

Breaking the Silence:

Lawyer Suicide

Society puts the burden of coming to grips with homicide on lawyers and the justice system. It is a lawyer's job to prosecute the accused, a lawyer-judge's job to try the case and a lawyer's job to defend the accused. Yet more people in America die of suicide than from homicide. Unlike our elaborate judicial system, with guaranteed rights of appeal for the defendant, and a public process for society to reconcile homicide, there is no system in place to prevent, understand and reconcile suicide.

Of course, this is just not a problem of the legal profession, but statistical data suggests that lawyers are more at risk for suicide than any other profession or vocation. In recent years, one North Carolina District Bar experienced eight suicides in eight years. We as a profession must take suicide as seriously as our profession takes homicide. The number of lives lost is greater and the cost to the survivors very high. Suicide is a phenomenon that tends to perpetuate itself in

families. Once a family member commits suicide there is a much greater risk that other family members will follow. The highest rates of suicide are for single or widowed men over 55.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, substance abuse and depression are the two underlying conditions most likely to lead a person to commit suicide. Both of these underlying conditions can either be prevented or mitigated by timely intervention and treatment to prevent a suicide from occurring. We as lawyers need to know how to recognize and to get help for the conditions that make lawyer suicide a frequent outcome if the underlying conditions are not treated.

UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION

Depression is a brain disease. Somehow the process by which normal "feel good" chemicals are generated and interact in the brain becomes impaired for a period of time. Predisposition to clinical

depression runs in families. Regardless of family history, depression can be triggered by many different kinds of events such as illness, death of a loved one or an accident. These types of events may trigger deep emotional issues which may lead to depression; however, just simply failing to address an underlying emotional issues may also cause depression. Because lawyers are involved in helping others, they often have little awareness of their own needs and emotional issues. Often the depressed lawyer, like the alcoholic, has no awareness that he or she has an illness. Over time a depressed state of being becomes the norm. The depressed lawyer is unable to face normal routine tasks at work. His or her view of the world becomes increasingly narrow, negative, and limited.

UNDERSTANDING ALCOHOLISM

Addiction to alcohol is also a brain disease. Predisposition to alcoholism often runs in families. The continuous use of alcohol by the alcoholic causes

those parts of the brain that create the normal “feel good” neurotransmitters to shut down. While most everyone drinks to experience an elevation in mood, the alcoholic is ingesting alcohol just to try not to feel so bad, to try to feel normal. The alcoholic’s ability to use alcohol to create the feeling of “normal” becomes more and more elusive as alcoholism progresses. Alcohol itself is a central nervous system depressant. In addition to the skewed brain chemistry caused by alcoholism, the alcoholic experiences tremendous guilt and remorse as he or she is no longer able to function normally as their behavior again and again disappoints themselves and others. The normal state for an alcoholic is depression fueled by fear, guilt and anger. Depression makes suicidal thoughts common. As alcoholism progresses the alcoholic loses these: first, meaningful relations with his family, second, his social relations, and finally, his job. By the time the lawyer is down just to a job, there is not much left of value that may seem worth living for. Among alcoholic lawyers who commit suicide, a major factor is often public disclosure of their

disease, of a wrong they committed while intoxicated, and/or their disbarment.

SIGNS OF ALCOHOLISM AND DEPRESSION

The outward signs of alcoholism and depression are often remarkably similar. They include:

- Feeling depressed, sad or anxious most of the day
- Neglecting one’s family and losing interest in activities once enjoyed
- Losing or gaining weight
- Changes in sleep pattern
- Feeling drained of energy
- Financial difficulties
- Increase in health problems
- Feelings of worthlessness and guilt
- Isolation from friends
- Reduced ability or inability to concentrate

TREATMENT WORKS

The good news is that excellent treatment is available for both alcoholism and depression. Like all diseases, the longer they go untreated, the greater the likelihood of the development of other concurrent problems, and also the greater the likelihood of suicide. Because depression and

alcoholism are both chronic, long-term diseases, there is a need for ongoing support that focuses on preventing isolation and increasing: a) physical activity to increase endorphins, b) intellectual activity, c) social activity and d) spiritual activity.

WHAT TO DO WHEN A LAWYER NEEDS HELP

Lawyers most often do not know how, and may feel uncomfortable trying to help another lawyer, even one they know well, who may suffer from a danger of suicide. You may not know how to help directly, but your duty to your professional colleague is simply to bring confidential help to bear. Just call, toll free, the Lawyer Assistance Program:

Don Carroll
1-800-720-PALS
nclap@bellsouth.net

Ed Ward
1-877-627-3743
eward@ncbar.com

Or visit our website at
www.nclap.org.