

# THE FOCUSED LAWYER

*A new strategy for lawyers with  
ADHD to get more done and  
increase well-being*



*Casey Dixon, PPC, SCAC, BCC, M.S.Ed.*

# Contents

Introduction	3
Understanding Lawyers with ADHD	4
A New Strategy	9
Succeeding as a Lawyer with ADHD	23
The Focused Lawyer Coaching Group	24
References	25

# Introduction

About 4.5% of U.S. adults have ADHD. According to the landmark ABA study on the state of mental health of U.S. attorneys, 12.5% of lawyers are reporting ADHD (Krill, Johnson, Albert, 2016).

That means lawyers are reporting ADHD at more than 2 ½ times the rate of other adults.

It also means that, if you are a lawyer experiencing ADHD symptoms, you are not alone.



# Understanding Lawyers with ADHD

ADHD is a complex system of neurological executive function impairments that causes problems with our brain's ability to manage itself. ADHD significantly interferes with functioning in many aspects of daily life: work, home, relationships, and health.

The executive function impairments of ADHD make it difficult for the adult with ADHD to:

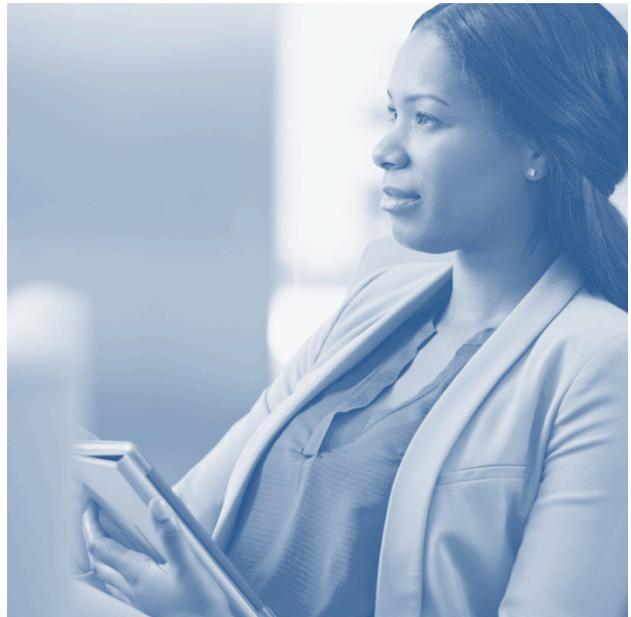
- Resist distractions,
- Get your thoughts or things organized,
- Start and restart on your tasks,
- Focus on tasks and shift focus from one task to another,
- Regulate your sleep and alertness,
- Maintain your effort,
- Process information efficiently and make decisions,
- Manage frustration and your emotions,
- Remember things in the moment,
- Direct your own actions

(Brown, 2017)

The landmark American Bar Association study on the state of mental health of U.S. attorneys reveals mental health problems for lawyers at significantly higher rates than the general population with 61% reporting anxiety, 45% reporting depression, and 12.5% reporting ADHD over the span of their careers (Krill, Johnson, Albert, 2016). Problematic drinking was also reported for over 20% of respondents. The poor state of lawyer well-being prompted the ABA to launch a Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being and recently adopt a resolution on well-being as a call to action in the legal profession to address the needs and reduce the stigma associated with mental health concerns (ABA Working Group, 2018).

### ADHD does not generally show up by itself.

About 80% of the time, ADHD co-occurs with anxiety, depression, addiction, or other mental health conditions (Barkley, Murphy, Fischer, 2008). This means that lawyers who are experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety, or problematic drinking might also be experiencing ADHD.



## 12.5% of U.S. lawyers are reporting ADHD.

But, why is the rate of ADHD among U.S. lawyers so high? People who have ADHD and do well in school are highly likely to go into law because they crave a high stimulation environment, love to create logical connections or arguments, can hyperfocus to get things done under stress, and have a tendency to rely on the sense of urgency that legal work provides to get things done.

Sounds perfect, right?

Unfortunately, as many lawyers with ADHD get further along in their careers, the more being a lawyer can exacerbate their ADHD symptoms, as the once-effective coping skills of their youth become overwhelmed by increased demands. Many become aware of ADHD symptoms for the first time in law school when the demands of coursework became difficult to manage for the first time. For other lawyers, they might not get a diagnosis until even later in life, or they might simply “self-diagnose” by learning about ADHD and recognizing themselves.



**So, I would like you to meet my client, Amanda.**

When I first met Amanda, she was a second-year associate at a large firm. Amanda is a typical, young lawyer: bright, driven to succeed, dedicated to her work. She is also a typical, young lawyer in that she struggles with her well-being. Before we began our work together, this is how Amanda described her professional life:

*I find myself having a really hard time working in a steady, consistent, non-panicked way. I have a difficult time getting started, fall into a spiral of procrastination, anxiety, and avoidance. I tend to work in huge bursts at the last minute, after having put off a big assignment for as long as possible, and usually end up feeling frustrated and disappointed in my work product. I can't stay away from distractions, especially the Internet.*

Lawyers are especially vulnerable to high-demands and distractions – often expected to be available 24/7, respond to emails immediately, hop from task to task with ease, and accept every interruption. I recently spoke to a room full of 250 lawyers at a CLE event. When I told them that most lawyers were being distracted 6 or more times per day they laughed (or scoffed) because they felt that number to be too low (Legal Trends, 2017). They reported being distracted “constantly,” and “never” having uninterrupted time. All of these demands and interruptions add up to a state of high stress and chronic distraction.

Amanda did well in law school, but struggled just enough for her to seek and get an ADHD diagnosis. She was really struggling as a second-year associate and was not sure she would get even close to her firm's 2000 billable hours expectation. Amanda was experiencing high stress because work tasks seemed to take longer for her and she did not have a habit of tracking her hours, so she would lose some along the way.

In addition to long (often under-reported) hours, Amanda was chronically distracted either by interruptions from others or her own distracting habits, like reading news on her iPad. When you add in the fact that Amanda's brain with ADHD was having difficulty with most or all of those critical executive functions, including resisting distractions, you can easily see how it felt nearly impossible for her to manage her work in a way that helped her to create and maintain health, well-being, and fulfillment.

**Amanda needed a *new strategy* – one that included a change in her perspective, getting support, and implementing some helpful tactics.**

2000 billable hours per year breaks down to 8.6 billable hours per day of work, taking into account available business days per year and vacation days. For that to actually happen, it is estimated that you will have to work 12 hour days, 5 days per week, all year long (The Truth, 2017).

# A New Strategy

A new strategy for lawyers with ADHD means changing your perspective, getting support, and implementing helpful tactics. This model shows what that looks like, and the next several pages will discuss each part of the strategy in greater detail.

## Change Your Perspective

---

1. Believe you can be a lawyer and have a healthy, fulfilling life.
2. Focus on your strengths and interests.

## Get Support

---

1. Learn about ADHD.
2. Get a diagnosis and treatment for ADHD.

## Implement Helpful Tactics

---

1. Optimize your brain with self-care.
2. Reduce your cognitive load.
3. Avoid distractions.

## Change your perspective

### **1. Believe you can be a lawyer and have a healthy, fulfilling life.**

Like many other lawyers, Amanda embraced the prevailing mindset that there is never enough time and everything is urgent (or due yesterday), and being overwhelmed means you're doing a good job.

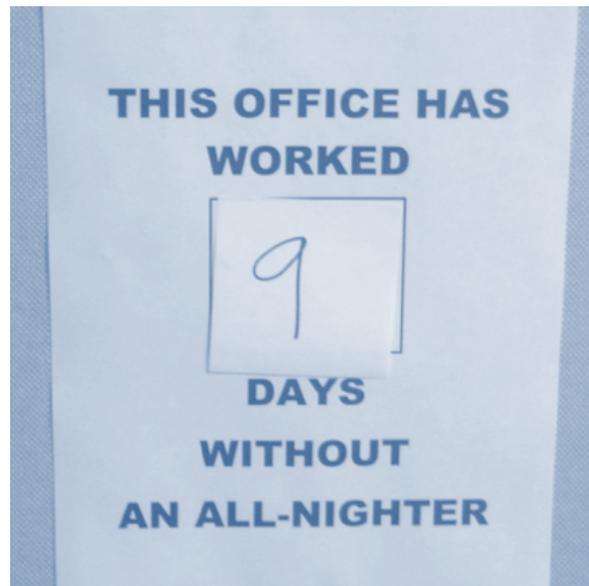
One of the most powerful steps an attorney with ADHD-like problems can take is to decide that being an attorney and having balance at work is not only possible, it's necessary to do your best work. It is essential for the lawyer with ADHD to shift his or her mindset and to embrace the idea that being an attorney does not have to be so difficult that it severely compromises all other areas of life.

What would it look like if you embraced the mindset that being a lawyer can fit into a healthy, balanced life?



Things to try:

- Envision what a healthy, balanced life might look like. Take some time to write about your vision.
- Make a list of the things you would add to your life to make your vision real.
- Make a list of things you would subtract from your life to make your vision real.



## Change your perspective

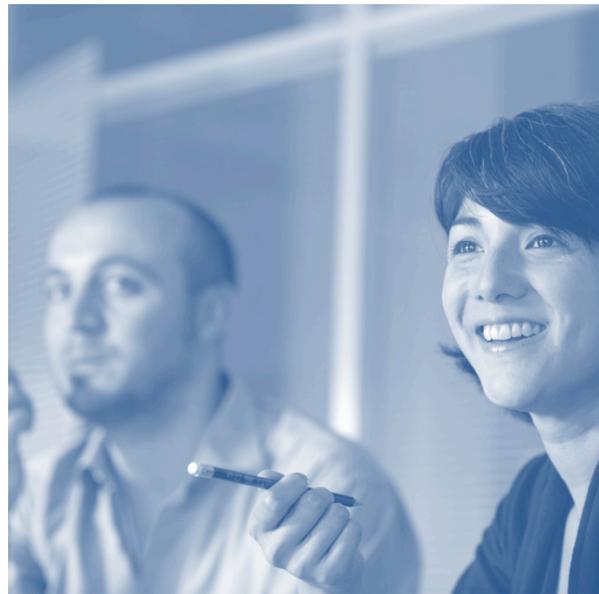
### **2. Focus on your strengths and interests.**

Lawyers with ADHD often find themselves feeling stuck on tasks unless the task is one which has especially strong interest for them. Spend most of your time and energy on tasks that are highly interesting to you, and your ADHD symptoms will decrease.

Practice handing less interesting tasks off to paralegals or assistants and spend less of your time on mundane chores. Intentionally create automatic habits around timekeeping and logging, document handling, email triage, and other not-so-fun aspects of being a lawyer. Remember that you became a lawyer because of your natural strengths and abilities. Identify what you want to be known for at work, and focus most of your time and energy on that. What would it look like if you focused more on your strengths and interests?

Things to try:

- Make a list of the tasks you do for work that interest you.
- Start long projects with the interesting parts.
- See if you can fit more of the interesting tasks into each day's schedule.
- Delegate uninteresting tasks to others whenever possible.
- Develop systematic habits for mundane tasks, like logging hours. This can be especially hard for lawyers with ADHD. An ADHD coach can help you to design and implement this habit. Or, you can find someone at work to help.



## Get support

### 1. Learn about ADHD.

Knowing how to define ADHD is a good start, but if you have ADHD, it will help you to keep learning. There are many ways for you to deepen your understanding of ADHD. Join local and national organizations dedicated to serving those with ADHD and sign up for webinars and conferences. Read or listen to books and podcasts on ADHD. Working with an ADHD coach will also help to advance your deeper understanding of ADHD.

### 2. Get a diagnosis and treatment for ADHD.

If you think you might have ADHD, but haven't received a diagnosis or treatment you should consider these three ways to get yourself the support you need:

- [Take a screening test and talk to a doctor.](#)

Try taking an online ADHD screening test (the Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale is a good one) and having a conversation with your doctor about diagnosis and treatment options. You can start with your general practitioner, but you could also go to a psychologist who specializes in ADHD for a more complete evaluation.

- [Consider ADHD medication.](#)

Medication is the most effective treatment for ADHD. Studies have shown that ADHD medications substantially improve the functioning of 70 to 95% of ADHD sufferers (Barkley, Murphy, Fischer, 2008). "Improve" is the key word for medication. Amanda reported to me that her meds helped her to get things done, but did not "erase" her ADHD symptoms.

## Get support

- Try working with a coach or therapist who specializes in ADHD. Working with a certified coach or a therapist that specializes in adult ADHD is also an effective way to get support, develop coping strategies, and learn how to implement necessary behavior changes. If you can find someone who is also familiar with the legal field, then that is even better. Interventions for lawyers with ADHD are more effective if they are targeted to the profession (Krill, Johnson, Albert, 2016). Check out your state's lawyer assistance programs to see if they have people or programs to support you.

- Treat your ADHD and co-occurring conditions (see p. 5). In addition, we know that treatment is much more effective when it addresses all co-occurring conditions. Imagine seeking treatment for depression or anxiety and keeping your ADHD in a secret box in the corner. How will your depression and anxiety fare when you continue to struggle with the executive functions listed on page 4? Experts in ADHD report that in cases where there is ADHD plus another co-occurring condition, "the health care professional may elect to treat the ADHD first because primary treatment of ADHD may reduce stress, improve attentional resources and may enhance the individual's ability to deal with the symptoms of the other condition" (ADHD and Coexisting Disorders, 2015).

Things to try:

- Search online for ADHD vlogs, blogs, or podcasts and try some out. Bookmark your favorites.
- Join [ADDA](#) or [CHADD](#) to read articles, attend webinars, or go to local and international conferences.
- Find social media about ADHD to follow. Follow me on Twitter at [@dixonlifecoach](#).
- Download and take the [Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale](#).
- Research coaches or therapists who specialize in ADHD and see what is available to you.
- Contact your lawyers assistance program to see if they have resources for lawyers with ADHD.

## Implement helpful tactics

### 1. Optimize your brain with self-care.

Even though you might have ADHD, you can still improve your well-being by keeping your brain at its best. In my practice, I call this “Eat, Sleep, Breathe, Move.”

- Eat

A healthy diet will support optimum brain function. This means making a regular habit of planning your meals, shopping, preparing food, and making time to eat.

- Sleep

Like many lawyers, Amanda would sacrifice her sleep to her work – pulling all-nighters whenever she had an urgent deadline. Unfortunately, the result of these nights with little or no sleep was typically a poor work product and raging ADHD symptoms over the next several days. Aim for 7 or more hours per night.

- Breathe

Mindfulness has also been shown to reduce ADHD symptoms, improving the ability to direct attention, get things done, and feel better emotionally. Mindfulness can be practiced in just a couple of minutes each day.

- Move

Exercise improves your ability to perform cognitively – reducing ADHD symptoms – and can alleviate stress. Quick cardio-vascular workouts are the most effective for increasing focus.

Things to try:

- Order groceries to be delivered or meals from a healthy meal delivery service.
- Set alarms to help you get into bed on time, or program your Internet or TV to shut off before your planned bedtime.
- Choose a mindfulness site or app that has short, guided practices for you to follow, like [MindfullyADD](#).
- Try jumping rope or running up and down the stairs at the office a couple times per day.



## Implement helpful tactics

### 2. Reduce your cognitive load.

When you have ADHD, your brain's executive function system tires easily. There are three main ways to reduce your cognitive load to free up precious brainpower:

- Externalize thoughts.

To reduce how much you are carrying around in your head, capture your thoughts externally using lists, journals, reminders, and plans as much as possible. Write everything down. This can be messy, with sticky-notes strewn about and multiple journals, or it can be tidy, with a hard-core system of lists and notifications. It does not really matter which way you go, as long as you are externalizing.

- Plan your day and week.

Many lawyers feel as if they cannot plan their days because of all of the demands of others and interruptions they must handle. But, making a plan, even if you cannot follow most of it, will help to reduce your cognitive load and free up critical brain power. Schedule a weekly planning session on Monday mornings and a daily planning session each morning before you jump into your work for the day.

- Make routines for mundane tasks.

If you have solid routines for getting ready in the morning, handling your email inbox, keeping track of your tasks and time, leaving the office, and getting to bed, then you will reduce your cognitive load significantly. When you waste time making decisions that are not worthy of your creative mind, you tax your executive function system so heavily that you often don't have energy left for your actual work. Make those decisions in advance, create routines, and practice until they become habit.

Things to try:

- Keep a to-do list and add to it from all of your “inboxes,” like email, voice messages, meeting notes, and random thoughts.
- Make a weekly and daily plan. Even if you know you will not be able to follow your plan, make it anyway. The act of planning can help you make productive choices later.
- Keep your to-do list and daily and weekly plans on paper instead of digitally. People with ADHD seem to pay attention more to paper solutions.
- Keep a *capture journal* or notepad by your workstation to write down thoughts and ideas while working so they don't lead you away from your work.
- Create a system for email. Turn off email notifications and do an email *triage* three times per day.
- Stop and think about what area of your work would benefit from a routine system. Then, spend some time designing your system or hire a professional organizer or coach to help you set it up.
- Pay attention to when you are making decisions that are not worth your brain's energy. Do repeat tasks (like arriving at the office, logging hours, eating lunch, etc.) in the same way at the same time as much as possible.

## Implement helpful tactics

### 3. Avoid distractions.

Lawyers are especially susceptible to distractions due to the nature of your work. But, that doesn't mean you need to allow distractions to drive your day.

Put yourself back in the driver's seat by identifying patterns of disruptions and distractions and intentionally setting up blockers. For example, turn off all digital notifications, put your phone on do not disturb, close your office door, and set browser blockers to limit your time on social media and other distracting websites.

You can also help to limit distractions by being willing to disappoint others now and again so that they will learn that you are in charge of your own time and are not open to all interruptions. Manage the expectations of those around you by not being available to every demand, interruption, or distraction.

For lawyers with ADHD, distractions often come from themselves in the form of internal distractions. When you are struck by an internal distraction, write it down and return to it later. This gets the distraction out of your head, helping you to avoid chasing it at the cost of getting work done.

Things to try:

- Turn off all notifications. You will not forget to check your email.
- Schedule Internet blockers during peak work times.
- Get out of the office and work in a coffee shop, local library, or co-working space.
- Do not be immediately available so people stop expecting you to be.
- Write down internal distractions to follow up with later.



# Succeeding as a Lawyer with ADHD

With the rate of ADHD at 12.5% for lawyers, it is critical for the legal community to gain a better understanding of how ADHD impacts lawyer well-being. With more awareness and reduced stigma surrounding ADHD, a greater number of lawyers will be able to get the help they need in order to thrive in their work and life. Through changing her perspective and getting support with ADHD treatment and coaching, Amanda was able to discover what her essential, helpful tactics were and apply them until they became habitual.

After implementing her new strategy, Amanda told me:

*I've regained my sense of confidence and competence. I don't feel like I am pretending to be a 'bright, young lawyer' anymore because I can bring my whole self to my work. When I fall out of good habits, I know how to reestablish them. I used to fantasize about working at Starbucks, but now I know I am in the right career.*

# The Focused Lawyer Coaching Group

The Focused Lawyer Coaching Group, is an online community created specifically for lawyers with ADHD.

Get support, guidance, accountability, and connection to help you develop the systems and processes to bring your vision to life.

Expand your understanding of how having ADHD impacts your practice of law, develop skills and habits to optimize brain function, maximize talents, motivate yourself to succeed, and identify the specific action steps that work best for you.

Share with and learn from other lawyers with ADHD, discuss your experiences with the group, and reap the benefits of having multiple minds "in the room."



The Focused Lawyer Coaching Group is the right community for you if you want to...

- Gain a deeper understanding of ADHD and how it impacts you.
- Augment existing ADHD treatments, like medication, therapy, or individual coaching.
- Benefit from the knowledge and experience of other lawyers with ADHD.
- Focus on your strengths and interests.
- Optimize your brain functioning with self-supportive habits.
- Reduce your cognitive load and unleash your brainpower at work.
- Avoid distractions, interruptions, and working on the wrong things.
- Create routines and systems to help you feel better and get more done.
- Believe you can be a lawyer who has ADHD and have a healthy, fulfilling life.

Find it here:

<https://www.dixonlifecoaching.com/focused-lawyer-coaching-group>

# References

ADHD and Coexisting Disorders (2015). National Resource Center on ADHD: A Program of CHADD. <http://www.chadd.org/Portals/0/Content/CHADD/NRC/Factsheets/coexisting.pdf>

ABA Working Group to Advance Well-Being in the Legal Profession, Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs Standing Committee on Professionalism, National Organization of Bar Counsel Report to the House of Delegates Resolution (2018). <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/images/abanews/mym2018res/105.pdf>.

Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS-v1.1) Symptom Checklist. <https://www.hcp.med.harvard.edu/ncs/asrs.php>.

ABA Working Group to Advance Well-Being in the Legal Profession, Commission Barkley, R. A., Murphy K. R., & Fischer M. (2008). ADHD in Adults: What the Science Says. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Brown, Thomas E. (2017). Outside the Box: Rethinking Add/Adhd in Children and Adults - a Practical Guide. Arlington, VA: Amer Psychiatric Pub.

Krill, P. R., Johnson, R., & Albert, L. (2016). The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys: Journal of Addiction Medicine, 10(1), 46–52. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ADM.000000000000182>

Legal Trends Report | Clio. (2017). <https://www.clio.com/2017-legal-trends-report/>

National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being: Creating a Movement To Improve Well-Being in the Legal Profession (2017). <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/images/abanews/ThePathToLawyerWellBeingReportRevFINAL.pdf>.

The Truth about the Billable Hour. Yale Law School (2017). <https://law.yale.edu/student-life/career-development/students/career-guides-advice/truth-about-billable-hour>.

Casey Dixon is a Life Coach with a unique focus on science-based, innovative collaborative coaching for lawyers, professors, and other demand-ridden professionals having ADHD. Comfortable and familiar with the paradox of competence and accomplishment smacked up against dysregulation and stuckness, Casey listens intensely without judgment, adding a logical voice and sometimes a bit of humor.

She founded Dixon Life Coaching in 2005 as a new beginning to her 15-year career of working with both kids and adults with learning disabilities and ADHD in schools and universities. Since then, Casey has become recognized for helping clients excel in authentic and creative ways using ADHD-informed approaches. Casey is known for reliably facilitating direct results.

Casey is recognized as an ICF Professional Certified Coach, Senior Certified ADHD Coach, and Board Certified Coach.

As an in-demand ADHD Coach, Casey has developed her expertise as an entrepreneur, author, interviewee, CLE presenter, and educational speaker.

Recently, Casey founded MindfullyADD, a website dedicated to helping adults with ADHD excel in both developing and sustaining a mindfulness habit.

