

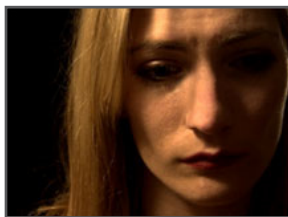


Feature

Depression in the Law Profession

By Mary Waldron

Everyone knows that law is a time-consuming, stressful, and sometimes-draining profession, but can it really get the best of someone? With overwhelming evidence that proves lawyers are at higher risk for depression, substance abuse, and suicide than those in most other professions, young and old lawyers alike need to know that there is help available and that they are by no means alone.



Let's face the facts. Studies show that the average lawyer has a higher chance of becoming depressed than the average person. The general male population's rate for depression is 8.5%, while the depression rate for females is 14.1%. Male

lawyers' average rate of depression is 20.8%—more than double the average rate. Female lawyers do not have it much better; their average rate of depression is 16%.

According to the New Jersey Lawyers Assistance Program, signs and symptoms that many depressed lawyers show are the inability to meet personal and professional obligations, which includes procrastination, file stagnation and neglect, lowered productivity, missing deadlines, excuse-making, and potential for misrepresentation of clients; persistent sadness, apathy, anxiety, crying, or a loss of interest or pleasure; and distinct changes in sexual energy, eating habits, and sleeping habits.

Along with experiencing these symptoms, many lawyers tend to become overwhelmed, distressed, and burnt-out at their jobs. The Utah State Bar found in multiple surveys that one quarter of all attorneys get so stressed at their jobs that it impairs their practice. Many have even reported that they are dissatisfied with their current jobs—a whopping 40% to be exact, according to the American Bar Association.

In fact, the Mississippi Bar has reported that there appears to be an alarming correlation between stressful office environments and the occurrence of stress, depression, and substance abuse in those who work in them.

Ronda Muir, a former lawyer and psychology and conflict-resolution expert has done extensive research on the emotional intelligence levels of lawyers, which tend to be very low. Studies have shown that because lawyers have difficulty

tapping into emotional data and because most lawyers are autonomous, they can often repress emotions, causing them to bottle up and leading to depression.

Interestingly, some lawyers can become depressed or traumatized by the cases and work that they handle. Helga West, President and CEO of Witness Justice, a national organization that provides assistance to survivors of violence and trauma, said, "One of the things that we have come to understand about individuals working in the criminal-justice system and law professions is that sometimes the work can be traumatizing. Individuals with prior trauma histories can have a particularly difficult time when the work triggers old trauma." Individuals who do not seek treatment for these disturbances, obviously, will have higher chances of developing eating disorders, substance-abuse problems, and/or thoughts of self-injury.

Yes, I know that this information may sound like a bit of a downer, but too many lawyers do not realize that there are many resources that can help them cope with and overcome the harsh risks of practicing law.

Lawyers Assistance Programs (also known as Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers Programs) exist in most states, as well as in Canada. These programs are also free and confidential.

Rachelle Reyner of the New Jersey Lawyers Assistance Program said, "I've spoken to many lawyers over the past few years who called our office while dealing with depression or addiction who each believed he or she was the only lawyer experiencing it. We make sure they know that they are not alone and that they do not have to manage alone."

Like the other branches of the Lawyers Assistance Programs, the New Jersey chapter offers a series of benefits and programs that can help lawyers understand and treat their illnesses. It has a staff of six that includes a clinician, a licensed certified alcohol and drug counselor who is also



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a certified life coach, and two attorneys/counselors (both of whom have practiced for more than two decades). This is considered a larger chapter of the organization because 55,000 of the 80,000 attorneys in New Jersey are actually practicing currently, which makes a full staff necessary.

The organization provides support groups that are designed specifically for male and female attorneys who are depressed. There are also 12-step programs designed for lawyers, judges, law students, and law graduates.

Being a lawyer does not have to mean you are doomed to a career of anxiety, depression, and stress. Take the time to evaluate your personal and professional goals and to find a lawyer-support resource so that you can organize and take control of your life in order to prevent these conditions from developing.

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