. Civil litigator
- b. Criminal litigator
- c. Transactional attorney
- d. Other (inactive, no longer practicing, etc.)
- e. Non-attorney

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Judge Snaps at Elderly Lawyer

Posted on Youtube.com by JudgmentLane



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Duty of Competence

- (a) A lawyer shall not intentionally, recklessly, with gross negligence, or repeatedly fail to perform legal services with competence.
- (b) For purposes of this rule, "competence" in any legal service shall mean to apply the (i) learning and skill, and (ii) mental, emotional, and physical ability reasonably* necessary for the performance of such service.



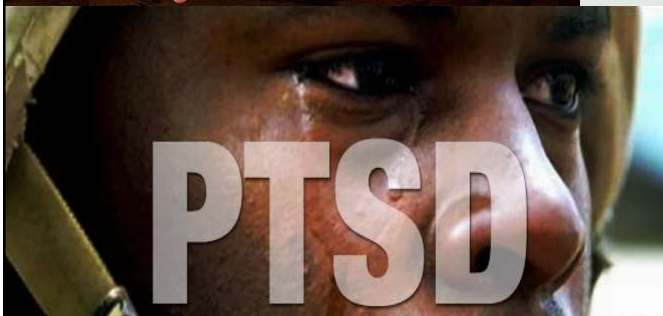
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Common Conditions Interfering with Competent Practice



Word cloud of mental health conditions and symptoms:

- DISORDER
- TENSION
- AWARENESS
- NERVOUS
- DEPRESSION
- TEMPER
- FEAR
- STRESS
- WORRY
- PTSD
- ANXIETY
- DESPAIR
- AGITATION
- INSOMNIA
- SCARED
- WITHDRAWAL
- OVERWHELMED
- FATIGUE
- NEGATIVE
- MOOD
- HEADACHE
- LONLINESS
- NEGATIVE
- FAILURE
- PANIC



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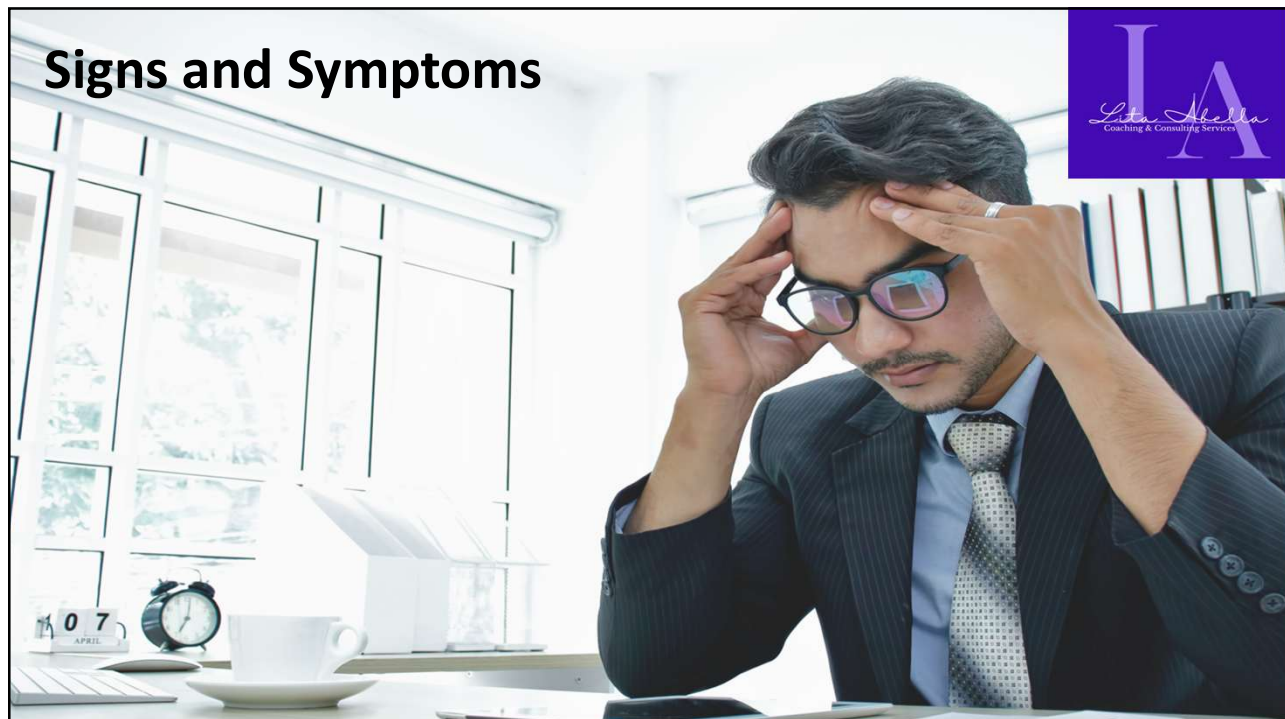
How familiar are you with the concepts of PTSD, vicarious trauma, or compassion fatigue as they relate to the practice of law?

Poll #2

- a. Very familiar
- b. Somewhat familiar
- c. Not very familiar
- d. Not familiar at all

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Signs and Symptoms







The image shows a man in a dark pinstripe suit, light blue shirt, and patterned tie, sitting at a desk in an office. He is wearing glasses and has his hands pressed against his temples, suggesting stress or a headache. On the desk in front of him are a white coffee cup on a saucer, a small black alarm clock, and a calendar showing '07 APRIL'. In the background, there are large windows with blinds and a bookshelf. A purple logo for 'Lita Akella Coaching & Consulting Services' is visible in the top right corner of the image.

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Symptoms of PTSD

Understanding PTSD: Causes, Symptoms, and Treatment Options, Dr. Saad Zia, 6/14/23



Re-living or re-experiencing	Hyperarousal or being on-guard	Avoidance	Negative changes in beliefs and feelings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nightmares Flashbacks Triggers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jittery/overly alert Difficulty sleeping/concentrating Feeling angry Irritable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoiding crowds Avoiding certain smells, sights, or sounds Avoiding talking or thinking about the event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Losing interest in things you used to enjoy Feeling guilty/ashamed Unable to trust others 

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What is Vicarious Trauma?

Vicarious trauma is the emotional residue of exposure to traumatic stories and experiences of others through work.



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Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma



Behavioral

- Sleep disturbances
- Appetite changes
- Losing things
- Self-harm behaviors

Cognitive

- Lowered self-esteem
- Trouble concentrating
- Perfectionism
- Racing thoughts

Emotional

- Oversensitivity
- Anxiety
- Emotional unpredictability
- Sadness
- Depression

Social

- Withdrawal
- Isolation
- Irritability
- Intolerance
- Projection of blame



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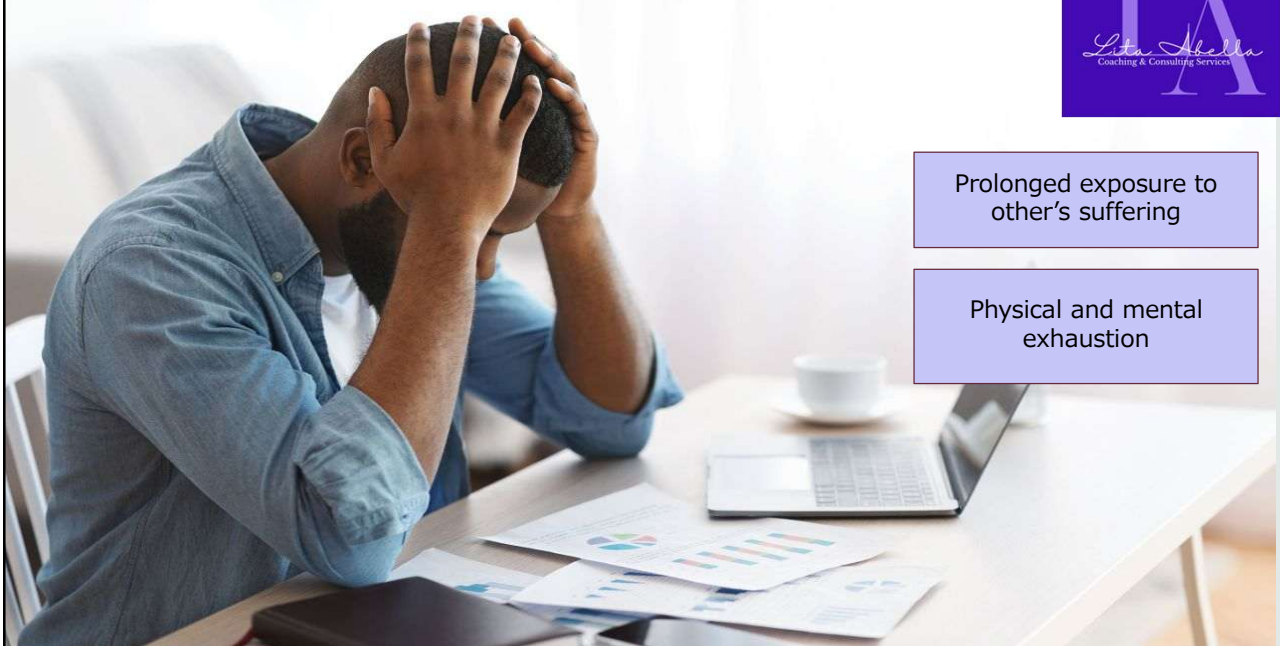
Poll #3

As a legal professional, have you had direct exposure to traumatic stories or events that have affected you personally?

- Yes, frequently
- Yes, occasionally
- No
- Not sure

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What is Compassion Fatigue?



Prolonged exposure to other's suffering

Physical and mental exhaustion

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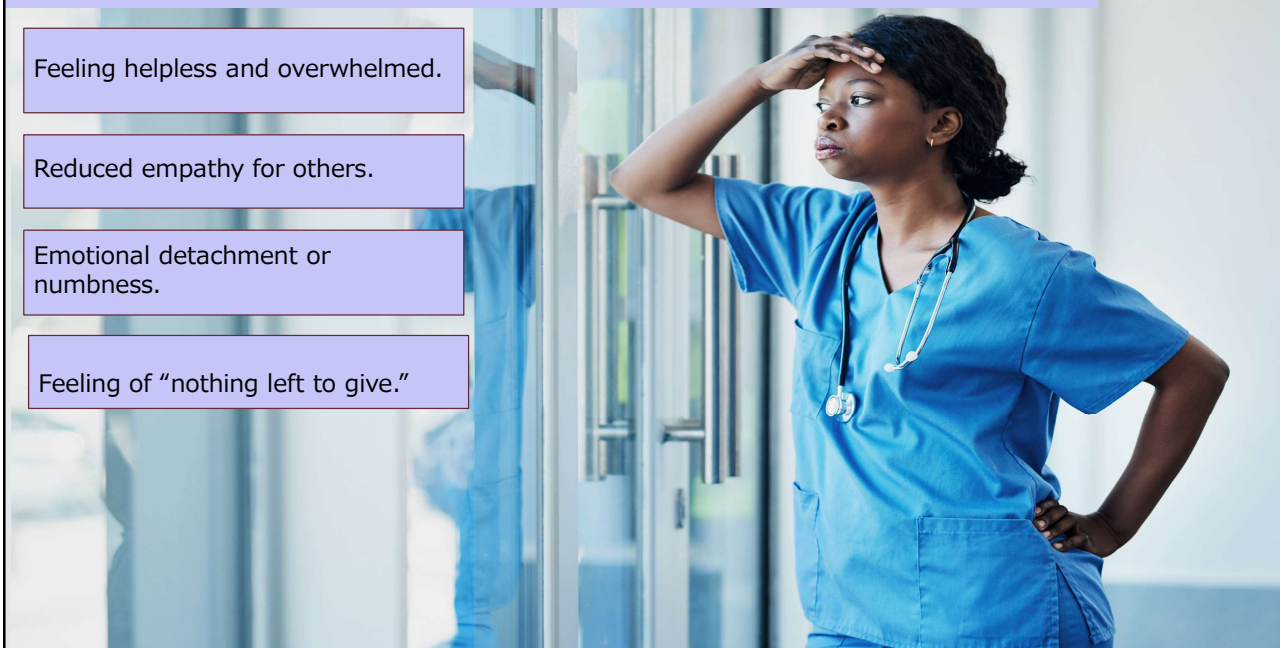
Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

Feeling helpless and overwhelmed.

Reduced empathy for others.

Emotional detachment or numbness.

Feeling of "nothing left to give."



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2024 Attorney Well-Being Report: The Divide Between Health & the Legal Industry

Attorneys Feel Burned Out Almost Half the Time

In Q3 and Q4 of 2023, what percentage of the time did you feel burned out?



Source: Bloomberg Law Workload & Hours Survey (Q3-Q4)

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Conditions That Can Impact Competency



PTSD	Vicarious Trauma	Burnout
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concentration • Remember important details • Manage emotions • Make rational decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional exhaustion • Reduced empathy • Intrusive thoughts • Anxiety • Depression • Sleep disturbances • Avoidance behavior • Substance use disorders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irritability • Trouble focusing • Depression • Anxiety • Frequent illnesses • Social withdrawal • Self-medication



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Areas of Practice Prone to Mental Health Issues



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Assessments



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Assessment



Lita Abella Coaching, Consulting, and Mediation Services

Self-Assessment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Vicarious Trauma, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout

Disclaimer: This is not a clinical diagnostic tool. This assessment is for educational and self-awareness purposes only. Consult a licensed mental health professional for evaluation and diagnosis.

Below are four assessments. Choose any of the assessments you would like to take.

Section 1: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Clinical Definition: PTSD is diagnosed when exposure to a traumatic event (directly experiencing, witnessing, or learning about it) leads to symptoms lasting more than one month, including intrusive memories, avoidance, negative mood changes, and hyperarousal (DSM-5).

Yes/No Questions:

1. Have you experienced or witnessed a life-threatening event (e.g., violence, disaster, accident)?
2. Do you have recurring nightmares or flashbacks about the event?
3. Do you avoid people, places, or activities that remind you of the trauma?
4. Do you feel emotionally numb or detached from others?
5. Do you startle easily or feel constantly on guard?
6. Do you feel intense guilt, shame, or anger related to the event?
7. Have you lost interest in activities you once enjoyed?
8. Do you struggle to remember details of the traumatic event?
9. Do you feel irritable or have outbursts of anger?
10. Have these symptoms lasted longer than a month?

Results:

- 4+ "Yes" answers: You may be experiencing PTSD.

Disclaimer: This is not a clinical diagnostic tool. This assessment is for educational and self-awareness purposes only. Consult a licensed mental health professional for evaluation and diagnosis.

This is a self-assessment on:

- PTSD,
- vicarious trauma,
- compassion fatigue, and
- burnout.



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Were you surprised by your score on the assessment?

a. Yes
b. No

Poll #4

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Addressing Vicarious Trauma in Victim Service Professionals, U.S. DOJ, Office of Justice Programs



Lita Abella, Coaching & Consulting Services gratefully acknowledges the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs for allowing us to reproduce, in part or in whole, the video presentation, *Addressing Vicarious Trauma in Victim Service Professionals*. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this video presentation are those of the speakers and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U. S. Department of Justice.

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Mitigating Mental Health Issues

Education

- Recognize Symptoms
- Continue Education



Support

- Peer Network
- Mentoring
- Professional Development
- Social Network

Self-Care

- Physical health
- Mental health

Boundaries

- Work-life balance



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Trauma-Informed Practices

Creating a safe and caring environment.



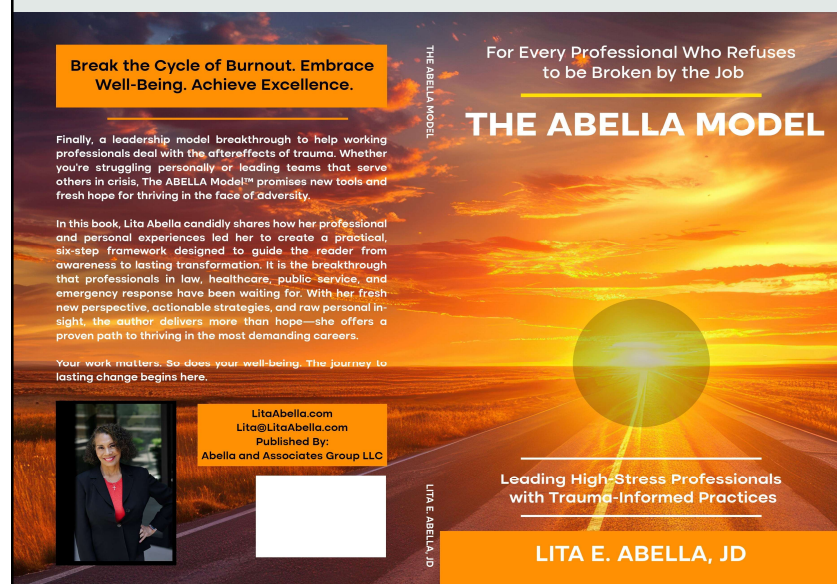
"If you fail to recognize the early warning signs of mental health issues, then the potential for significant physical, mental, and emotional decline increases.

If your organization fails to cultivate a deeply trauma-informed culture and instead treats cumulative trauma as "just part of the job," then you risk compounding harm."

Lita Abella, *The ABELLA Model*

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Trauma-Informed Practices



6 Step Framework:

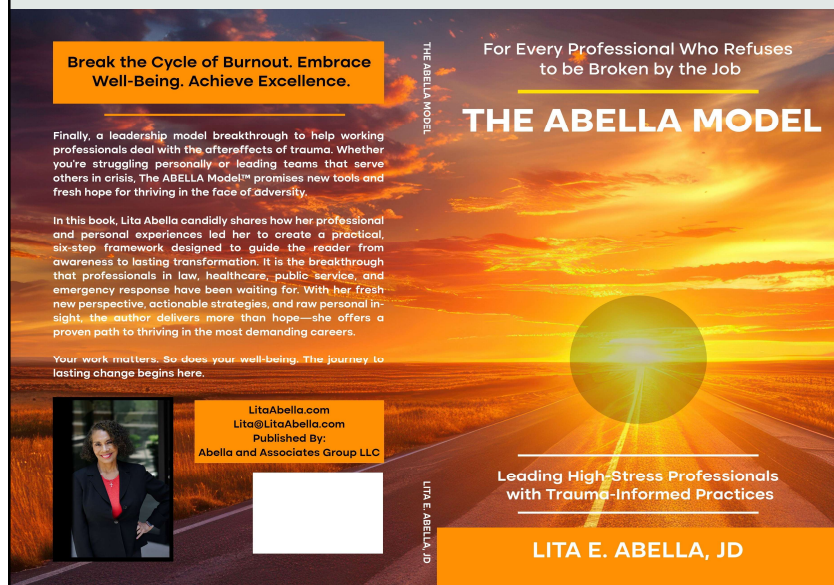
A-Amplify Awareness

B-Beyond Blame

E-Examine & Educate

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Trauma-Informed Practices



6 Step Framework:

L-Listen and Learn

L-Link & Leverage

A-Apply Action

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What is a Trauma-Informed Legal Practice?

Trauma-Informed Practice is when the practitioner:

- Puts the realities of the client's trauma experiences at the forefront,
- Adjusts the practice approach,
- Reduces re-traumatization, and
- Recognize the role trauma plays in the lawyer-client relationship.



An Introduction to Trauma-Informed Lawyering by Alexander S. Rusek and Aylsh B. Gallagher, Michigan Bar Journal, Aug. 2023

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What is a Trauma-Informed Practice?

Benefits of Trauma-Informed Lawyering:

- Clients will share more useful information.
- Clients will hold the trauma-informed lawyer in higher regard.
- Establish a more effective attorney-client relationship.



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What is a Trauma-Informed Practice?

Organizations can:

- Talk about secondary trauma;
- Focus on changing the workplace and organizational culture;
- Create a supportive atmosphere;
- Be sensitive when discussing cases; and
- Normalize conversation about secondary traumatic stress.



Understanding Secondary Trauma: A Guide for Lawyers Working with Child Victims

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Poll #5

If applicable, what prevents you from seeking help or resources for vicarious trauma or any mental health concern? (You can choose more than one answer).

- a. Lack of time
- b. Concerns about confidentiality
- c. Stigma associated with mental health
- d. Unsure of where to find resources
- e. Other

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Resources for Legal Professionals



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Resources for Legal Professionals

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Understanding and Addressing Vicarious Trauma

ABA Commission of Lawyer Assistance Programs (CoLAP)

Lawyer Assistance Program (LAP)

Lawyer Depression Project: Free resource for attorneys, law students, paralegals, and administrative professionals

988 Suicide and Crisis Prevention Hotline-call or text 988

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) with your employer

Your law firm/ law school/ bar organizations



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Coaching can help legal professionals who are struggling with:

Burnout,
Overwhelm,
Depression,
Anxiety, and
Stress.

- **Career/Business Coaching:** Create a sustainable and fulfilling legal career.
- **Executive/Leadership Coaching:** Strengthen your leadership role in your firm/organization.
- **Health/Wellness Coaching:** Prioritize your well-being amidst the demands of your legal practice.
- **Transition Coaching:** Successfully manage career changes or stepping into new roles/industries.



Feeling overwhelmed by the pressures of your legal practice? As an leadership coach with years of experience in the health, wellness, and legal field, I can help you regain control and find balance. Let's work together to thrive both personally and professionally. Contact me for a complimentary consultation today!

#LegalCoaching #WorkLifeBalance #LegalProfessional

[CONTACT US](#) www.LitaAbella.com 909-228-1700




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Coaching can help your clients who are dealing with difficult legal challenges:


- Enhanced client communication
- Mindset transformation
- Conflict resolution strategies
- Goal setting and accountability
- Overcoming limiting beliefs
- Empowerment through inquiry



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Give feedback to Lita

Scan this QR code





Or go to

<https://talk.ac/litaabella>

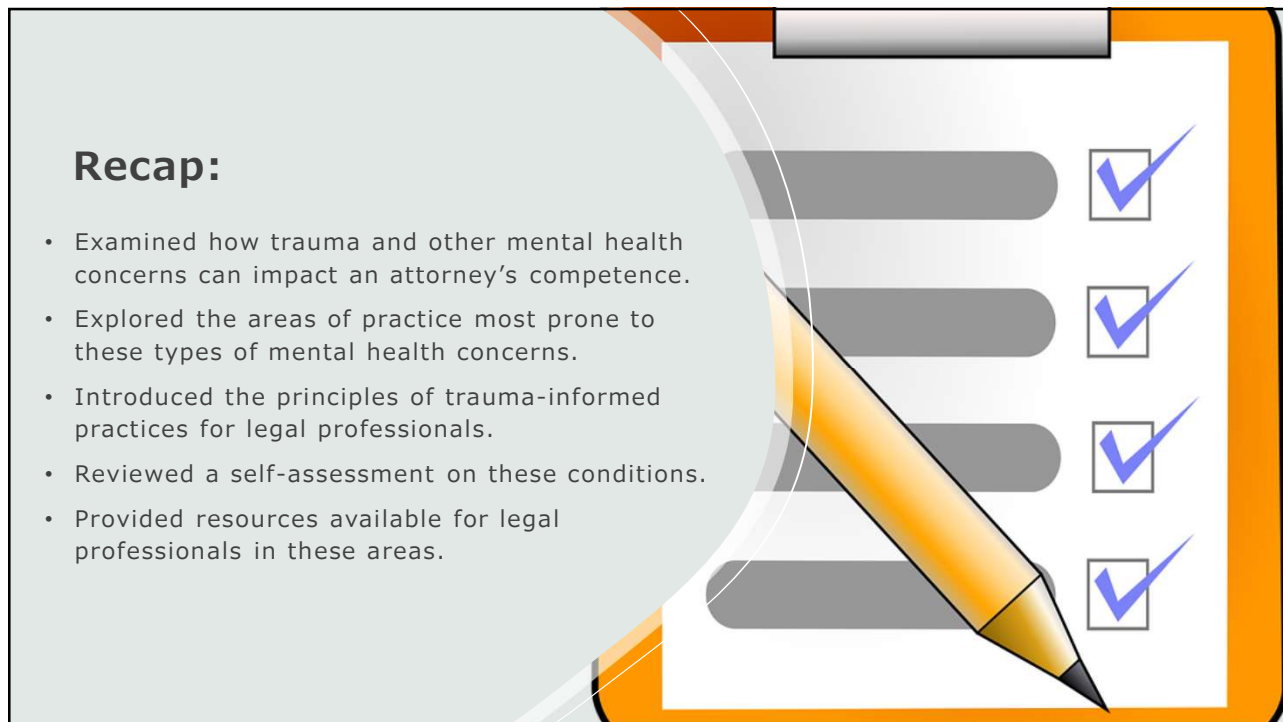
and enter this code when prompted

TALK



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Recap:

- Examined how trauma and other mental health concerns can impact an attorney's competence.
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