

2025

# Imposter Syndrome in the Legal Profession

MCLE Blitz 2025

**GIBSON DUNN**

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# Agenda

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**01** Current State of Imposter Syndrome in the Legal Profession

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**02** Imposter Syndrome Defined

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**03** The Five Imposters

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**04** Reflection v. Rumination Exercise

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**05** Leadership Skills to Tackle Imposter Syndrome

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**06** Additional Resources

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# Current State of Imposter Syndrome in the Legal Profession

01

# Imposter Syndrome in Law School



## Combating Imposter Syndrome in the Classroom

Allison Caffarone Professor & Executive Director, Perry Weitz Mass Tort Institute  
Maurice A. Deane School of Law at Hofstra University

**1. Understanding Imposter Syndrome in Law Students:** Imposter syndrome disproportionately affects law students from underrepresented groups, leading to self-doubt, reduced classroom participation, and feelings of inadequacy.

Professors can create more inclusive and supportive learning environments to address these challenges.

**2. Inclusive Teaching Strategies:** Effective techniques include sharing personal stories to normalize imposter syndrome, learning and using students' names and pronouns correctly, employing diverse instructional methods (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic), and using inclusive materials that reflect a range of cultures and experiences.

**3. Encouraging Engagement and Resilience:** Strategies such as pausing after questions, electronic polling for anonymous feedback, and reframing mistakes as part of the learning process help foster confidence and participation among students struggling with imposter syndrome.

# By the Numbers

## Lawyers

Studies show that approximately 74% of lawyers experience imposter syndrome.

Ankori, G., Tzabari, D., Hager, T., & Golan, M. (2022). From self-doubt to pride: understanding the empowering effects of delivering school-based wellness programmes for emerging adult facilitators—a qualitative study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(14), 8421. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19148421>

## Junior Lawyers

This phenomenon appears to be higher amongst junior lawyers with a rate of 83%.

Altaf, S. (2022). What about the therapist? – a quantitative exploration of the pathways from a therapist’s professional life to their personal well-being. *The Cognitive Behaviour Therapist*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1754470x2200023xof-legal-artificial-intelligence..> <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2020.acl-main.466>

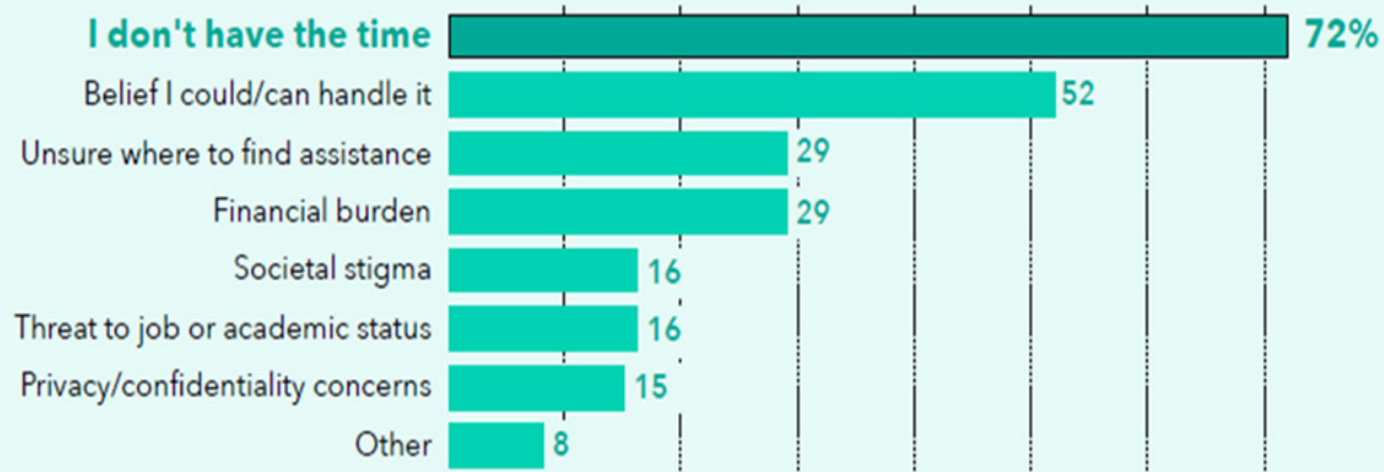
## Senior Legal Professionals

Even senior associates and partners may experience imposter syndrome.

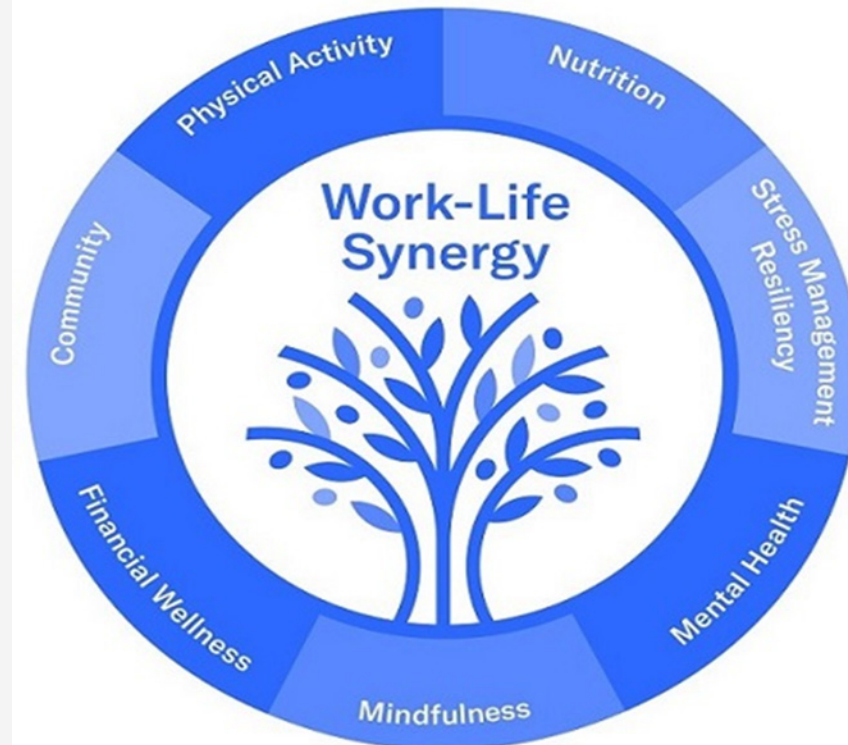
Gohil-Thorp, A. (2022, April 14). Stop, imposter! The Law Society. Retrieved from <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk>

# State of Well-Being in the Legal Profession

## Why Have You Delayed / Why Are You Delaying Seeking Treatment for Mental Health?



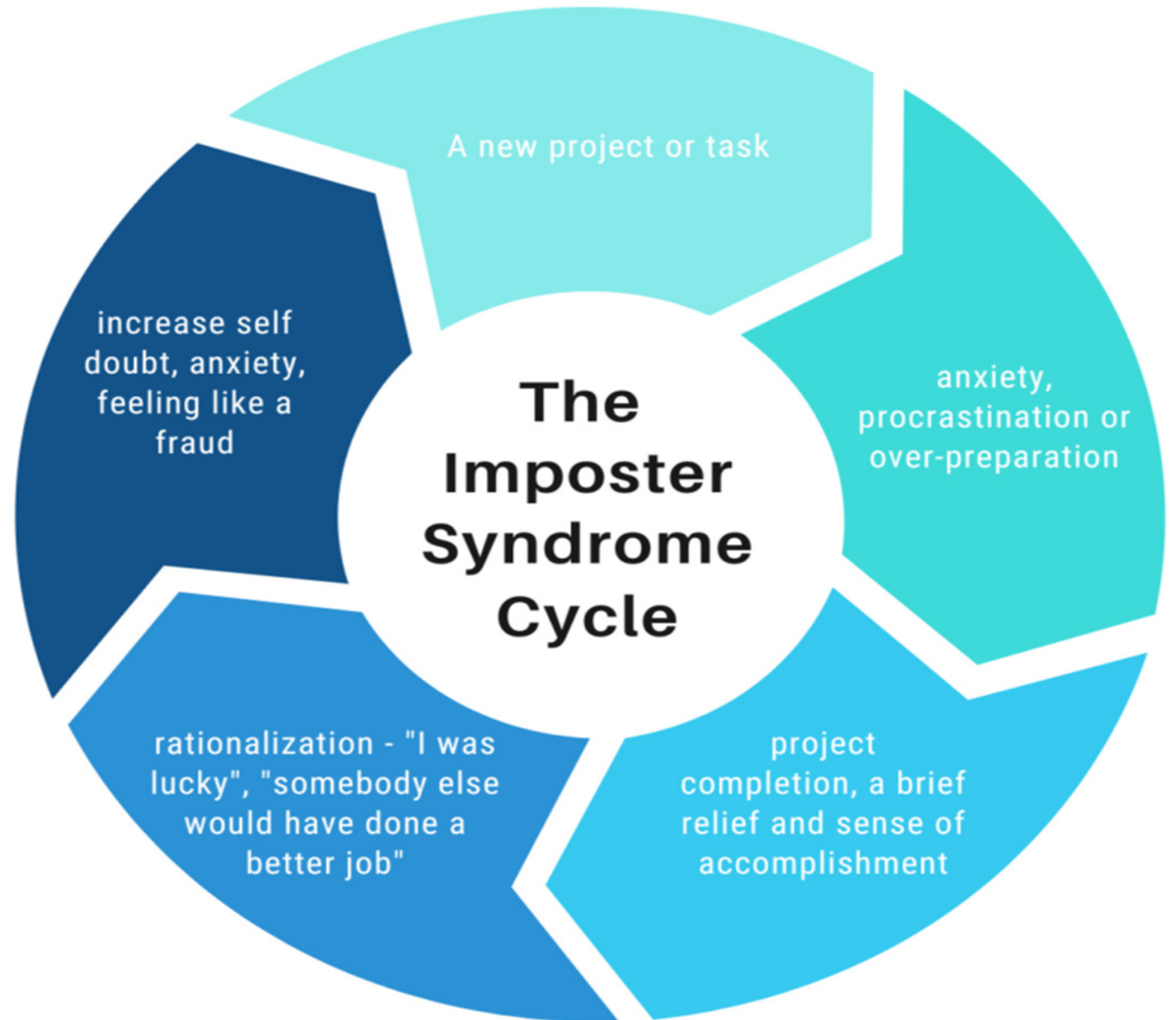
Source: 2024 Attorney Well-Being Survey



# Imposter Syndrome Defined

02

# Imposter Syndrome Cycle





# 5 Types of Imposter Syndrome

## Five Imposter Subtypes

### THE PERFECTIONIST

Has excessively high standards



### THE SUPERHERO

Works harder and harder to measure up



### THE NATURAL GENIUS

Must have natural ability to master tasks



### THE INDIVIDUALIST

Asking for help reveals fraudulence



### THE EXPERT

Fears being exposed as inexperienced or unknowledgeable



# The Five Imposters

03

# The Perfectionist



# How Lawyers Can Overcome Perfectionism

1. **Focus on Professional Competence Over Perfection:** Lawyers must adhere to **ABA Model Rule 1.1**, which requires competence, not perfection. Emphasize delivering high-quality legal services while recognizing that striving for unattainable perfection can lead to burnout and ethical lapses, potentially compromising professional responsibilities.
2. **Adopt a Growth Mindset to Professional Development:** View challenges and setbacks as opportunities for learning and growth, rather than as failures. Encourage continuous improvement by seeking feedback, engaging in CLE programs to enhance skills, and celebrating progress rather than fixating on mistakes.
3. **Adopt Ethical Self-Care Practices:** Under **ABA Model Rule 1.16**, lawyers must withdraw from representation if mental health issues impair their ability to perform duties. Overcoming perfectionism through mindfulness, stress management, and self-compassion can prevent mental health challenges, ensuring lawyers meet ethical standards while maintaining well-being.

# The Superhero



# How Lawyers Can Overcome Superhero Syndrome

- 1. Prioritize Delegation and Team Collaboration:** Lawyers with superhero syndrome often try to handle everything themselves, risking burnout and inefficiency. Delegating tasks to colleagues, paralegals, or support staff ensures the workload is shared, improving productivity and preserving mental and physical health. This also aligns with **ABA Model Rule 5.1** (Responsibilities of Partners and Supervisors) by fostering team accountability.
- 2. Cultivate Inner Confidence Through Internal Validation:** Lawyers can combat superhero syndrome by shifting their focus from external recognition to internal validation. Acknowledge personal achievements and strengths without relying on constant external feedback. Reflect on the meaningful impact of your work, which fosters inner confidence and reduces the pressure to "do it all" for external approval.

# The Individualist



# How Lawyers Can Overcome Individualism

1. **Foster a Collaborative Mindset:** Lawyers can combat individualism by recognizing the value of teamwork in achieving better outcomes for clients. Actively seek input from colleagues, engage in team discussions, and share responsibilities. This approach aligns with ABA **Model Rule 5.3** (Responsibilities Regarding Nonlawyer Assistance) by promoting a collaborative environment that leverages everyone's expertise.
2. **Reframe Success as a Shared Goal:** Shift the focus from personal achievements to collective successes. Recognize that outcomes are often the result of group efforts and celebrate team accomplishments. This builds stronger relationships with colleagues, reduces isolation, and reinforces a sense of community within the profession, supporting the **ABA Well-Being Pledge's** emphasis on fostering connections.



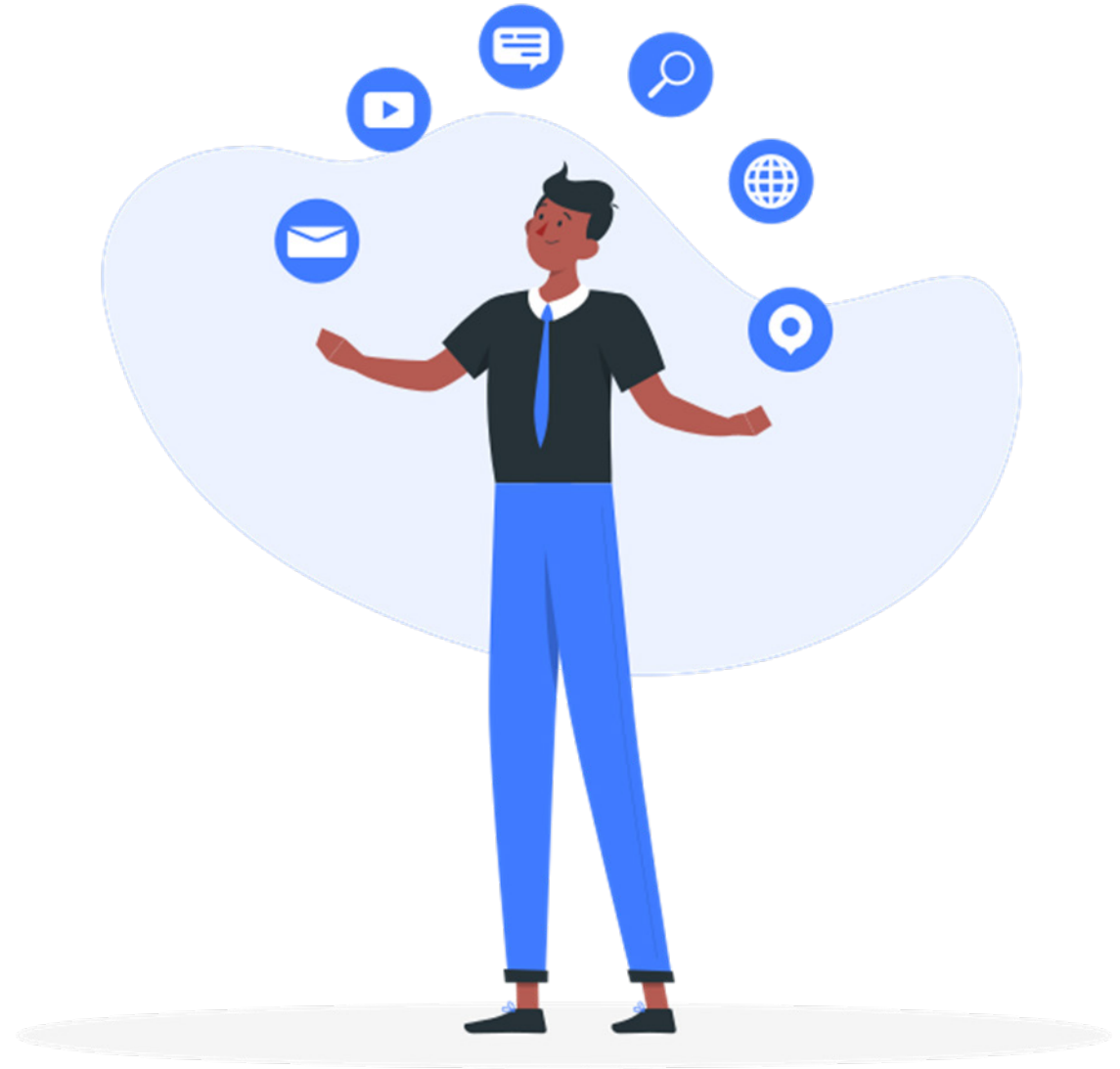
# The Natural Genius



# How Lawyers Can Overcome the Natural Genius Mindset

- 1. Embrace the Learning Process:** Lawyers with the natural genius mindset often feel they should master new skills effortlessly. Overcome this by focusing on the journey of growth and skill development rather than expecting immediate perfection. Celebrate incremental progress and recognize that practice and persistence lead to mastery, aligning with the **ABA Well-Being Pledge** to promote resilience and adaptability.
- 2. Seek Mentorship and Constructive Feedback:** Instead of assuming you should "know it all," seek guidance from mentors and peers to enhance your learning. Constructive feedback helps identify areas for improvement and reinforces that needing help is normal and not a sign of failure. This collaborative approach supports the **ABA Model Rule 1.1 (Competence)** by ensuring continuous professional development and maintaining high standards of practice.

# The Expert



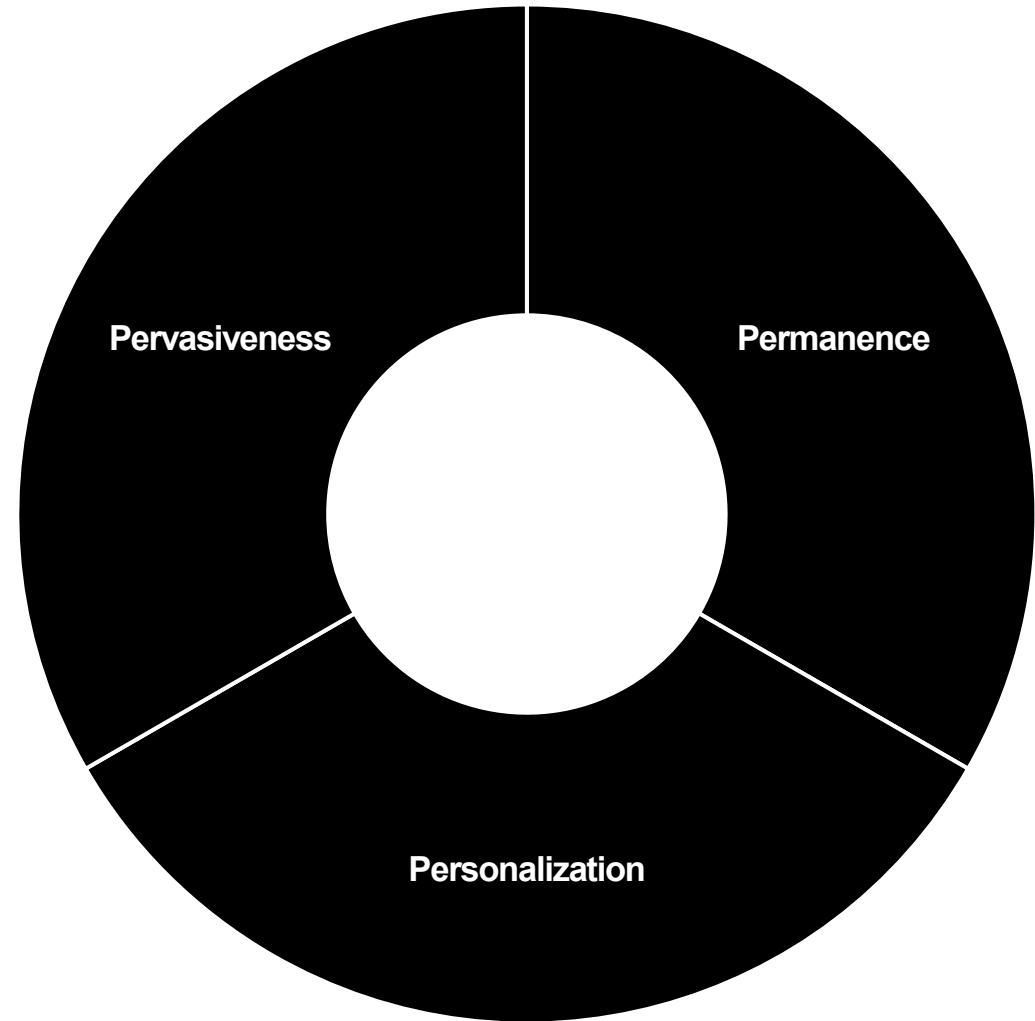
# How Lawyers Can Overcome the Expert Mindset

1. **Focus on Practical Competence Over Total Mastery:** Lawyers with the expert mindset often feel they need to know every detail before taking action, which can lead to paralysis or inefficiency. Instead, focus on achieving practical competence sufficient to address the client's needs effectively, as required by **ABA Model Rule 1.1** (Competence). Recognize that no one can know everything, and continuous learning is a natural part of the profession.
2. **Leverage Team Expertise:** Rather than trying to be the sole authority on every issue, embrace the collective knowledge of your team or network. Consult with colleagues or specialists when needed, which ensures a more thorough approach and prevents burnout. This aligns with **ABA Model Rule 2.1** (Advisor), which emphasizes providing well-rounded, informed advice by utilizing available resources.

# Reflection v. Rumination Exercise

04

# Dr. Martin Seligman's 3 Ps



# Reflection v Rumination Exercise

1. Describe a hardship you have recently experienced.
2. Analyze your thoughts during that time
  - Personalization - How have you personalized this event?
  - Pervasiveness - In what ways have you seen the adversity spill over into different aspects of your life?
  - Permanence - How have you viewed this adversity in terms of its duration or permanence?
3. • How can you reframe this adversity as an opportunity for growth?
4. • What is one positive lesson you can take from this experience?



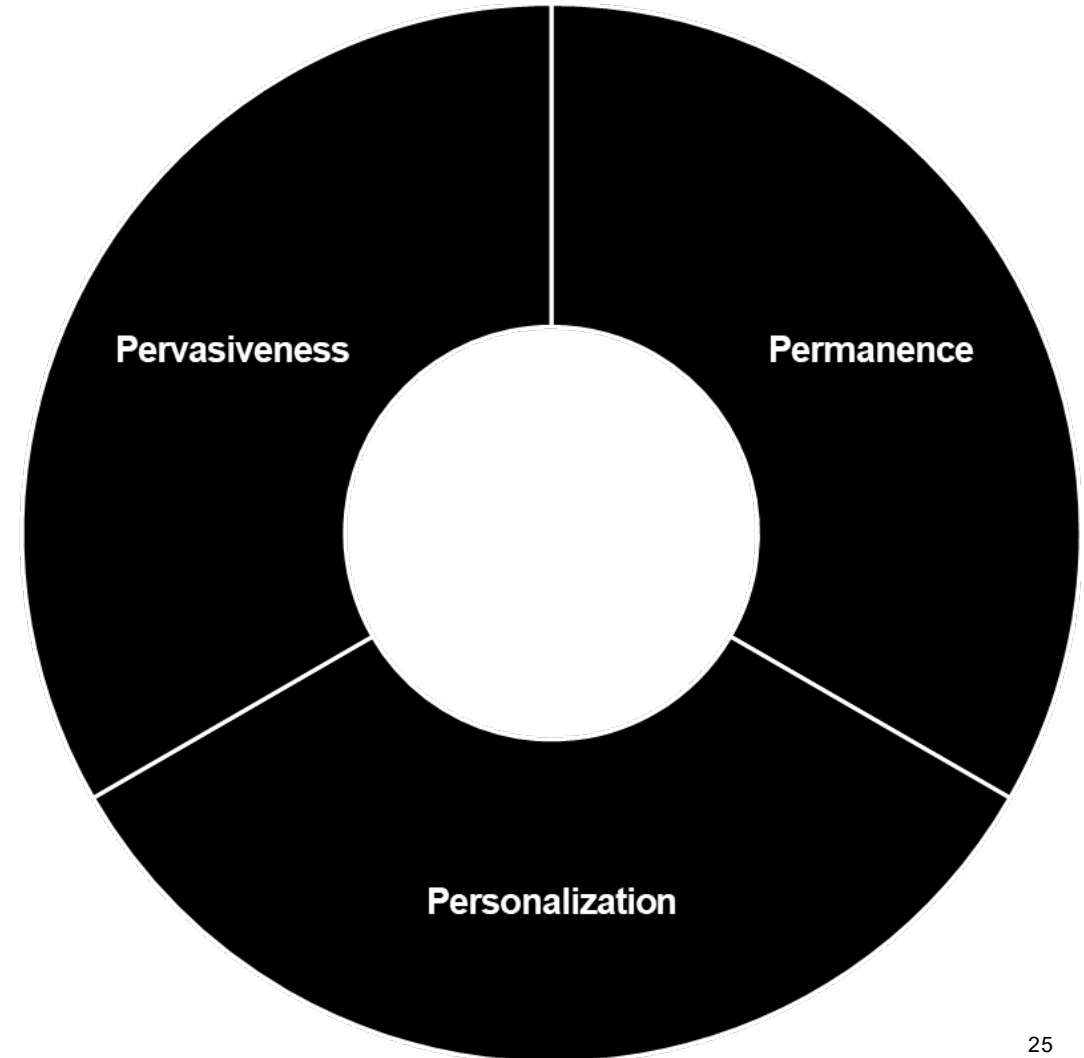
# Leadership Skills to Tackle Imposter Syndrome

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# Why Leadership Should Understand the Science of Adversity

1. Empathy and Support
2. Tailored Guidance
3. Building Trust
4. Modeling Resilience
5. Strategic Problem-Solving
6. Fostering Growth



# How Resilience Contributes to Sustained Performance and Adaptability on Legal Teams

## Consistency in Performance

- Sustains team motivation and energy levels.

## Positive Mindset and Growth

- Encourages learning and team adaptability.

## Strong Team Dynamics

- Strengthens collaboration and problem-solving.

## Emotional Regulation

- Helps team manage stress under pressure.

## Recovery from Setbacks

- Enables fast team recovery from failures.

## Problem-Solving and Innovation

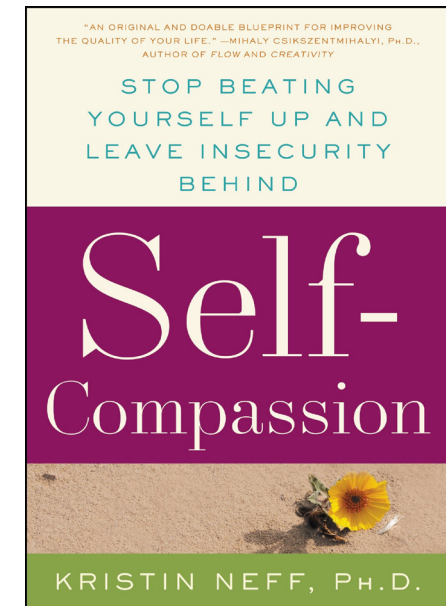
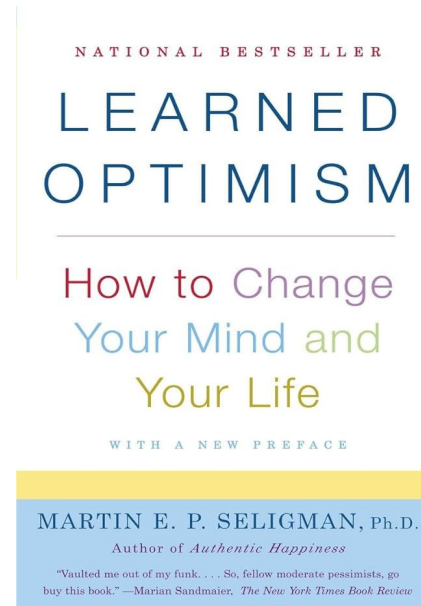
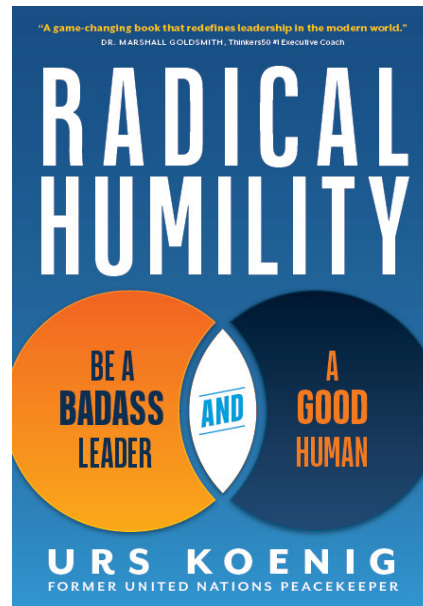
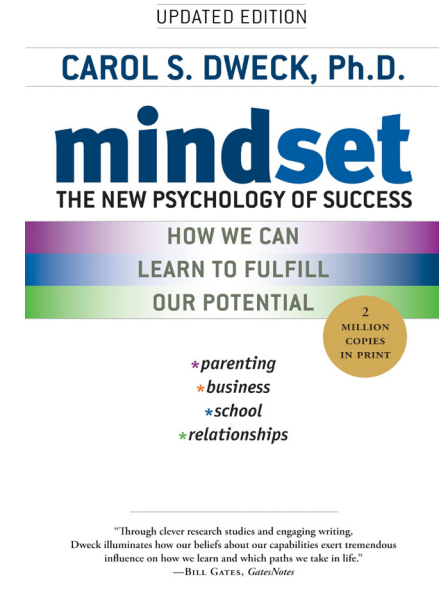
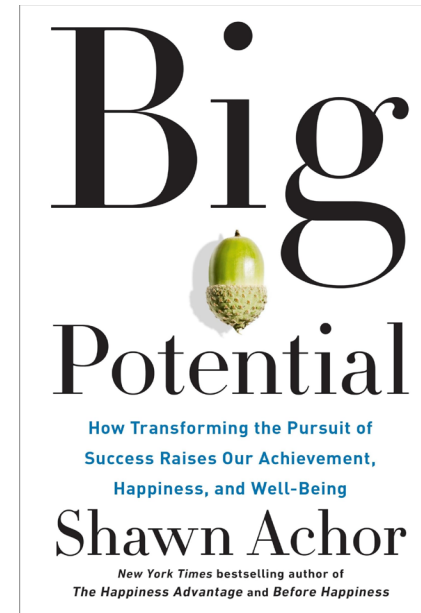
- Fosters collaborative, creative team solutions.



# Additional Resources

06

# Additional Resources



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