

BY DANIEL BINSTOCK

Battered and Bewildered?

Maybe it's time to rethink priorities, repair your self-esteem, or even look for a new job.

Career Advice

Brian was a young attorney who appeared to have it all. He graduated from a top law school with top grades, landed a prestigious job during a slow market, and made a salary reaching well into the six figures.

When Brian contacted me to discuss a job search, he seemed beaten down. I asked him to describe his work. This is what he told me:

- He worked closely with a senior attorney with erratic, unpredictable mood swings, which ranged from being complimentary and charming one moment to condescending and verbally abusive the next.
- Brian would get stomach pains almost daily when the senior attorney's name would show up on his caller ID. He never knew if the person would be in a good mood or calling to berate him.
- He felt his entire self-worth hinged on whether the senior attorney was pleased with his work. Nice comments meant he was on top of the world; negative comments meant he was a failure.
- He recently woke up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat realizing the page numbers in a brief he filed that day were in the Arial font, while the brief itself was in Times New Roman. (He got reprimanded the next day for the Arial.)
- Although he had received positive performance reviews, he believed it was only a matter of time before his superiors would "find out" he wasn't as smart as they thought and would believe they had made a mistake in hiring him.
- He was afraid to share any of this with his co-workers or family for fear that he would be viewed as weak or a failure.

Brian added, "I know this may sound bad, and although I'm pretty miserable, I think I'm lucky to be working here."

If you can relate to these examples, you could be suffering from the effects of BAS, "battered attorney syndrome." Is this a diagnosis recognized by mental health professionals? No. But having worked with attorneys in highly stressful jobs, I can say that BAS is real and its effects can undermine a legal career.

According to Ed Honnold, a 13-year veteran of a D.C. law practice who is now a career consultant and psychotherapist for lawyers, "The effects of stress in the legal practice not only cause profound damage to an attorney's mental health, personal, and family relationships, but also directly inhibit an attorney's ability to practice law at the highest level."

BAS is not limited to attorneys in large law firms. Says Matthew Pascoello of the Office of Career Services at American University's Washington College of Law: "Unfortunately, I've seen evidence of BAS across the spectrum of legal employment—from public to private, and large to small employers."

WHAT IS BAS?

Of course, practicing law carries a certain level of stress. By its very nature, the law is challenging, complex, and not for the faint of heart. An important distinction, however, should be made between a challenging job and overwhelming stress and unhappiness. If you feel a loss of self-esteem or a lack of control over your life, you probably have BAS.

If you are still in your current job, you may be thinking, "Yeah, I can relate to Brian's situation, but isn't this just a part of life in the legal world? It's just like this, or worse, at other places. I chose to be a lawyer, worked hard, got a great job making lots of money to pay off my loans. If I leave, I'm a quitter and a failure. If I can stick it out, it'll be worth it."

This type of response is a common symptom of BAS: you are aware that your situation is unhealthy—probably both emotionally and physically—but you believe you are locked in. And if you have read about all the unemployed lawyers, you might believe you were lucky to land your job. The danger with this type of thinking is that you are intellectually aware of your unhealthy situation, but continue to do nothing.

Unfortunately, it is not always realistic to begin a new job search. In these situations, you have to try to improve the situation. However, if you have decided to look for a new job or have been asked to leave your current job, you will likely feel a temporary euphoria. It is absolutely crucial, however, to realize that

the BAS symptoms and residual effects can linger and hinder your future opportunities.

The most common symptoms of BAS are anger and a loss of self-esteem. Experiencing a loss in self-esteem will undermine your ability to practice law. You lose faith in your instincts, doubt your judgment, and avoid asking necessary questions because you fear being perceived as unknowledgeable.

Pascoello recently counseled a rising female attorney who, he says, “despite receiving the highest bonus in her class and being sought out by partners to work on sophisticated transactions, had a nagging feeling of ‘being found out to be a fraud.’” She felt this all came from a work environment that used fear as a motivator.

These self-doubts will harm your best interests. If you have decided to interview for a new job, your low self-esteem will be obvious to a potential employer. Furthermore, you may be so downtrodden in your current situation that you may be willing to jump at the first job offer that comes along, even if it’s not best for you.

“One devastating side effect of damage to self-esteem is that lawyers lose sight of their personal and professional identities—forgetting who they are, what they value in life, what they are capable of doing well, and what type of environment will allow them to fully maximize their natural skills and talents,” notes Honnold.

Anger comes from the resentment you feel toward the people or factors you believe have added to your unhealthy situation. You could be angry at unjustified criticism or humiliation, unreasonable billable hour requirements, or the lack of an appropriate or promised raise or bonus. Anger can impede your ability to stay calm in stressful situations and can cause hostility toward co-workers and even clients.

If you have been recently asked to leave and given time to find a new job, keep in mind that there are resources at your firm. You should still be able to find some references in your current practice group, unless you are hostile and negative toward them. And on interviews for a next job, your anger toward your previous employer will likely rear its ugly head. Nothing will turn off a potential new employer as much as an angry candidate. Remember, a firm’s reputation is its most valuable asset, and firms steer clear of candidates who may jeopardize it.

YOU’RE NOT ALONE

If you think you are suffering from some form of BAS, you are not alone. If you are feeling symptoms of BAS but must stay in your current job, you can do several things to try to regain a sense of power.

First, if the source of BAS is the stereotypical “jerk” or intimidating superior, the most effective way to handle the situation is by confronting that person directly.

Interestingly, the person doing the battering is often being battered by a person up the ladder and is taking his frustrations out on you. Senior associates are battered by partners, junior partners by senior partners, and everyone is battered by the clients. There are many techniques for confronting people effectively, but sometimes saying, “Mr. Partner, instead of telling me my writing is horrible, I would really appreciate more specific and constructive feedback” helps. That sends the message that you won’t tolerate disrespect, without pointing fingers or inviting an argument.

Second, realize you are not trapped. Although you may not be able to make a move right now, try creating a plan for where you’d like to be and how to get there.

Lastly, if you feel that BAS comes from unrealistically high expectations you are putting on yourself, understand that this is common for attorneys, who are notorious overachievers. However, if you feel that your entire value as a person is tied directly to your job performance, it may be time to step back and re-evaluate your priorities. A third party can help peel away what may be very distorted frames of reference. Qualified legal career counselors, support services with your local bar association, personal life coaches, therapists, and doctors can provide necessary support and perspective.

Assuming you don’t have to stay in your current job and are open to a job change, good for you. There are countless stories of lawyers who were hesitant about career transitions but thrilled to learn that the grass can actually be greener on the other side. The same applies to attorneys who were laid off and given a blessing-in-disguise opportunity to find their dream job.

“Often, what starts out as a very difficult situation becomes the path to not just a new job but a new and more-satisfying life,” says Evan Anderson of Shannon & Manch, a legal outplacement and attorney development consulting firm in Washington, D.C.

As you wind down at your current job and look for a new one, stay aware of any potential BAS symptoms. And keep in mind: If you are suffering from BAS, you are not alone.

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