



Suicide Watch

How understanding warning signs and using the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program can help save lives.

BY HANNAH KIDDOO

Each year in Texas, about 2,800 people commit suicide. That averages to around eight often-preventable deaths each day in the Lone Star State. Although there is no defined path to suicide, common prime indicators include depression and substance abuse, and these are factors that lawyers all too often encounter. Faced with a unique combination of characteristics and circumstances—persistent high stress, pessimistic outlook developed through school and practice, long hours and isolated work, along with perfectionism and a low tolerance for failure—law professionals can easily fall down a slippery slope that leads to complex mental health conditions and possibly suicide.

“[Lawyers] have almost an inability to abide by much less than perfection for themselves,” said Bree Buchanan, a Texas Lawyers’ Assistance Program staff attorney. “Members of our profession experience both substance abuse and mental health problems at twice the rate of the general population.” Countless studies report additional upsetting statistics. Lawyers are three times as likely to suffer from depression as any other professional, and suicide is the third leading cause of death among lawyers.

It is not just practicing attorneys who are at risk. Faced with heavy workloads, high expectations, and competition, often coupled with fear of failure and debt, law students are also at risk for developing depressive symptoms—and harmful ways for dealing with them.

“What law students may be able to get by with at 25—heavy drinking as a means to deal with stress—no longer works at 45 or 55,” Buchanan said. Unhealthy coping strategies and unhealthy lifestyles adopted in the first half of a legal career begin to take their toll in the second. “Depression, addiction can set in—both of which are strong risk factors for suicide.”

While there is no exact method for identifying a suicidal individual, Buchanan notes that warning signs may include increased isolation, anxiety or agitation, reckless behavior, giving away possessions or wrapping up affairs, and expressions of hopelessness. Strong risk factors for suicide are previous attempts, substance abuse, or mental health problems. Buchanan says that those contemplating suicide may make statements about wanting to die, wanting to “go to sleep and never wake up,” or that others would be better off if they were gone.

Fortunately, there are many resources for law professionals to lean on when dealing with suicidal thoughts or other mental health conditions. The Texas Lawyers’ Assistance Program (TLAP) actively works to help attorneys, judges, and law students whose lives, practices, and studies are affected by mental health issues.

During the 2012-2013 fiscal year, TLAP provided confidential, respectful, and discrete assistance to 605 attorneys and 224 concerned others. “We want Texas lawyers

who consider suicide as the way to escape their problems and pain to know that there is help and hope for them,” Buchanan said. “TLAP can help them find the resources they need.” Those resources include mental health professionals, support groups, and educational materials, as well as connection with one of 600 TLAP volunteer attorneys who provide peer support.

If a suicide is imminent, 911 should be notified immediately, or those at risk should report directly to an emergency room. When a suicide is contemplated, the National Suicide Prevention Hotline is available at (800) 273-TALK. TLAP can provide support and referrals for members of the legal profession who are depressed or who are concerned about someone. TLAP also conducts training for firms and associations on suicide prevention.

While it may be intimidating to call TLAP about a colleague, members of the bar are encouraged to err on the side of caution rather than to remain silent. “If you are concerned about a fellow lawyer, law student, or judge, call us. We can help you strategize as to the best way to help this person,” Buchanan said. Those contemplating suicide may be too overwhelmed, too depressed, or too fearful to reach out for help themselves.

“If you are concerned that someone may take his life, the best thing you can do is talk about his feelings,” Buchanan said. “Give him an opportunity to talk about what is going on and let him know that you are listening and that you care.” Then, help that person find an appropriate resource. If suicide seems imminent, this may mean calling 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Hotline. “If you are not sure as to how to approach the person, call TLAP and, together, we can develop a plan for the best way to help.” **TBJ**

If you are concerned that someone you know may take his life, please call 911 or contact the National Suicide Prevention Hotline. If you would like general information about suicide prevention, call the Texas Lawyers’ Assistance Program at (800) 343-8527.

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