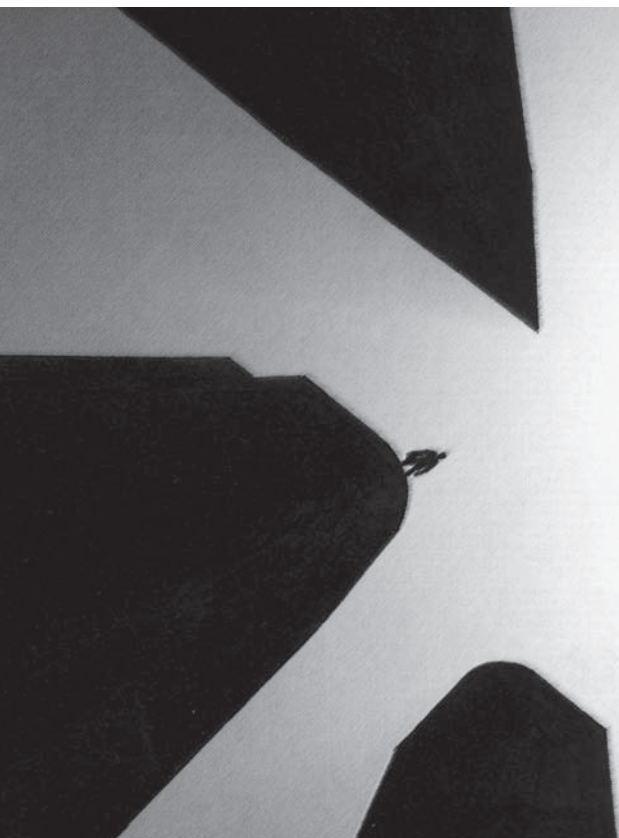


HIGHLIGHTS

of the American Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs

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Lawyer Suicide

BY JEANNE MARIE LESLIE

Suicide is one of the most preventable forms of death. In the United States, more people die each year by suicide than by homicide. It is the eleventh leading cause of death and the fourth leading cause of death in individuals between the ages of 24 to 44 years of age (“Suicide Facts at a Glance,” Center for Disease Control, www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/Suicide_DataSheet-a.pdf). Every seventeen minutes someone in America takes their life. The reality is that most of us have been touched by suicide or know someone who has been touched by suicide.

In the book *The Suicide Lawyers: Exposing Lethal Secrets* by C.C. Risenhoover (Ashland, Ohio: Simpson PC, 2004), lawyers Skip Simpson and Michael Stacy passionately discuss their commitment to suicide prevention. Their law firm deals almost exclusively with the victims of suicide. Their insight is profound and their message is poignant. Suicide is preventable and suicide education needs to be a priority for everyone. The inability of our health-care systems to consistently provide proper assessment, proper diagnosis, and proper treatment for suicidal individuals and their families; the ignorance about suicide; as well as the myths surrounding suicide all contribute to the alarming number of needless deaths by suicide in America (Risenhoover 144).

Most people find it a difficult subject to discuss. However, by discussing suicide and bringing it into the light so to speak, lives can be saved. Suicide and suicidal behavior are not usually a result of stress to difficult life events. These are risk factors. Ninety

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Editor’s Note: The Op-Ed piece from Joseph Lemon expresses his own opinions, not that of *Highlights* or CoLAP. Hopefully we will continue to print more opinions like this in the future. Our intent is to stimulate discussion about our work and to find new ideas to improve CoLAP’s mission.

—Hugh Grady, Editor in Chief

A Modest Proposal

JOSEPH L. LEMON JR.

When I was a child, my mother advised me that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

For those of us who work with impaired attorneys suffering from substance abuse, we know all too well how true that adage is. We also know that, as a profession, our legal community is disproportionately affected by the disease of addiction—in fact,

so great is the challenge of chemical dependency among our brethren that many states specifically mandate continuing education regarding the perils of substance abuse.

So, if we understand that prevention is the best medicine and that lawyers are a particularly susceptible lot, why do we seem unable to curtail the epidemic of addiction within our ranks? And a related question: What initiatives can we take to stem addiction before it takes root?

There are many explanations offered for the excessive number of lawyers impaired by alcoholism and other chemical dependencies: high stress demands, challenging deadlines, long hours, confrontational relationships, etc. Oftentimes, these factors are present even in law school, where intense competition places heightened pressures

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percent of individuals who become suicidal or die from suicide have depression or other mental disorders are involved (National Institute for Mental Health, www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/suicide-in-the-us-statistics-and-prevention/index.shtml#intro). Karl A. Menninger once said hope is a necessity for normal life and the major weapon against the suicide impulse. Suicide victims don't necessarily want to die; they often leave many clues prior to committing suicide. They want relief for their pain and they feel hopeless that there is no other solution ("Hopelessness: A Dangerous Suicide Warning Sign," www.suicide.org/hopelessness-a-dangerous-warning-sign.html).

Dr. Edwin Shneidman in *The Suicidal Mind* asserts that almost all suicides have two common factors, psychological pain coupled with lethality, which measure the degree or likelihood of suicide (Oxford University Press, 1996, 7). Shneidman discusses the subject at length in his book, in which he addresses the phenomena of suicide as it plays out in the minds of suicidal people (Schneidman vii). According to Shneidman, the key to understanding suicide is looking at the intense psychological pain, and how "that idea 'I can stop this pain: I can kill myself' is the unique essence of suicide" (Schneidman 8).

If this is true, every time a help call is answered at a lawyer assistance program (LAP) for an addiction, depression, or other type of mental health issue, the

potential lethality of the caller is reduced by the act of asking for help, and when that lawyer actually participates in some form of therapy, the psychological pain is reduced as well. While it is impossible to measure the number of suicides avoided, there can be little doubt that LAPs save lives by assisting lawyers before problems reach crisis level.

Lawyers are more vulnerable to suicide by the nature of their work.

Suicide affects all aspects of society, but because lawyers are competitive by nature, they thrive in pessimistic environments, working long hours in high-stress situations. It should come as no surprise that the legal profession faces disproportionate problems of addiction, depression, and suicide (Heather Fiske, "Suicide," *GPSolo Magazine*, Oct./Nov. 2004).

LAPs often receive calls from lawyers seriously considering suicide. LAPs are in unique positions to address these calls because LAPs are familiar with the unique personalities of lawyers and LAPs utilize trained peers to help others in need. Many

of the issues that make it difficult for individuals to receive proper care as discussed above are addressed in LAPs. Lawyers calling for help are also introduced to other lawyers who have had some of the same problems. Support systems are established and relationships are made. Most established LAPs also are involved with clients for several years, ensuring continuity in services as well as accountability in behavior.

Bar associations and LAPs across the country are taking suicide prevention seriously, offering programs to assist members in identifying signs and symptoms of suicidal behaviors in the clients they are working with as well as identifying colleagues in need.

Suicide is an issue that affects all of us. We all need to be cognizant of suicide signs and symptoms and do what we can to dispute the myths surrounding suicide. Lawyers are more vulnerable to suicide by the nature of their work. However, lawyers find unique resources in LAPs. In closing, while writing this article I received a call from a lawyer in despair. It is such a privilege to do this work and to help when the call comes in. I know that people who have the opportunity to touch lives in the manner in which volunteers and LAPs are able to do will understand clearly what Dr. Edwin S. Shneidman says are the two most important questions to a potentially suicidal person: "Where do you hurt?" and "How can I help you?" (Schneidman 6). Isn't this what lawyer assistance is all about? **H**

JEANNE MARIE LESLIE is the director of the Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program and a member of the Highlights editorial board.

Chair's Column

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Advisory Committee members Laura Gattrell, Terry Harrell, and Janis Thibeault are rotating off of the Advisory Committee. Laura, Terry, and Janis have all been very active as Advisory Committee members. All three have served on several National Conference Planning Committees. Laura Gattrell served as vice-chair of the National Conference Planning Committee for the 22nd National Conference in Phoenix in 2009 and as chair of the National Con-

ference Planning Committee for the 23rd Annual Conference this year in Indianapolis. She has also served on the Law School Assistance Committee.

Terry Harrell is currently serving as vice-chair of the National Conference Planning Committee and will serve as chair of the National Conference Planning Committee for the 24th National Conference to be held in 2011 in Tampa, Florida. Terry has also served on the Judicial Assistance Initiative and has also been very helpful by serving as the CoLAP liaison to the ABA Standing Committee on Substance Abuse.

Janis Thibault has been of great assis-

tance to the Commission through her work on several National Conference Planning Committees and other committees. In addition her advice and counsel to the chair the past three years have been invaluable and are greatly appreciated.

To each of these dedicated people I extend heartfelt thanks for the time, energy, hard work, and great ideas that you have contributed during your tenure as a Commissioner or Advisory Committee member. I hope and expect that you will continue to be involved with the great work that CoLAP does to assist the legal profession and the public by assisting judges, lawyers, and law students. **H**