



Talk SAVES LIVES

ONE OF MY MAJOR INITIATIVES IS LAWYER WELLNESS. Even before the pandemic, I was aware that a segment of our lawyers was suffering. Lawyers disappeared, became disabled, or died. The stress lawyers are going through has significantly increased. Lawyers are experiencing greater challenges than ever. Since the pandemic, lawyers seem more willing to admit their stress, anxiety, and compassion fatigue. I hope that is a silver lining that remains.

When a friend or family member gets a major health diagnosis like cancer or diabetes, our community comes out with support and casseroles. But when someone has a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or depression, the reaction is much different. We must change that. Health is health. We need both good physical health and good mental health to survive and thrive.

I have experienced poor mental health firsthand. For many years, I was ashamed that my mother was a person with paranoid schizophrenia. She manifested her condition when I was a high school senior. My younger sister and I woke up and discovered that there was no furniture in our house. Mom said that we had been robbed.

At 18, just before I left home to go to Texas A&M, I had to commit her to a mental institution where she was confined for months. My parents had divorced the previous year, my older sister was away at college, and my maternal grandparents refused to do so. Schizophrenia is a disease that cannot be cured. Instead, it can only be controlled with medication. As my mother's condition worsened, her medication had to be increased. I always knew when she needed an increase. It was a lifelong battle.

Suicidal ideation is another major mental health issue. A survey released in 2022 by Law.com and ALM Intelligence revealed that 19% of lawyers reported that they had contemplated suicide during their career. Death by suicide is the 12th leading cause of death in the United States. It is the third leading cause of death among lawyers, only behind cancer and heart disease. I have been focusing on what we as lawyers can do to try to curb deaths by suicide. I have learned that suicide can be prevented, just as heart disease can be treated and cancer cured.

In a recent Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program webinar presentation, Amy Grosso, director of behavior health services at Round Rock Independent School District, taught us that "Talk Saves Lives." She also taught us that the suffering of people who are contemplating death by suicide is similar to physical pain. Imagine the worst physical pain you have ever been in and recall how difficult it is to think clearly about how to stop the pain. This is what a person experiencing suicidal ideations is feeling.

People at risk of death by suicide have three common types of conditions: health, historical, and environmental. "Health" means mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and personality disorders. People who have physical conditions like serious head injuries are more at risk of death by suicide. If there is a family history of suicide or mental health issues, childhood abuse, or previous suicide attempts, a person is more at risk. Environmental conditions that contribute to death by suicide include prolonged stress, which is a condition we as lawyers have to deal with; stressful life events; access to lethal means; and exposure to suicide.

If you have noticed changes in personality of lawyers you know, talk to them about what they are going through. Ask them how they are doing. Ask if they are considering ending their lives. Listen for statements that your friend has no reason to live, considers himself to be a burden on others, feels trapped, or is suffering from unbearable pain.

If you encounter a lawyer with these signs, trust your gut and assume that you are the only one that is going to reach out to talk to them. Talk in private. Listen to their story. Express care and concern. Encourage them to seek mental health services. Try not to minimize their feelings. Do not try to convince them that life is worth living or model behavior suggesting that you have the solutions to their problems. Instead, stay with them. Secure lethal means if it is safe to do so so that they cannot harm themselves. Escort them to a mental health service provider.

Finally, tell them that you are there for them and that they are not alone. Thank them for their honesty. Thank them for trusting you with their problems. Assure them that you are going to work to get them help. Every life matters. Especially yours.

WHAT CAN YOU DO WHEN YOU HEAR SUICIDAL LANGUAGE OR BEHAVIOR?

1. Ask if the person has considered suicide.
2. Seek more information.
3. Know where and how to refer to professionals.

Call the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988 or call or text the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program at 1-800-343-8527.

For additional resources, go to tlaphelps.org/suicide-prevention.

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