



## *It's OK to* **ASK FOR HELP**

**MY DECEMBER 2022 PRESIDENT'S PAGE URGED OUR LAWYERS** to secure their own oxygen masks first. The number of Texas lawyers who responded to that message letting me know either that they too were suffering from compassion fatigue or felt encouraged by my willingness to share my feelings surprised me. If my struggle resonated with you, you can take comfort in the fact that you are not alone. More than ever, lawyers across the country are experiencing what some call compassion fatigue and what others refer to as vicarious trauma. Regardless of its label, it is a serious problem that we must address before we become hopeless.

Many healthcare professionals told me they were cautiously optimistic that my willingness to publicly acknowledge the symptoms I was experiencing might help us break the stigma that prevents people from reaching out for help. I hope so.

I know there are times when I feel overwhelmed such that I would benefit from the help of others. Despite that, I hesitate to ask for help out of fear that I will be criticized for undertaking too much responsibility, failing to plan my time effectively, underestimating the amount of time it would take to accomplish the tasks at hand, or for being weak. That fear has resulted in my not asking for help.

No matter how much I tried to convince myself that there is no reason to suffer in silence and that I wouldn't be a burden to others, I didn't seek help by sharing my situation. Not anymore.

In September 2022, I was very busy with client work, the move of our Houston office, and preparing to speak about legal education and the legal profession at a seminar. I was working on the part of my presentation involving lawyer wellness and the impact of the pandemic on both lawyers and law students. As part of my research for the presentation, I reached out to Erica Grigg, the director of the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program, or TLAP, about how best to address the reluctance people have asking for help.

In our conversation, I shared with Erica that I had a hard time asking for help and knew that others struggled in doing so too. Erica told me that she thought it was ironic that so many people hesitated to ask for help when not only are people willing to help, but also when we ask for help, we actually help those who help us.

Similar to a "runner's high," which is a state of euphoria that athletes experience due to endorphins released during exercise, there is what is known as the "helper's high" that is caused by our brain releasing endorphins when we help others, which leads to a similar phenomenon. There is a growing body of research on telomeres, which form the protective end caps to our chromosomes. Telomere attrition is associated with aging. It is important to have strong, healthy telomeres because shortened end caps can lead to a lower quality of life and premature death.

With the stress and anxiety we are feeling, especially now, it is likely that the effect on us is shortened telomeres. We can attempt to reverse that effect by maintaining a healthy exercise regime and looking for ways to help others. Knowing that people who help others are likely to be happier, stay healthier, and live longer is something I am going to remember when I struggle to ask for help.

If you find yourself struggling, pick up the phone and ask for help. Last year, our TLAP professionals handled 845 consultations, which, by statute, are confidential. You can call or text TLAP at 800-343-8527, 24 hours a day. You can also call a friend. And you can also call me at 713-658-4635. None of us will be judgmental.

Not only is it OK to ask for help, it might save your life and the lives of others. We are all in this together.

### **LAURA GIBSON**

President, 2022-2023  
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