The Legal Industry as a Breeding Ground for Depression

While the cause of the high rates of depression amongst the attorney community is up for debate, there is no questioning the fact that the issue needs to be examined. Unfortunately, many lawyers refrain from going public, choosing instead to struggle with their problems alone.

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It is unusual to find an individual attorney who is willing to address the subject and reveal his own personal experiences with depression in the process. However, Anderson Kill & Olick partner, Mike Lane, has done just that.

Earlier this month, the Dave Nee Foundation honored Lane with the David S. Stoner Uncommon Counselor Award for his efforts to counter depression within the legal profession. The Dave Nee Foundation was named for a Fordham law graduate who committed suicide while studying for the bar exam in 1995. In recognition of the fact that the legal profession has the highest rates of depression and suicide, the foundation’s Uncommon Counsel program works to battle suicide among law students through education. Uncommon Counsel actively works with CUNY School of Law, Duke University School of Law, Fordham University, New York Law School, and the Touro College Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center to provide information about depression, its impact within the legal profession, and available treatments.

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Lane has more than 25 years of experience as a civil litigator and has been an Adjunct Professor at Fordham University School of Law, where he has taught first year courses on legal research and writing since 1993. As someone who experienced depression as a first year law school student, Lane is well aware of the fact that the pressures of law school can encourage the onset of clinical depression. According to the Dave Nee Foundation website, stress in law students is at 96 percent, compared to 70 percent in medical students, and 43 percent in graduate students. Furthermore, just eight to nine percent of law students suffer from depression before matriculation, while 27 percent report symptoms of depression after one semester. After two semesters, depression among law students is reportedly at 34 percent and after three years of law school that number jumps to 40.

Wynne Kelley, the Vice President of the Dave Nee Foundation noted that “Mike has been a staunch supporter of the Dave Nee Foundation, but more importantly has lived the message of the Foundation in both his practice and in his classroom. Mike lets his fellow members of the bar and his students know that, due to various factors, they are at risk of depression, but also that depression can be easily treated and that there are many people who care and a variety of resources available.”

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In an interview with Jeff Storey of the New York Law Journal, Lane said, “I am not an expert, but I believe the intense, competitive and adversarial nature of legal practice (particularly over the past 10 to 20 years) results in greater stress, anxiety, and depression. Lawyers and judges are all overworked. Litigation disputes over the silliest things are, regrettable common. Certainly the level of collegiality at the bar has dropped significantly in my 26 years of practice.”

According to the foundation, statistics show that the current economy has led to an increased rate of suicide attempts among attorneys, making the issue more pertinent than ever.

See Law School: The Most Depressing Three Years of Your Life for more information.

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