

The Lawyers' Epidemic: Depression, Suicide, and Substance Abuse

by C. Stuart Mauney

In a period of 18 months, six lawyers committed suicide in South Carolina. In late 2008, a student at the Charleston (SC) School of Law committed suicide. Around that same time, a student at the USC School of Law died of alcohol poisoning. Recent studies show that lawyers are three times as likely to suffer from depression as other professions. The rate of substance abuse among lawyers is twice that of the general population.

The South Carolina Bar formed the HELP Task Force to shine a bright light on these problems. It is my privilege to serve as Chair of HELP, whose mission is to raise awareness and promote prevention of substance abuse, mental illness, and suicide within the legal profession. The Bar's Lawyers Helping Lawyers program provides confidential services for lawyers who suffer from substance abuse and mental illness. HELP complements the work of LHL, by educating lawyers, law firms, law students, and judges about the services available through LHL. HELP also promotes a better understanding of mental health issues in the legal profession.

A study by Johns Hopkins University found that among more than 100 occupations studied, lawyers were most likely to suffer from depression and were 3.6 times more likely than average to do so. A quality of life survey by the North Carolina Bar revealed that almost 26% of respondents exhibited symptoms of clinical depression, and almost 12% said they contemplated suicide at least once a month. The North Carolina study was prompted in part by the suicides of 8 Mecklenburg County lawyers in a seven-year period.

10% of Americans, more than 19 million people, suffer from depression every year. More Americans suffer from clinical depression than heart disease and cancer. Effective treatment is available for 90% of those with a depressive illness.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among attorneys, after cancer and heart disease. The rate of death by suicide for lawyers is nearly six times the suicide rate for the general population. Suicide can be prevented. While some suicides occur without any outward warning, most do not. We can prevent suicide among lawyers by learning to recognize the signs of someone at risk, taking those signs seriously, and knowing how to respond to them.

The National Institute on Alcohol and Alcohol Abuse estimates that 10% of the U.S. population is alcoholic or chemically dependent. In the legal profession, the abuse may be as high as 20%. Alcoholism is a factor in 30% of all completed suicides. Reports from lawyer assistance programs indicate that 50%-75% of lawyer discipline cases nationwide involve chemical dependency.

Whether you are the husband, wife, employee, judge, law student, law partner, law firm associate, friend, or colleague of a person challenged by depression or substance abuse, your understanding of the nature of the problem can play a vital part in helping that individual to achieve and maintain recovery. Please remember that there is hope, and there is help. You are not alone.

Call the Lawyers Helping Lawyers toll-free helpline at 866-545-9590 or LifeFocus Counseling Services toll-free at 866-726-5252 to be referred to a counselor in your area.