



Reading This Might Save Your Life or the Life of Someone You Love

I am sure that many of you read the recent CNN article, "Why Are Lawyers Killing Themselves?" While I knew that depression and suicide were certainly issues faced by members of our profession, I was very disturbed to learn that our profession ranked fourth in rate

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of suicides. In fact, suicide is the third leading cause of death for lawyers.

When you think about what the practice of law entails, sadly some of the answers to the question posed by CNN are all too obvious. We work within an adversarial system, where as a general rule, we routinely do battle with our fellow lawyers. Oftentimes, we are seeing our clients at their worst, because of the stress of the legal issues that brought them to our office. We are faced with deadlines from every corner. While technology has improved our legal lives in many ways, that same technology has also put pressure on us to be accessible 24/7 and to respond more "immediately" to communications from opposing counsel and clients. We are expected to have our game face on at all times, and to never show any weakness. There is incredible pressure to be successful, and to bring business through the door. At the same time, we must balance these work obligations with taking care of our families, and giving back to our communities and our profession. Let's face it: no matter how much you love the practice of law or how "successful" you are, there are days when it seems absolutely impossible to be all that we are supposed to be.

The statistics tell us that we are failing ourselves and our colleagues by ignoring the issues of depression and suicide in our profession, but how do we make a difference? In trying to find some of

those answers, I turned to Laura McClendon, with the Tennessee Lawyers Assistance Program (TLAP), who has a wealth of knowledge about the subject. Laura referred me to TLAP's website at tlap.org, which contains very helpful and practical information for those struggling with issues of anxiety, stress, depression and suicide, anger management, substance abuse and addiction, and grief and loss. These materials are not just for those suffering from these issues themselves, but also for those who have colleagues, friends or loved ones who are battling with them and want to help, but may not know how.

Of course, TLAP also offers much more than written materials. It also offers absolutely free and totally confidential counseling for lawyers, judges and law students who are struggling with these issues and many others. I know you may be skeptical when told that something is confidential, but TLAP can fully support its claim by reference to *Tenn. Code Ann.* § 23-4-101 and Supreme Court Rule 33, which indeed make TLAP's services fully confidential. Additionally, you may also make a fully confidential referral if you know a law student or member of the bench or bar who you believe is experiencing one or more of these health concerns. The only way that anyone will know that you consulted with TLAP or made a referral through them is if you are the one to tell

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them. As wonderful a program as TLAP is, Laura McClendon would also be the first to tell us that that is not enough. We must each do more.

One of the most eye-opening things that Laura shared with me during our conversation was that when we suspect a colleague might be contemplating suicide, *we need to actually ask him in a direct and straightforward way if he is considering taking his own life*, rather than making a statement such as "You wouldn't do anything to hurt yourself, would you?" While I would have thought that this was the worst thing that I could do, Laura says that it is what we must do if we are going to truly help. By directly asking the question, we are actually inviting the person in crisis to really open up to us. Of course it is essential that we have both the time and true willingness to listen and offer support when we ask the question.

You may be saying that this message is not intended for you. You are not personally experiencing serious depression or having suicidal thoughts, and do not know of anyone in your legal circle who is, but I would urge you to think again. Remember that you do not have to wait for a crisis to reach out to TLAP. In fact, they want you to call at the first sign of a problem so that a crisis might be averted. Also, even if you are not struggling with any of these issues, chances are overwhelmingly high that

you know someone who is. Statistically speaking, we all have friends in the profession who are struggling with depression and who are at risk for suicide. I submit to you that we don't hear about these issues from our colleagues in crisis because they are afraid or ashamed to talk about it. Really look around you and try to identify those who might be struggling. When you ask your colleagues how they are, make sure that they know you really want to hear their honest answers and then take the time to listen.

We must each commit right now to take better care of our own mental and emotional health and to be vigilant about trying to identify and assist those around us who are struggling. Suicide is one of the most preventable causes of death, and we can no longer sit back and watch as we lose some of our best and brightest to it. With this issue more than any other, "Together We Make a Difference!" 

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Learn More

"Why Are Lawyers Killing Themselves?" by Rosa Flores and Rose Marie Arce, CNN.com, Jan. 20, 2014, www.cnn.com/2014/01/19/us/lawyer-suicides/index.html?c=&page=4

Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network
<http://tspn.org/>

Tennessee Lawyers Assistance Program
877-424-TLAP; www.tlap.org/

The William B. Cain Foundation Revolving Loan — financial assistance for Tennessee lawyers and judges suffering from addiction, depression and other mental health illnesses, who lack the resources to pay for appropriate help. Contact TLAP.

"A Way Out: Lawyers' Assistance

Program Is Free, Confidential and Waiting for Your Call, by Suzanne Craig Robertson, September 2011 *Tenn. Bar Journal*, www.tba.org/journal/a-way-out

National Judges' Helpline — through the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs (ABA/COLAP) Judicial Assistance Initiative 800-219-6474

ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs
www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance.html

Lawyers in Recovery
www.recoveringlawyers.org

Lawyers with Depression
www.lawyerswithdepression.com

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ago, and he was consistently gracious and attempted to be helpful to all. This extended even to his efforts on behalf of clients, some of whom were banks and other lenders on whose behalf John would attempt to collect on defaulted loans.

John's approach to collections was nothing short of novel, indeed often unorthodox, and he routinely began the

collection effort by sending the debtor a demand letter. This is generally the typical approach, but John's form letter was both unusual and reflective of much of John's approach to life.

The letter began with a salutation and then stated: "The other night my wife Harriet and I were having dinner, and I mentioned to her that I had been engaged by [lender] to collect from you

the amounts you owe to [lender]. My wife then said, 'Oh my, what would his mother say if she knew that he hadn't paid. How sad.'"

John's collection efforts were spectacularly successful, and perhaps we can all learn several lessons from that little but important story.

— Wynne James, Nashville