Studies show that lawyers are three times more likely to suffer from depression than any other profession. The rate of substance abuse disorders is twice that of the general population. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among attorneys, after cancer and heart disease. Perhaps you know someone who is struggling with such a problem. Let me introduce you to someone who has been there.

The lyrics to singer and songwriter James Taylor's song “Down in the Hole” include the following:

Welcome down underground, hunker down a spell. Gets to feel like home to me though I know it looks like hell. Down in the hole, Lord, it’s deep and the sides are steep. And the nights are long and cold, down in the hole. Light and love and the world above mean nothing to the mole.

Taylor has called this song his anthem to depression. He knew about the hole, the hole so deep, so dark, sides so steep, with no obvious way out. James Taylor had been there.

The Hole of Depression

And, I have been there. Some 23 years ago, during a time in which I had been feeling down and things had not been going my way at work, I noticed that I was not myself. I felt down most of the time. I had lost interest in most activities. I was more tired and had less energy. I had trouble thinking and concentrating at work, and I was indecisive. I would be at work for hours on end and find myself having not accomplished anything at all. I was more irritable and emotional, particularly at home.

I also experienced a change in my sleeping patterns. I began to wake up in the morning around 4:30, and then not be able to go back to sleep. I thought I was going back to sleep, but I never did—and as a result, I woke up tired.

All of the things that I just mentioned are the warning signs for depression—or being down in the hole, the hole so deep, so dark, so steep, with no obvious way out.

The American novelist William Styron was best known for his novel Sophie's Choice. In 1985, Styron suffered from clinical depression, which he would later recall in his memoir Darkness Visible. In that book, he wrote about his descent into depression, his attempted suicide, and the triumph of recovery. Styron described his depression this way:

The decision making of daily life involves not, as in normal affairs, shifting from one annoying situation to another less annoying—or from discomfort to relative comfort, or from boredom to activity—but moving from pain to pain. One does not abandon, even briefly, one's bed of nails, but is attached to it wherever one goes.

Styron related the madness of depression to a storm, but a storm of murk. Responses slow down; energy throttles back close to zero. Ultimately, the body becomes sapped and drained.

Hope, Help, and Support

What did I do? I got help. With the support of my wife and the help of antidepressant medication, I slowly came out of the hole and back into the light. It was not quick, and it was not easy; but slowly I climbed out of that hole. I could not have done it by myself. No amount of alcohol or vacations or just pulling myself up by my bootstraps would have done it. I needed help.

My story is not terribly dramatic. I did not lose my job, and I was never suicidal. I was never hospitalized, but I was sick. I got help and got better. Depression can be treated, and you can recover, be successful, and be productive. If you remember nothing else, remember these three things:

• Depression is a medical illness, not a personal weakness.
• Depression is a medical problem that can be successfully treated with medication and therapy.
• If you or someone you know has a problem, seek help from a medical professional.

Please remember that there is hope, and there is help. You are not alone.

A directory of lawyer assistance programs in each state can be found on the ABA website. Lawyers may also call the National Helpline for Lawyers at 1-866-LAW-LAPS.

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