

Talking Mental Health: Managing Emotions In Trauma Cases

By **Nikki Hurtado** (January 8, 2025, 4:46 PM EST)

*Attorneys and other legal professionals share insights on mental health and well-being in this Law360 Pulse Expert Analysis **series**. If you'd like to write about these issues, please reach out to expertanalysis@law360.com.*

In this installment, personal injury attorney Nikki Hurtado discusses the mental health challenges that attorneys can face when representing victims of catastrophic injuries, as well as her personal experiences in coping with such challenges.

Representing Victims of Catastrophic Injuries

Representing victims of catastrophic injuries is among the most emotionally taxing roles an attorney can take on. These cases involve clients who have suffered severe physical, emotional and psychological harm. The impact of their trauma often extends far beyond the walls of a courtroom.

As an attorney, the mental and emotional toll of advocating for victims can be extensive, and without proper management, it can lead to burnout, emotional exhaustion and a diminished ability to effectively serve clients.

Attorneys who represent victims of catastrophic injuries, such as those involved in severe accidents, medical malpractice or as victims of a faulty product, often find themselves bearing witness to stories of immense suffering.

These cases are rarely about minor injuries or isolated incidents. Instead, they involve life-altering trauma that may result in permanent and long-term injuries, or even death. The emotional cost of these cases can be significant.

One of the primary challenges an attorney may face in this line of work is the internalization of their client's trauma and suffering. The stories of pain, loss and hardship may begin to feel less like a client's burden and more like the attorney's own.

Although not directly involved in the incident, an attorney that really dives into their client's story may start to feel the emotional and psychological impacts of their client's injuries.

Our human instinct to empathize with clients is powerful, and while it is a vital component of being an effective advocate, it can also be a double-edged sword.

When an attorney internalizes their client's trauma, it can be difficult to leave it at the office at the end of the day. Attorneys might find themselves feeling drained or unable to fully engage with their own personal lives outside of work. It's crucial for attorneys to find the strategy that works for them to mitigate any damage to their own well-being so they can effectively advocate for their clients at all times.

What Motivates Me to Take Such Cases

For me, the motivation to take on these challenging cases comes from a deeply personal belief that no one should have to face trauma alone.

Many victims of catastrophic injuries have families that help them until their last breath, but many do not. Even those that do are wary of what role litigation will play in their lives when they are battling through their own traumas both physically and mentally.

Some clients are navigating these traumatic experiences without a network of people who understand what they are going through. Ensuring that my clients know that there is someone advocating for them in at least one aspect — the legal aspect — of their battle makes the world of difference.

It really makes me proud of the work I do. The opportunity to make even a small positive difference in their lives is what drives me to push through the emotional and mental challenges that come with this practice.

As a passionate advocate for mental health counseling, it has been my experience that we cannot understand or manage our emotions effectively until we allow ourselves to fully experience them.

However, attorneys must strike a delicate balance between deeply empathizing with their clients and maintaining a sense of professional distance. One method that has helped me and can help other attorneys manage their emotions is compartmentalization.

While not always the ideal solution, compartmentalization can serve as an essential tool for attorneys to avoid bringing their work home with them — mentally, at least.

The key to successful compartmentalization is understanding that it is not about denying or suppressing emotions, but rather about recognizing when it is time to set them aside in order to recharge and focus on other aspects of life. Attorneys should let the emotions drive their advocacy during work hours, but also create space for themselves to process them outside the office.

How Other Attorneys Can Manage Their Well-Being

The mantra "taking care of you helps you take care of others" reigns true in this practice, and attorneys who embrace this principle are better equipped to navigate the complexities of their work while maintaining their own well-being.

With that being said, attorneys should not be afraid to ask for help either — help from colleagues that understand what they're going through, help from a mental health professional who can guide their healing and emotional management, and help from loved ones that can provide support at home.

Setting emotional boundaries can be difficult and requires practice, but it can be done, and attorneys and their clients will surely reap the benefits.

How I Like to Unwind

I love to spend time with my family and close friends. They help me refuel and, regardless of the day I have had, they can always make me smile. I love watching comedy movies or TV shows to keep my spirits high.

I love eating because food keeps the soul full. I love dancing and playing tennis to keep my body moving and endorphins up. For me, giving time to family, fun and physical activity allows me to continue advocating for my clients with passion, resilience and compassion.

After a long and prosperous day at work, I always take a few moments to center my mind and body through grounding techniques. I close my eyes and focus on one thing I can touch, one thing I can smell, and one thing I can feel.

Although the oldest advice in the book, many of us can forget to simply take a deep breath. It's all about balance, as they say. My hope is that we all find ours so we can be the best possible advocates for our clients.



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