

Lawyers ASSISTANCE

By Dr. Angela White-Bazile, Esq.

IS IT SAFE TO UNMASK?

Is it safe to unmask? I am not only referring to no longer wearing face coverings once required to slow the spread of COVID-19. Is it safe to take off the metaphorical mask you have been wearing since before the pandemic, maybe even since childhood? The mask you wear to please or impress others or the mask saying “everything is good or great” when, in actuality, the opposite is true. What about the mask that covers your fears, struggles, insecurities, or the truth of who you really are? Is the mask covering your reality revealed in the mirror of transparency to the naked eye?

In this instance, “unmasking” can be defined as unveiling, exposing, or releasing your hidden truth or true character. Unmasking is associated with a raw vulnerability that reveals your true nature without the privilege of having a quick cover-up. Surveillance can detect your great attributes during this process, but it also conveys scars, wounds, blemishes, defects and imperfections.

What do you do when it seems everything is falling apart on the inside? What are you concealing, resisting or avoiding? Why do you shy away from sharing when you feel overwhelmed, anxious, depressed or even suicidal? What are you allowing darkness to cover and you refuse to bring it to the light? Does happiness seem unattainable? Why is it so hard to have a conversation surrounding mental health? With whom can you unmask and become transparent without being ridiculed, judged or labeled as “unfit” to practice law?

The World Health Organization defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a con-

For mental health resources, visit these ABA websites:

- ▶ Law Students:
<https://abaforlawstudents.com/events/initiatives-and-awards/mental-health-resources/>
- ▶ Lawyers/Legal Profession:
www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/resources/covid-19--mental-health-resources/
- ▶ Judges:
www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/articles_and_info/resources_for_judges/
- ▶ “Fear Not: Speaking Out to End Stigma” (short video):
www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/profession_wide_anti_stigma_campaign/

tribution to his or her community.”¹

We are all aware of how challenging and demanding the legal profession can be with working long hours, meeting deadlines, billing pressures, client demands, heavy dockets and adhering to the mandates of our judiciary. The law being a “jealous mistress” is an understatement because she requires your stability and competency even when you are feeling broken, shattered and maybe even empty. We can all acknowledge that our families, our communities and the public look to us for answers when there are times that we have questions ourselves. Thus, we do not always feel comfortable openly discussing when the lows in our life appear to outweigh the highs. Nor do we discuss when unhealthy habits or distractions become addictions.

Addictions are not just an issue for underserved communities, uneducated youth, or those labeled as “the wrong crowd.” Anyone can suffer from an addiction. Addiction fails to discriminate based on age, gender, education level, social class or geographical location.² Addiction does not only apply to alcohol, drugs or mental health issues. Addictions can range from being a workaholic to being addicted to social media, food, caffeine, sugar, cigarettes, shopping or gambling. These are just a few examples of what you, your family members, classmates or colleagues may be masking.

Masking your emotions, addictions and mental health issues can be harmful to yourself and those around you. Mental health struggles are nothing to be ashamed of and should not be ignored. Mental health is just as important as physical health, and these issues, if not addressed, can lead to lifelong battles requiring more than positive thinking and inspirational quotes to overcome.

The American Bar Association’s (ABA) 2020 Profile of the Profession concluded that lawyers have been, and still are, more susceptible to alcohol use, substance use and mental issues compared to the general population and other highly educated professionals.

▶ 21% qualify as problem drinkers, more than triple the rate for the general population (6%) and nearly double the rate for other highly educated professionals (12%).

▶ 28% struggle with depression.

▶ 19% have symptoms of anxiety.

▶ 25% to 30% of lawyers facing disciplinary charges suffer from some type of addiction or mental illness.³

The study found substance abuse, other unhealthy coping mechanisms and mental health issues started in law

school for some. Law students reported being reluctant to seek help because they thought it would be a threat to their job or academic status, a potential threat to bar admission, or because of the social stigma of seeking help.⁴ Erasing the stigma and offering assistance for unmasking without deleting the protection afforded to the public is key to the balance of a successful lawyer.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, more than half of people with mental illness do not receive help for their disorders.⁵ For people who do receive help, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) found the average delay between onset of mental illness symptoms and treatment is 11 years.⁶

NAMI offers some suggestions about what we can individually do to reduce the biases and stigma of mental illness:

- ▶ Talk openly about mental health.
 - ▶ Educate yourself and others by sharing facts.
 - ▶ Be conscious of language — words matter.
 - ▶ Encourage equality between physical and mental illness.
 - ▶ Show compassion for those with mental illness.
 - ▶ Normalize mental health treatment, just like other health care treatments.
 - ▶ Choose empowerment over shame.
 - ▶ Refuse to allow others to dictate how you view yourself or how you feel about yourself.⁷
- Here are some suggestions for employers:
- ▶ Commit to leading a behaviorally healthy workplace.
 - ▶ Train leaders to identify emotional distress, make referrals, and respond promptly and constructively to behavioral performance issues.
 - ▶ Welcome the need for accommodations and change.⁸

As you unmask and encourage growth, you must be mindful of what you say and do. Words can sometimes hurt more than “sticks and stones.” Try these simple tips in your personal and professional life.⁹

DO SAY

Thanks for opening up to me.

Is there anything I can do to help?

How can I help?

Thanks for sharing.

I'm sorry to hear that. It must be tough.

I'm here for you when you need me.

How are you feeling today?

I love you.

DO NOT SAY

It could be worse.

Just deal with it.

Snap out of it.

Everyone feels that way sometimes.

We've all been there.

You've got to pull yourself together.

Maybe try thinking happier thoughts.

You may have brought this on yourself.

It is exhausting pretending to be someone else while wearing multiple suffocating masks. If you think you will disappoint your family by admitting you need help, stop and reflect on what is best for you. Remember what you had to endure to become a member of this respected and prestigious profession. Think of the challenges and obstacles you have already overcome throughout your lifetime. You know the importance of perseverance and self-discipline to create the life you desire and, of course, deserve. But you are only one person, and you do not always have to pretend to be strong. Your family, friends and colleagues want you to be healthy and happy.

Mental health issues generally do not go away on their own. Let us create safe environments and normalize conversations surrounding mental health. It is okay to seek counseling or other assistance for areas you struggle with in your personal or professional life. You deserve to be heard. You deserve meaningful and supportive relationships.

Your life is more important than your career or keeping up an appearance. It is time to uproot all that you have buried over the years because you only have one life to live. Release the built-up pain, embarrassment and other suppressed feelings. Be kind to yourself. Take care of yourself. Please do not be discouraged from seeking a peer support group or mental health professional trained to listen and offer support, such as a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, therapist or counselor. You are not alone and should no longer suffer in silence. No one has it all together or all figured out. We are all perfectly imperfect.

I want you to know it is safe to unmask

and reveal the real you. Remember, the Louisiana Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (JLAP) is here to offer you a confidential, safe haven to heal and unmask without judgment.

To learn more or to seek confidential help with any type of mental health or addiction issue, contact the professional clinical staff at JLAP, (985)778-0571, email jlap@louisianajlap.com, or visit the website, www.louisianajlap.com. Remember, we are a Safe Haven of Healing.

FOOTNOTES

1. “A Brief Mental Health Checkup,” American Psychiatric Association, Oct. 9, 2015, <https://www.psychiatry.org/news-room/apa-blogs/apa-blog/2015/10/a-brief-mental-health-checkup>.
2. “The Myth of the Functioning Addict,” Defining Wellness Centers, Inc., Oct. 9, 2020, <https://definingwellness.com/blog/the-myth-of-the-functioning-addict/>.
3. “ABA Profile of the Legal Profession 2020,” American Bar Association, <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/news/2020/07/potlp2020.pdf>.
4. *Id.*
5. “Stigma, Prejudice and Discrimination Against People with Mental Illness,” American Psychiatric Association, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/stigma-and-discrimination>.
6. “Mental Health By the Numbers,” National Association on Mental Illness, <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>.
7. *Id.*
8. *Id.*
9. *Id.*

Dr. Angela White-Bazile, Esq., is the executive director of the Louisiana Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (JLAP) and can be reached at (985)778-0571, toll-free (866)354-9334 or by email at jlap@louisianajlap.com.

