

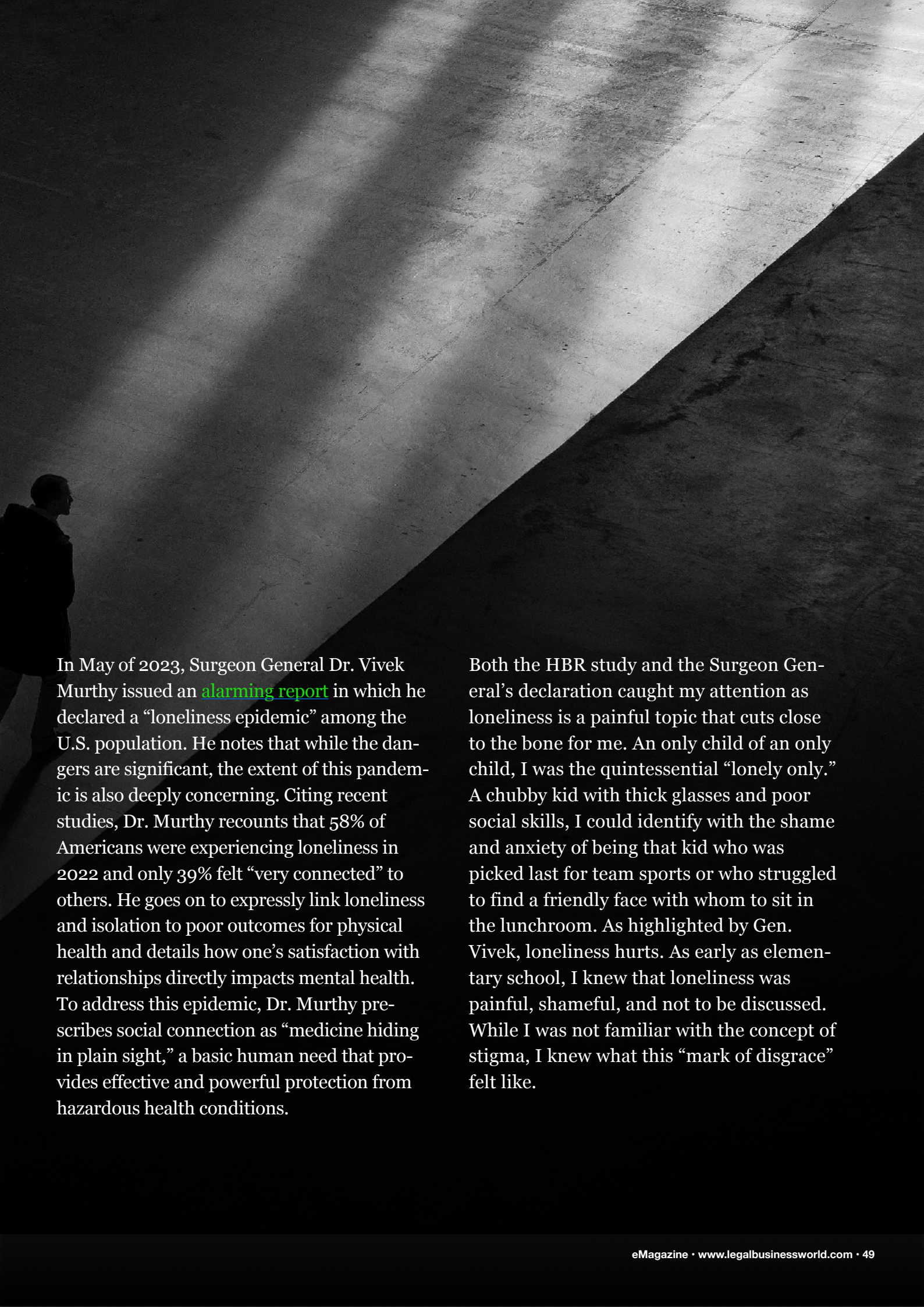
LONELINESS IN LAW

A Silent Source Of Our Suffering

By Bree Buchanan, Senior Advisor for Krill Strategies



Loneliness – along with its first cousins isolation and alienation – are drivers of much of the distress, overwhelm, burnout and behavioral health disorders that plague our profession. The first alarm was sound in 2018 when the Harvard Business Review shared findings of a [wide-reaching study](#) of the perceived sense of isolation and loneliness among U.S. professionals. Lawyers were found to be the loneliest professionals, closely followed by members of other professions such as doctors and engineers. This finding was buttressed by a [2023 study by ALM](#) (American Legal Media) which found that 45% of firm lawyers felt isolated at work and 35% felt detached and alone in the world.



In May of 2023, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued an [alarming report](#) in which he declared a “loneliness epidemic” among the U.S. population. He notes that while the dangers are significant, the extent of this pandemic is also deeply concerning. Citing recent studies, Dr. Murthy recounts that 58% of Americans were experiencing loneliness in 2022 and only 39% felt “very connected” to others. He goes on to expressly link loneliness and isolation to poor outcomes for physical health and details how one’s satisfaction with relationships directly impacts mental health. To address this epidemic, Dr. Murthy prescribes social connection as “medicine hiding in plain sight,” a basic human need that provides effective and powerful protection from hazardous health conditions.

Both the HBR study and the Surgeon General’s declaration caught my attention as loneliness is a painful topic that cuts close to the bone for me. An only child of an only child, I was the quintessential “lonely only.” A chubby kid with thick glasses and poor social skills, I could identify with the shame and anxiety of being that kid who was picked last for team sports or who struggled to find a friendly face with whom to sit in the lunchroom. As highlighted by Gen. Vivek, loneliness hurts. As early as elementary school, I knew that loneliness was painful, shameful, and not to be discussed. While I was not familiar with the concept of stigma, I knew what this “mark of disgrace” felt like.

It carried forward to my time in law school when imposter syndrome brought up feelings of alienation and loneliness informed by an errant belief that I didn't really deserve to be among all the brilliant people in my cohort. Like so many lawyers, loneliness was an undercurrent during periods of my career, a drain on my energy, my health, and – at times – on my ability to be at the top of my game.

The Nature of Loneliness

Given its subjective nature, defining loneliness is an inexact science. It is *perceived* isolation based upon a *perceived* need for a type, quality, or quantity of relationships. This perception is characterized by a sense of lack or insufficiency in regard to *wanted or needed* social connection. Given its subjective nature, the desired level of connection will vary among individuals. Sometimes being alone does not automatically equate with loneliness. For example, introverts need 'alone time' to recharge while academics and artists may find self-sequestration to be a necessary predicate to deep concentration or the flow of creative energy. Alternatively, some individuals may find themselves surrounded by other people and yet still feel loneliness.

Although the need for contact may vary, when a person does perceive loneliness within their self, it can simultaneously signal to our bodies that something is very wrong with our circumstances. In fact, the pain associated with loneliness activates the same neural networks as physical pain. Along with the experience of pain, a sense of unease and danger can ensue as our need for connection is primal and foundational to healthy functioning. Humans

evolved as communal beings with survival often dependent upon being a part of a collective of other humans. Isolation and alienation from the community meant deprivation and possibly death. From the earliest times, banishment and exile were some of the harshest punishments dispensed to those out of compliance with the predominant group's mores and social order. In his report, Dr. Murthy summarizes the foundational need for connection in stating that, "loneliness is like hunger or thirst. It's a feeling the body sends us when something we need for survival is missing."

Dangers of Disconnection

A review of disconnection's negative impact on physical and mental health quickly demonstrates why Dr. Murthy expressed deep concern over our country's loneliness epidemic. Those experiencing unwanted disconnection from others experience a 26% increase in risk of early death and a 30% increase in risk of stroke or heart attack. These individuals are also twice as likely to experience depression and twice as likely to develop dementia. Lacking social connection carries the same risk as smoking 15 cigarettes each day and poses more risk than obesity, physical activity and air pollution *combined*.

Patrick Krill, a renowned researcher on well-being in the legal profession, published a 2023 study on factors leading to the high rate of suicide among lawyers in the U.S. Entitled "[Stressed, Lonely, and Overcommitted: Predictors of Lawyer Suicide Risk](#)," Krill's report highlights the dismal fact that lawyers who screened as lonely were 2.8 times more likely to endorse suicidality.

Why Lawyers are the Loneliest

Lawyers lead all other professions in loneliness and, as a result, they disproportionately experience its documented and extreme adverse effects. A panoply of reasons contributes to this threat to lawyers' health and ability to practice at optimal levels, including competitiveness that breeds animosity and alienation, a culture (often fueled by toxic perfectionism) that idolizes overwork, a pervasive unwillingness to show any vulnerability and to admit the need for help, and excessive workloads that act as barriers to maintaining quality connections with others.

A published expert on loneliness in the legal profession, Olivia Ash, also [posits](#) that lawyers' critical analysis and combativeness create a sense of hypervigilance which, in turn, sets the stage for disconnection and isolation. The pessimistic thinking style developed in law school and reinforced during the practice of law runs directly counter to maintaining mental states needed to promote trust, inclusion, and communication which are necessary precursors to creating high-quality connections.

When the "I" in DEI is Missing

In recent years, law firms have increasingly and justifiably made efforts to increase diversity among their ranks, enhance equity for all members, and promote inclusion, particularly for those who have historically been kept outside the circles of power and authority. Wide range awareness now exists that connection and belonging are essential for a sense of meaningful inclusion. Conversely, we also know that social isolation results in an unfulfilled need to belong or feel connected to oth-

ers which, in turn, leads to poor mental and physical health outcomes. In essence, marginalization leads to loneliness and all its detrimental effects.

Research on the general U.S. population bears this out. People from underrepresented racial groups are more likely to be lonely. Alarming, 75% of Hispanic adults and 68% of Black/African American adults are classified as such. These distressing numbers are consistent with a social structure constructed to exclude members of disempowered and marginalized groups, a dismal circumstance that widely persists even today. A striking disparity also exists between young ("emerging") adults and their more established elders. An alarming 79% of adults aged 18 to 24 feel lonely compared to 41% of those aged 66 and over.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO COMBAT LONELINESS

Strategies for the Individual Lawyer

Because loneliness is a stigmatized condition, overcoming it can be challenging. There are certain traits, however, that can help in doing that. To start, one needs self-awareness, not only to identify loneliness as a problem, but to find optimized strategies that counter unwanted isolation in a manner that meets individualized needs. Next, chances of creating a high-quality relationship improves if participants are willing to demonstrate vulnerability and openness. Additionally, a willingness to focus on commonalities and de-emphasize differences can aid in weaving the first strands of friendship.

Some specific strategies for individuals seeking to break out of loneliness include:

Cultivate and nurture high quality relationships. This strategy is most effective when connections are both prioritized and sought out intentionally. An easy first step may be to simply re-connect with old friends or people who have had a positive influence. A next step would be to seek out connection with someone new by inviting them to coffee, a walking break during the day, or lunch. Don't fall in the trap of waiting for another person to reach out or make the first move.

A caveat: recent research on people feeling deep loneliness has shown they often experience more negative social interactions. It seems that loneliness predisposes people to approach social interactions with cynicism, distrust and an expectation of rejection and betrayal. This attitude, in turn, makes efforts at socialization particularly dissatisfying. Researchers suggest that in extreme cases, a person experiencing loneliness may – prior to seeking new friendships – do well to first work on monitoring and dispelling negative thought patterns, such as thinking that no one would want to be their friend.

Engage in meaningful conversations. Fueled by curiosity and compassion, engage another person on a topic of mutual meaning which may enhance the formation of a trusted and reliable relationship. While speaking of work obligations may be the easiest opener, social-oriented interactions will more efficaciously lead to deeper and meaningful conversations that can

instill a sense of belonging and deep connection,

Build micro-connections over the course of a day. While long-term quality relationships may bring the most satisfaction, short interactions of a positive nature with people encountered over the course of a day can also boost one's sense of connection and well-being. Brief conversations on a regular basis with those who are a part of daily living – the receptionist or other support staff, a store clerk, the person delivering mail – can build towards meeting one's desired level of socializing without taking time out of an overly scheduled day.

Pay attention to - and improve upon - impressions made. Monitor body language, facial expressions, and verbal tone to determine the effect of non-verbal cues broadcast to others. A friendly and open demeanor will assist in finding and nurturing positive connections. Conversely, anger and impatience are also readily conveyed to others and will destroy efforts at building friendships.

Volunteer with – or work for – a mission-based nonprofit. Above, I wrote about my struggles with feeling lonely at various points over the course of my life. A reliable way to break out of my perceived loneliness has involved dedicating my time and energy to work on a mission-based project alongside a like-minded cohort. In my early career, I worked for a legal aid office representing victims of domestic violence. Later, I became involved in service to the bar and found many friends through the experience of serving on numerous boards of directors.

Many of those I met remain among my core friend group to this day. Now, approaching retirement, I volunteer with social service groups who provide support to the poor in our community. All of these endeavors served to heighten my sense of community and belonging, thereby dispelling the toxic feelings of loneliness.

Protect sleep and periods of rest. New research shows that sleep deprivation often leads to more isolation. This consideration is particularly important for the legal profession as we have a deep and longstanding tendency towards over work, perfectionism, and anxiety which all can lead to poor sleep. The 2023 ALM Mental Health and Substance Abuse survey showed that 88% of respondents got seven or fewer hours of sleep each night which is below what's needed for health and adequate functioning.

Recent studies in this area show that the amount of sleep is directly tied to how lonely and unsociable one feels from day to day. Ultimately, the amount of sleep one gets will determine how they are perceived by others as we tend to become a social turn-off when sleep deprived, resulting in increased alienation and isolation.

A final comment is warranted regarding men and their (lack of) friendships. Currently, men have fewer social ties than in the past. In 1990, half of U.S. men reported having at least six close friends, compared to a quarter of men reporting the same in 2021. Among the many reasons include a biologically driven vigilance

against showing any vulnerability which, in turn, creates a barrier to forming close friendships. Key to building supportive relationships is a willingness and ability to reveal personal experiences with another person. This takes some degree of courage but the result – greater life satisfaction, better health, etc. – will be worth the effort.

Strategies for Firm Leadership

As loneliness can wreak havoc on the emotional and physical health of an individual, it can also create significant problems in the workplace. Those who feel lonely and disconnected perform more poorly at work, feel less satisfied with their jobs, burnout more, quit more frequently, are more likely to develop a mental health or substance use disorder, and create more risk for their firm.

To meaningfully assess the degree of loneliness, isolation and alienation in a firm, its leaders should consider the following questions:

- Do practices at the firm create a culture that is atomized and siloed, or one that is communal and collaborative?
- Is the firm a psychologically safe place where employees can be authentic (making establishment of meaningful connections more likely) and can feel secure in seeking help for behavioral health or performance-related issues?
- Are behavioral health resources known and used by staff? Those struggling with issues, such as depression or alcoholism, often experience heightened isolation and loneliness leading, in turn, to greater dysfunction.

Some specific strategies for firm leaders seeking to reduce loneliness, isolation and alienation can include:

Create and adequately support affinity and peer support groups. Personnel with common interests (the future of A.I, or parents with young children, for example) can find community and a sense of belonging. This practice is even more important for those from marginalized populations who may find some connections and support from others in the group. In doing so, they may discover means to address isolation and form meaningful relationships with those facing similar challenges.

Promote to positions of authority those who – due to race, ethnicity, LGBTQ status, gender – have typically and historically been excluded from that level of leadership. Doing so will demonstrate a true commitment to meaningful inclusion for all members of the firm.

Develop a strong sense of belonging among staff. Having a deep connection to a workplace is the number one desire of employees (desired more than an increase in pay, better benefits, or a better work-life balance) and its absence is the second most often cited reason for quitting. Given its importance, surveying staff about how connection, inclusion and belonging can be heightened is a great foundational step toward creating those conditions. Leaders should remain vigilant about creating opportunities for staff to learn about one another as people and be scrupulous about making sure everyone is included in these efforts.

Create opportunities for meaningful work. Researchers in the 2018 Harvard Business Review study found that the single most impactful

leadership behavior to counteract loneliness is to create opportunities for building shared meaning with colleagues. This finding is based upon the truism that people want to feel they matter and that they are part of something bigger than themselves.

To achieve a widespread sense of meaning among staff, ensure that staff understand the reason for a project and how it comports with the mission of the firm or the client. Communicate with team members working on a project about why the work matters to the firm, the client, and/or society. Often this means making sure people understand how a particular project affects the larger goals. Beyond meaning in the workspace, have teams become involved in community volunteer projects which is a great way to enhance a shared sense of meaningful work.

Create the conditions that promote high quality connections at work. Trust (a necessary ingredient for high quality connections) is promoted when staff are given some degree of autonomy, are not micro-managed, and are encouraged to share information. Finding opportunities for playfulness will also reap benefits in promoting connections. This could involve encouraging (appropriate) humor in the workplace, getting out of the office together to experience a shared activity, or establishing creative practices to deal with high stress and overwork such as taking breaks to experience a sunny day.

CONCLUSION

Studying the dilatory effects of loneliness has helped me to understand why it's been such a painful and shameful condition at the times I've been beset by this feeling. As an introvert,

I have to consistently make a conscious and intentional effort to create and sustain high-quality connections with colleagues, friends, and family. The effort is worthwhile given that research has consistently shown that the most significant predictor of overall happiness, life satisfaction, and well-being is one's sense of connection to others.. So, take a moment to reflect on how you and your firm are impacted by loneliness and lack of connection. Then make a plan to see your role in effecting some of the change needed to move the dial on creating a happy, healthy, engaged, connected, inclusive workplace.

About the Author

[Bree Buchanan](#), JD, MS, is Senior Advisor for

[Krill Strategies](#), a legal consulting firm providing support to AmLaw100 firms seeking to enhance well-being among their personnel. In 2020, she worked with a small team to create the [Institute for Well-Being in Law](#) and served as its first executive director and board president.

In January 2024, Ms. Buchanan was recipient of the [Reed Smith Award](#) for Excellence in Well-being in Law. Prior to this work, she served as director of the [Texas Lawyers Assistance Program](#) and Chair of the [ABA Commission on Lawyers Assistance Programs](#). Currently, she serves as a commissioner for the [International Bar Association's Professional Wellbeing Commission](#).

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