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ADDICTION CRISIS IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

Written by Dianne Schechter

What images and/or characteristics come to mind when you hear the word lawyer? Perhaps it is an individual that a majority of society would consider successful? Someone who usually appears confident? Someone who wears a nice suit? Regardless of any of the stereotypical attorney jokes, most people would probably use positive attributes when describing a lawyer or someone who works in the legal profession.

Attorneys are supposed to be competent in order to help us in our times of need. They are supposed to be pillars of the community and morally sound as they are representatives of the justice system. Would you be surprised to learn that lawyers are at roughly twice the risk of becoming addicted to drugs or alcohol as people in other professions? (Indra Cidambi, M.D., *Drug and Alcohol Abuse in the Legal Profession: Why Lawyers Are at Increased Risk for Addiction* (July 17, 2017), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sure-recovery/201707/drug-and-alcohol-abuse-in-the-legal-profession>.)

Lawyers also have a higher incidence of depression, anxiety, suicide, and other mental health issues than the general population. (Meghan Vivo, "Addicted Lawyers Start as Addicted Law Students," *Highlights of the American Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs* 14.4 (Winter 2012):4-5.)

While many cite long hours, huge caseloads, and the stress of the field as reasons for these problems, one judge warns that the seeds of addiction are planted long »

before an attorney begins practicing law. According to Hon. Robert L. Childers, a judge in the Circuit Court of Tennessee since 1984, and who has served on the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs (CoLAP) since 1999, substance abuse and mental illness often begin in law school. Lawyers start facing very heavy workloads and conflicts with their value systems right when they enter law school, and they may use alcohol or drugs to cope. (Cidambi, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sure-recovery/201707/drug-and-alcohol-abuse-in-the-legal-profession>.)

On the first day of law school, studies show that the average law student is “normal” in terms of their happiness, mental health, and wellness. Within the first six months, early signs of psychiatric problems, such as depression, anxiety, hostility, and paranoia, can be detected. After the first year of law school, as many as 40 percent of law students suffer from depression. Symptoms often persist through law school and into their later legal careers.

Many attorneys turn to drugs or alcohol because they have compromised their ethical principles and moral values. They may bend the rules to hold onto a key client or pursue “winning” at all costs. When Judge Childers speaks with law students and young lawyers, he emphasizes the importance of practicing law in a way that doesn’t go against their values. Stress turned inward, he warns, often results in health problems, depression and addiction. “In some ways, the legal profession has become more of a business and less of a profession,” says Judge Childers. “There are lawyers who cut corners and do things that are against normal ethical or moral standards. Then when the guilt and shame build up, they try to bury those feelings with drugs or alcohol.”

A legal education is an honorable pursuit, but there are a few precautions law students should consider before school begins. According to Judge Childers, stress management and self-care are critical to long-term success as an attorney. “The stress of law school continues as students graduate into young lawyers with billable hour requirements and the stress of

legal practice,” says Judge Childers. “Since the stress will always be there, students can set themselves up for success by embracing a healthy lifestyle, eating a

balanced diet, exercising, staying close to their faith and developing a solid social support system.”

As a result of growing awareness surrounding law students and substance abuse, a number of law schools are instituting health and wellness programs for their students. Judge Childers and other advocates are working on

law student assistance programs and other resources for this high-risk population. Almost every state offers a lawyer assistance program (LAP) that provides advice, counseling and drug rehab referrals to legal professionals and law students struggling with substance abuse, addiction, and mental illness. LAPs accept calls – in many states, seven days a week, 24 hours a day – from a variety of concerned parties. The services are free, confidential, and available to law students as well as lawyers, judges, and bar applicants. There are also drug rehabilitation centers that specialize in treating law students, lawyers, judges, and other professionals. These programs can assist with interventions, assessments, short or long term treatment, and monitoring and aftercare.

Law students and young lawyers who struggle with drug or alcohol addiction suffer significant consequences, including health problems, financial troubles, and the threat of job loss. For every lawyer struggling with addiction or mental illness, there’s a family, circle of friends, and a full book of clients who are also put in danger. If you or someone you know is suffering, get help today.

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Dianne Schechter is the qualified domestic relations order paralegal at Butterfield Schechter LLP. Ms. Schechter has assisted attorneys with client matters before the IRS, FTB, and the State Board of Equalization. She has also assisted attorneys with legal collections and recovery processes, while managing a process service department. Ms. Schechter received her undergraduate degree in History and Italian studies, magna cum laude, from the University of San Diego, her paralegal certificate, cum laude, and her Master of Arts in History, summa cum laude, from USD in 2013.