

TAKE ACTION TO PREVENT LAWYER SUICIDES

Suicide kills three times as many Americans as does AIDS. Got your attention? It should, particularly since published research makes it clear that lawyers are at a greater risk of suicide than the general population.



MEASURING THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

In response to several series of lawyer suicides, various organizations conducted studies to determine the scope of the problem. The National Institute for Safety and Health conducted one such study, the results of which indicate that male lawyers between the ages of 20 and 64 are more than twice as likely to die from suicide than men of the same age in other occupations. The Canadian Bar Association analyzed data provided by the Canadian Bar Insurance Association and found that suicide was the third-leading cause of death among insured lawyers younger than 65, with a rate of 69 out of every 100,000 deaths. This is nearly *six times* the suicide rate in the general population. A study conducted at Campbell University in North Carolina indicated that 11 percent of the lawyers in that state thought of taking their own life at least once a month.

DEPRESSION: GOOD NEWS/BAD NEWS

Depression is known to be a predisposing risk factor for suicide. Given the staggering statistics on attorney suicides, it is not surprising that lawyers experience depression at higher rates than the general population. Research published by Johns Hopkins University shows that among more than 100 occupations studied, lawyers were three times more likely to suffer from depression than other professions.

The good news is that depression is among the most treatable of psychiatric illnesses. Between 80 percent and 90 percent of all people with depression respond positively to treatment, and almost all patients gain some relief from their symptoms.

The bad news is that depression often goes undiagnosed and untreated, presumably because the perceived stigma of mental illness prevents people from seeking help — particularly lawyers. The personality traits often found in people drawn to the legal profession, such as perfectionism and competition, are thought to reinforce this response. Unfortunately, the traits that can bring a lawyer success in the workplace may keep that lawyer from seeking much needed help for a possibly life-threatening illness.

CALL TO ACTION

The statistics illustrate the urgent need to address suicide within the legal profession. The Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program Committee of the State Bar of Texas recognized this need and developed a protocol for taking action.

The first step of the protocol employs a vital tool of suicide prevention — education. You must know the

basic warning signs to recognize that suicide is a possibility. Common feelings in most suicides are hopelessness and helplessness. Other signals typically include a combination of the following: dramatic changes in mood and behavior, particularly prolonged sadness; increased recklessness; significant changes in appetite or sleep patterns; excessive irritability, anger, worry, or anxiety; inability to concentrate or to take pleasure in former interests; isolation; and perceived public embarrassment or humiliation.

The second step is to marshal your advocacy skills to get the lawyer help. Investigate the situation. Do not be afraid to broach the issue of suicide with the suffering lawyer — ask him or her about suicidal thoughts and plans. You may feel that doing so could induce suicidal thoughts; however, medical professionals advise that asking the question actually reduces risk somewhat and is a necessary step in getting the person help. Plead your case by sharing a relevant experience with the lawyer and opening a dialogue. Encourage the lawyer to seek help and have the contact information of a qualified medical professional on hand. If the lawyer refuses to make an appointment at that time, get a commitment that he or she will seek help and will not to take any harmful action if the suicidal impulse intensifies. In the event of an immediate crisis, call 911 or take the lawyer to the emergency room.

More specific action steps are outlined on the *Life Alert: Save a Lawyer* cards developed by TLAP and distributed to local bar associations. Please contact the TLAP staff for further assistance in helping a lawyer who may be suicidal. The toll-free number is (800) 343-8527 or go to texasbar.com/tlap for more information.

We can save a lawyer! Although some suicides occur without any outward warning, most do not. Suicide is a preventable killer if we learn to recognize the signs of someone at risk, take those signs seriously, and know how to respond to them. **TBJ**

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