

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

SUICIDE IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

We in the legal profession are at a greater risk for suicide than those in the general population. Scientific studies — most notably the Johns Hopkins study that compared the prevalence of depression in more than 100 professions — have established that lawyers and judges suffer depression at rates up to three times that of the general population. We suffer alcoholism and addiction at rates up to twice the general population. When depression and substance abuse are more prevalent, so is the risk of suicide.

There are new and effective resources available to help us understand and acknowledge why we are at such heightened risk, such as the website, www.lawyerswithdepression.com, founded by lawyer and depression survivor Dan Lukasik. Despite the availability of better information about the general statistics, a huge problem remains: How do we become better skilled at recognizing warning signs and more able to identify who may need help?

The question “Do you ever really know the people you practice with?” is posed within an article¹ written by Ohio attorney Tabitha M. Hochscheid, which centers on the suicide of her law partner, Ken Jameson, a “universally respected, consummate professional” who by all outward appearances seemed to be enjoying life.

According to Tabitha, no one suspected that Ken, a “self-confessed perfectionist,” was suffering from depression. But, in April 2011, Ken suffered a pinched nerve in his back and underwent surgery in May. He seemed to be recovering well, but on May 22, 2011, without warning, Ken took his own life.

According to Tabitha, “As the next few days unfolded, details began to surface. Following the back procedure, he checked in with people at the office and seemed

like his old self. He visited his mother and called his best friend. But, all the while, Ken was meticulously planning to take his own life. People were in a state of shock and disbelief.”

In hindsight, Tabitha’s law firm sees warning signs: “It’s easy now to look back and see the signs of Ken’s depression (sleep deprivation, self-criticism, a feeling of letting others down, a search for answers and inability to allow others to help) and to wonder what, if anything, could have changed the outcome. Time, however, does not give us this luxury and these questions will never be answered. The best that can be done is to acknowledge that Ken’s illness, depression, can be deadly.”

Suicides continue to take place within our legal profession here in Louisiana. As one would both compassionately expect and solemnly respect, most cases are not publicized and the most intimate facts and circumstances leading up to suicide deaths often remain untold. Against the backdrop of suicide statistics alone, it is easy for many of us to convince ourselves that the problem, as frightening as it may be, simply will not impact us personally.

All the while, the truth is that no one is immune to depression, alcoholism, addiction or other mental disorders that can lead to suicide. We can’t predict who will be beset with these diseases any more than one can conclusively predict the incidence of cancer or diabetes. What we can do, however, is better arm ourselves with knowledge to help fight suicide in our profession. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline website at www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org lists both risk factors and warning signs.

Suicide Risk Factors that particularly affect lawyers and judges include mood disorders such as depression and anxiety disorders; alcohol and substance disorders; hopelessness; aggressive tendencies; job or financial loss; loss of relationship; lack of

social support and sense of isolation; and the stigma associated with asking for help.

Suicide Warning Signs include thinking or talking about things such as wanting to die; feelings of hopelessness or having no reason to live; feelings of being trapped or in unbearable pain; and being a burden to others. Also, beware of behavior that includes increased use of alcohol or drugs; being anxious, agitated or reckless; sleeping too little or too much; withdrawing or isolating from others; showing rage or talking about seeking revenge; or displaying extreme mood swings.

A full discussion about suicide risk factors and warning signs is surely beyond the scope of what can be provided here. Thus, visit the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline to obtain additional information. Another resource is the website www.suicide.org that includes a list of Louisiana suicide hotlines, www.suicide.org/hotlines/louisiana-suicide-hotlines.html.

Finally, do not hesitate to place a confidential call to the Lawyers Assistance Program to obtain information about reaching out to someone who may be in trouble or to obtain assistance yourself. All calls to LAP are confidential as a matter of law and you do not have to give your name. Call LAP toll free at (866)354-9334, email LAP@louisianalap.com, or visit LAP on the web at www.louisianalap.com.

FOOTNOTE

1. The article can be accessed at: www.lawyerswithdepression.com/articles/the-suicide-of-a-lawyer-with-depression-kens-story.

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