HOPE DOES.

Our profession is especially at risk for depression, but you need not feel alone

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I am a trial lawyer, like many of you. I also struggle with depression, like too many of you.

A new study by the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation and the American Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs found that 28 percent of over 12,000 practicing lawyers polled reported a problem with depression. That’s more than three times the rate of the general public. That means, if you tallied every attorney in the U.S., over 368,000 would report symptoms of clinical depression.

My plunge into the dark well of depression began shortly after I turned 40. I was litigating personal injury cases as the managing partner at my firm. I was always under a great deal of stress slugging it out in the trenches, but I thought I could handle it.

It was just part of the deal of being a lawyer, I thought. And part of being a man.

But something changed. I started to feel a deep sadness that wouldn’t go away. I lost my ability to concentrate and be productive at work. Sleep became fragmented. I was always tired, but couldn’t sleep well. I would go to bed early and wake at 3 a.m., unable to go back to sleep. Sometimes I’d watch TV while my family slept. Other times I would shower, shave, get dressed in my suit and tie, and go to an all-night coffee shop. I’d wait until the sun came up and then drive to work—with no one the wiser to the inner torment I was going through.

I tried to hunker down and power through, but it didn’t work. I would find myself crying as I drove home, for no particular reason. I would pull into abandoned parking lots to weep. In the past, sadness was the result of some loss or misfortune that either I or someone I loved had endured. I would cry, but not often. And when I did, it was a release: It felt better to get it out of my system. Now, crying was not a relief. It only led to more crying.

I got therapy and ultimately was put on medication. This helped. As I recovered, I noticed that others found it difficult to understand what I had been through. Over time, I began to understand that some of this is because of the stigma that surrounds depression. A 1996 poll by the National Mental Health Association found that 54 percent of Americans think “depression is a sign of personal or emotional weakness.” Folks with depression are to blame for their plight, many thought. This made me angry and sad at the same time. Would they feel this way about other afflictions?

Why do lawyers suffer from such high rates of depression? There’s no easy answer, because depression has many causes. Some of the risk factors include a family history of depression and one’s emotional experiences with their family of origin. We are also, by training and experience, negative people in an adversarial profession. This creates not only stress, but chronic stress that has significant negative effects on the areas of the brain associated with depression. The legal profession is a “perfect storm” for depression to develop.

Over the past 15 years that I’ve been dealing with depression—and, yes, I still struggle with it—I’ve come to know hundreds of others in our craft who suffer just like me. I created the website lawyerswithdepression.com 10 years ago as a place those in the profession could go to learn about what depression is, as well as find support. I hope you check it out.

Many lawyers do not seek help. For those who do, too often they feel ashamed of their struggle. Lawyers are, after all, supposed to be fixers—not people with problems. But depression can’t be “fixed” by oneself. You need help and support; it’s a team effort. The bottom line? You can recover.

Depression doesn’t have the final word in the closing arguments of the lives of those who suffer with it.

Hope does.

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