

LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

LAW STUDENTS AND DEPRESSION

A 2016 study on attorney mental health confirmed a 28 percent depression rate in the legal profession. Also, 48 percent of lawyers have experienced issues with depression during their careers.¹ To put this into perspective, the general population suffers depression at rates under 10 percent.

There are approximately 23,000 licensed attorneys in Louisiana. Per the 28 percent and 48 percent depression rates noted above, 6,440 attorneys are likely suffering from depression *right now*, and 11,040 attorneys have, or will likely have, issues with depression at some point.

What sparks high depression rates in the legal ranks? It begins in law school. Students entering law school suffer depression at the same rate as the general population. But something about the dynamics of the law school experience lights new fuses on depression. Astoundingly, up to 40 percent of the members of any given law school class will likely suffer depression in one form or another by the time they graduate.²

A considerable number of students will eventually overcome their bout with depression, but others will complete law school with both a law degree *and* chronic depression that must be managed long-term.

Dan Lukasik of Buffalo, NY, is in recovery from depression. He is perhaps the most recognized lawyer in the nation on the topic of depression in the legal profession. His website includes discussions on law student depression: <http://www.lawyerswithdepression.com/law-school-depression>. The site also includes input from others about law student depression (citations are on the site).

William M. Treanor of Fordham Law School: "Depression is a very important issue that often gets swept to the side. It's a real concern and a problem in the legal profession. Studies indicate that it is com-

mon among law students and common among lawyers. Given that, it's important to try to figure out ways to combat it and to let people know if they are suffering, they are not alone."

Florida State University Law Professor Lawrence Krieger: "There is a wealth of, which should be alarming, information about the collective distress and unhappiness of our [law] students and the lawyers they become. We appear to be practicing a sort of organizational denial because, given this information, it is remarkable that we are not openly addressing these problems . . . The negative phenomena we ignore are visible to most of us and are confirmed by essentially unrebutted empirical evidence."

According to Lukasik, people tend to confuse student unhappiness and dissatisfaction with depression: "They're not the same thing, not even close. Unhappiness and discontent are relatively transitory; other emotions aren't pushed to the margins or extinguished. We are adaptable in response to our environment. We might feel stressed or exasperated by the law school grind, but everyone bumps up and down throughout their days. We deal with our stress and balance ourselves out either with exercise, socializing or just by having stress-resilient genes. Not so with depression."

In 2008, the American Bar Association produced a law student mental health tool kit.³ It's a general mental health "wellness" guide, but Lukasik sees that effort, as laudable as it may be, as a "lump-it-all-together" message that does not adequately address the severity of depression head on: "Students need to hear about depression *straight-up*." Lukasik deems it imperative that students hear about depression from other students and lawyers who have suffered from it and are willing to talk about it.

Moreover, Lukasik feels that when law

schools pool a list of mental ills together into a small program on "mental health," their students fail to see how any of it is connected to them. Also, if only a "sliver of time" is allocated to depression, students don't perceive the school takes it seriously.

In Louisiana, steps are being taken to address law student depression. The Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program (JLAP) has increased its interaction with all four law schools. JLAP sponsors "Uncommon Counsel" presentations by Dr. Kate Bender from the Dave Nee Foundation.⁴ JLAP also hosts "JLAP Office Hours" at the law schools wherein one of JLAP's licensed professional counselors visits the school and provides free and confidential clinical advice to law students. These efforts are a good start, but the issue of adequately addressing law student depression still remains a very formidable challenge.

If you or someone you know needs help with depression, place a confidential call to JLAP at (985)778-0571, email JLAP@louisianajlap.com, or visit the website at: www.louisianajlap.com.

FOOTNOTES

1. American Society of Addiction Medicine, *Journal of Addiction Medicine*, Volume 10, Number 1, January/February 2016, "The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys," Patrick R. Krill, JD, LL.M.; Ryan Johnson, MA; and Linda Albert, MSSW.

2. <http://www.daveneefoundation.org/scholarship/lawyers-and-depression/>.

3. <http://abaforlawstudents.com/events/initiatives-and-awards/mental-health-resources/>.

4. <http://www.daveneefoundation.org/uncommon-counsel/>.

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