

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine variables previously reported to have some relationship to depression in lawyers (e.g., alcohol abuse and perceived stress) and to add new variables (e.g., attributional style and work addiction) which had not been examined in the literature. Evidence from prior studies of lawyers reported higher than normal levels of depression (Beck, Sales, & Benjamin, 1995; Benjamin, Kaszniak, Sales & Shanfield, 1986; North Carolina Bar Association (NCBA), 1991), alcohol abuse (Beck, et al., Benjamin, Darling & Sales, 1990; Drogin, 1991), and perceived stress (Beck, et al.). Moreover, lawyers' work habits appeared to have an association with work addiction (American Bar Association (ABA), 1991; Sells, 1993) and the pessimistic attributions lawyers ascribed to their personal and professional dilemmas were noted in the literature (ABA, 1991, Boston Bar Association (BBA), 1997). It was therefore determined that variables measuring lawyers' attributions and work addiction would be included in this study. Further, a comprehensive examination of this phenomenon required an inspection of those aspects of law practice which distinguished the more salient predictors of depression in lawyers.

The problem was determined to be significant for at least three reasons. First, the scant research available on lawyers' depression was limited to a few empirical studies. Because a clear picture of the

specific risk factors related to depression was not fully examined, this study was designed to offer a first step to address this gap in knowledge by focusing on depression-related variables reported in the literature. Second, because empirical studies and anecdotal reports suggested serious problems with depression in the legal profession, a key to this dilemma had been left unexamined. Attribution theory suggests that the causes of successes and failures in life are dictated by the extent to which "helplessness" (depression) is chronic, pervasive and undermining of self-esteem. Therefore, the influence of attributional style on depression in lawyers had not been previously examined. Finally, because legal training and practice produces intense competition, multiple demands, high performance requirements, and need for control and perfectionism, such conditions are reported to be risk factors for work addiction (Robinson, 1999) and can lead to depression, anger, and anxiety (Haymon, 1993). To date, a study of the legal culture's patterns of work behaviors had not been previously reported.

The primary aim of this study was to 1) determine if there was relationship to attributional style, work addiction, perceived stress, and alcohol abuse in lawyers, and 2) if attributional style, work addiction, perceived stress, and alcohol abuse predicted depression in lawyers. A summary of the study's research questions, methodology, findings, conclusions, limitations, counseling implications, recommendations, and concluding comments follow.

### Research Questions

This study used survey research methods to collect data. Correlational methods were used to examine the relationship between depression (dependent variable), and (a) attributional style, (b) work addiction, (c) perceived stress, and (d) alcohol abuse (independent variables). The following research questions were examined in this study:

1. In lawyers, is there a relationship between (a) depression and attributional style, (b) depression and work addiction, (c) depression and perceived stress, and (d) depression and alcohol abuse?
2. In lawyers, do (a) attributional style, (b) work addiction, (c) perceived stress, and (d) alcohol abuse predict depression?

### Methodology

A random sample was drawn from the computerized membership list of the North Carolina State Bar. A survey, including demographic questions and five psychometric instruments (measuring depression, attributional style, work addiction, perceived stress, and alcohol abuse), was mailed to 1000 lawyers. A cover letter, a self-addressed stamped envelope, and a self-addressed stamped return post card was mailed to each lawyer using first class postage. Assurances of confidentiality were included in the cover letter and printed on the survey. Two separate reminder post cards were mailed within two week periods of the preceding reminder notice. Data was dated, coded, and entered into SPSS as it was received. A sample of 292 was used in the final

analysis.

To assess whether a relationship existed between depression and attributional style, work addiction, perceived stress, and alcohol abuse, Pearson product correlation coefficients were calculated. A standard multiple regression analysis was used to determine the independent variables predicting depression. Independent *t* tests were conducted to measure the differences between males and females and an analysis of variance was conducted to measure the differences occurring between types of law firm practice and types of law firm positions.

### Findings

Research questions in this study sought to determine the relationship between attributional style, work addiction, perceived stress, and alcohol abuse with depression in lawyers. The results indicated: a) a large inverse correlation between depression and attributional style ( $r = -.63$ ), b) a moderate positive relationship between depression and work addiction ( $r = .49$ ), c) a high positive relationship between depression and perceived stress ( $r = .75$ ), and d) no relationship between depression and alcohol abuse ( $r = -.04$ ). The regression analysis revealed that attributional style, work addiction, and perceived stress contributed significantly to the prediction of depression in lawyers style ( $F = 112.57, p = .001, (R^2 = .60)$ ). Perceived stress was the largest contributor of depression, followed by attributional style and work addiction. Alcohol abuse was not a significant predictor of depression.

## Conclusions

The findings revealed that over 27% of the lawyers in the study are depressed. The higher levels of depression found in this study relative to previous studies indicates depression in lawyers has risen considerably over time (Beck, et al., 1995, Benjamin, et al., 1990; NCBA, 1991). The study reported no differences in levels of depression between males ( $M = 31.32$ ,  $SD = 9.52$ ) and females ( $M = 33.42$ ,  $SD = 10.56$ ). The study also reported no differences in depression between types of practice, including private practice, corporate counsel, government/public sector, judiciary, and "other" practice. Statistically significant differences were found in law firm positions between partners ( $M = 29.59$ ,  $SD = 8.58$ ) and junior associates ( $M = 36.05$ ,  $SD = 12.16$ ).

The study revealed that a significant number of lawyers (53%) have attributional personality styles that are pessimistic in nature. Lower scale scores indicate higher levels of pessimism. There were statistically significant differences between males ( $M = 16.58$ ,  $SD = 4.53$ ) and females ( $M = 14.90$ ,  $SD = 4.71$ ) for attributional style, showing males to be more pessimistic than females. Junior associates had a lower average attributional style scores than all other positions types ( $p < .05$ ), demonstrating that younger lawyers appear to be more pessimistic than other participants in the study. This is consistent with earlier research (ABA, 1991), and may speak to the growing dissatisfaction in the profession found among younger lawyers. The analysis revealed no

differences between law practice descriptions.

The study revealed that over half of the lawyers (51%) experience stress at levels beyond that of the normal population. Junior associates ( $M = 26.39$ ,  $SD = 3.29$ ) had a higher average levels of stress than did partners ( $M = 21.19$ ,  $SD = 3.58$ ) ( $p < .05$ ). These findings may be the result of the pressure younger lawyers feels to work longer hours, imposed deadlines, scrutiny, or critical judgment from others, and which may be different from partners. Female participants ( $M = 21.62$ ,  $SD = 8.32$ ) were more likely to be stressed than males ( $M = 23.90$ ,  $SD = 9.52$ ). This result is consistent with previous research (Beck, et al., 1995). There were no statistical differences found between law practice descriptions.

A significant number (26%) of lawyers in the study were found to be work addicted. There were no statistically significant differences between genders, position type, or law practice description on work addiction.

The results of the study also revealed that 5.5% of the participants had higher averages of alcohol abuse than the normal population, and that males ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 2.98$ ) were more likely to abuse alcohol than females ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = 4.53$ ). Alcohol abuse was not a statistically significant predictor of depression in lawyers. This result is different from earlier studies (Beck, et al., 1995; Benjamin, et al., 1990; NCBA, 1991).

In summary, the results of this study revealed that there are statistically significant factors that are predictive of depression in

lawyers. These factors include a pessimistic attributional style, work addiction, and perceived stress. These results indicate potentially serious implications for legal education, legal practice, clients, and lawyers' important relationships. The findings in this study suggest that the legal profession needs to take a careful look at how it can assist lawyers who show signs of depression by supporting programs and services that may help them understand the consequences of such distress. Leaders in the profession, including legal educators, law firm administration, and bar organizations should begin serious introspection into the way the contemporary practice of law may be feeding depression in lawyers.

#### Limitations

Several limitations regarding these findings need to be observed. Due to the correlational design of this study, the direction of causality between depression, attributional style, work addiction and perceived stress cannot be determined. Nevertheless, attributional style, work addiction, and perceived stress appear to account for unique variation in some aspects with depression. Second, due to restrictions in the population (limited to North Carolina lawyers) and the characteristics of the study sample, this study is confined to those lawyers who are practicing law in the state of North Carolina. Another threat to validity includes a lack of controlling for diversity among racial and ethnic groups. Replication of this study should include lawyers not only practicing in other jurisdictions, but also those jurisdictions which have more ethnic diversity.

The mean age of the participants in this study was 46 years of age. A third limitation concerns the fact that there were fewer younger lawyers who participated in the study, a factor which could indicate response bias. Likewise, the mean years of practice for the participants in this study was 17 years of law practice. Because this number represents a more experienced law practitioner, a lack of controlling for numbers of years of practice could be a threat to validity. Finally, although participants were selected at random and the sample size was sufficient, a fourth and final limitation concerns threats to validity resulting from use of a convenient sample of participants.

### Counseling Implications

Because depression is masked in several forms, the results of this study offer a contextual framework to address the screening and treatment of depression in lawyers. When lawyers present with depression, clinicians are encouraged to assess for associations with attributional style, work addiction, perceived stress, and the depression. A thorough investigation of these specific aspects can be helpful in determining the role each variable may represent for depression in lawyers. After careful assessment, counseling interventions for each of these variables can be chosen. In other words, rather than dealing with depression as a global issue, counselors can intervene in the areas of work addiction, perceived stress, and attributional style.

Because lawyers are trained to think in a logical, straightforward manner, and because cognitive techniques provide a structured approach to problem-solving, the use of such therapeutic techniques



may be especially useful with lawyers. For example, encouraging lawyers to discuss compromises they make between their personal and private lives and agree to contracts for behavior change utilizes concepts and familiar aspects of the legal trade. Teaching techniques which must be practiced and reported can attract lawyers' intellectual curiosity and provide practical guidelines to re-frame belief systems found to be at the foundation of depression. Explicit cognitive skills (i.e., re-attributions to dispute pessimistic explanations of events, work habits, and sources of perceived stress) provide mechanical tools for self-talk when depression (i.e., learned helplessness) emerges. Cognitive therapy offers effective techniques which can help troubled lawyers learn to dispute irrational thoughts, beliefs, and actions that are spinning unrealistic webs. Using re-attributions to dispute such explanations legitimizes powers of the self, changing habits of thought to control not only what one thinks but when (Seligman, 1998). With work and encouragement, pessimism can change to optimism, the negative effects of work addiction understood, and stressful situations can be put into perspective.

Counselors also can make use of assessment measures to foster self-understanding and affirmation, providing "proof" for lawyers who need further convincing of the disquieting effects of depression. Career counselors can share this study's results to offer a clearer understanding of the rewards and inherent risks in choosing the legal profession; asking of prospective lawyers, "Is this the kind of life you want?" Career counselors can share the study's findings with lawyers unhappy

in the profession, fostering a better understanding of (1) the source of their career dissatisfaction, (2) alternative law practice options or other more satisfactory career options, and (3) the interaction of personality differences with environmental factors found to be harmful in the profession. Further, counselors may assist lawyers who are work addicted, first choosing interventions to infiltrate the wall of denial, followed by techniques designed to treat addictive behaviors. Family counselors can assist families experiencing difficulties with new understanding and awareness of the underlying causes of depression, providing knowledge and support to address their unmet needs. Moreover, counseling professionals can offer group support for lawyers, information on depression at continuing legal education programs, and professional growth seminars designed for law students, firms, and bar associations. Finally, counselors can consult with lawyer assistance programs offering additional insight into the variables associated with depression.

By and large, the counseling profession can use these data to encourage new knowledge, skills, and behaviors that cultivate personal and professional growth for lawyers. For example, counselors can explore spiritual resources, teach relaxation techniques, encourage lawyers to meditate, practice yoga, exercise, practice good nutrition, and routinely receive massage therapy to reduce the toxic effect of stress. What remains paramount as a result of these findings is that counselors help lawyers with an understanding of the underlying causes of depression. Such knowledge may save a career, a family, or a

life.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Future research investigating links between depression and lawyers should include the following:

1. The addition of qualitative data (e.g., interviews with lawyers experiencing or who have experienced depression) can provide a clearer focus of the impact of attributional style, work addiction, and perceived stress on depression. Such an addition could add richer meaning to the literature in these areas.
2. Because junior associates had higher average levels of depression, pessimism, and stress, a study of younger lawyers and ways to support them should be considered.
3. Studies of role identities for lawyers may add important insight into the perceived nature of the profession experienced by law students vs. the actual practice of law.
4. Inclusion of a scale measuring self-deception to statistically control for social desirability bias should be included in future studies.
5. Longitudinal studies could add important follow up research to the current study, thereby gaining firmer conclusions about the causal nature of these variables. An examination of lawyers' coping skills (e.g., how lawyers cope over time in their job) may add valuable information to attributional theory. Moreover, an inspection of novice

lawyers' experiences that mediate or mitigate work addiction and perceived stress could add insight into the problem of depression.

6. The predictive powers of this study's construct needs to be examined with a wider array of personal characteristics (e.g., aspects of the social and work environments of lawyers, family of origin information, social and marital support networks, financial resources, level and marital support networks, level of physical health, level of support/mentoring within the law firm environment, number of vacation days per year, family of origin work ethic, and parental influence on career choice). A wider selection of variables can clarify the impact of additional variables that predict depression in lawyers. Additionally, replication of this study could strengthen knowledge of specific sub-populations of lawyers who experience depression and help to develop a national data bank about lawyers in distress. Such information may be useful to employee assistance programs, lawyer assistance programs, law school administrators, law firms, and bar associations. A replication study which produces statistically significant data on lawyers' billable hours may produce further evidence that depression is still apparent despite the billable hourly requirement. For example, more experienced lawyers may still feel depressed, work

addicted, and stressed due to other factors brought on by partnership status. Finally, replication studies comparing other professional groups can be constructive research used to enrich these data and provide meaningful contrasts.

### Concluding Remarks

This study offers evidence that levels of depression in lawyers continue to rise and that pessimism, work addiction, and perceived stress play important relationships in the distress symptoms found in the legal profession. Further research can help to clarify whether these dysfunctions are a direct result of the way lawyers are trained and their work environments.

For over fifteen years, leaders in the profession have discussed and debated what measures can be taken to assist lawyers who are suffering from depression and how the contemporary practice of law may be influential in such distress. Lawyer Assistance Programs have been developed in virtually every state in the country, providing lawyers with assistance and advice to help them with depression. But much more can be done before the debilitating effects of depression takes its toll on lawyers, their clients, and their families, breeding dissatisfaction and public distrust of the legal system.

The results of this study offer a first step into a more complete picture of depression in lawyers. It is apparent that in order to thrive in a culture that is highly stressful, where work addiction and pessimism are apparent, lawyers must learn to 1) manage stress, 2) avoid

occupational habits that are workaholic in nature, and 3) understand that optimism is favorable to pessimism. It may be that such knowledge and behaviors can help reduce depression in lawyers and that lawyers can live productive, healthy lives as a result.

Three important aspects remain for the future. First, the legal profession needs to take an open and honest approach to helping depressed lawyers. Such approaches may be to expand Lawyer Assistance Program services to address these problems. Second, the legal profession should pay special attention to younger lawyers who, from the results of this study, demonstrate higher than average levels of depression, pessimism, and stress than other positions. Third, there is need to know what other factors endemic to the practice of law lead to pessimism, work addiction, and stress, and when combined, lead to depression. Additional research on the matter can provide further evidence, but it is fair to question how much more evidence is needed for the legal profession to act responsibly in educating, supporting, and encouraging treatment for depression. What is done by leaders in the profession can result in positive consequences for clients, family members, and lawyers themselves. One can only hope that a combination of programs, including informed counseling and treatment, will result in beneficial changes in the lives of our lawyers. Perhaps then, the stories that lawyers tell will be ones that are absent depression.