

Depression in the Legal Profession

There have been many studies done and articles written about depression within the legal profession. Looking at the activities most lawyers engage on a daily basis, it is a surprising that the number of lawyers suffering from this illness is not higher. According to the National Institute of Mental Health *In any given 1-year period, 9.5% of the population, or about 19 million American adults, suffer from a depressive illness. For lawyers that percentage is almost doubled.* Clinical depression is a serious medical condition. It affects the way a person thinks, reacts, interacts and sleeps. For lawyers, it affects the way they prepare, interpret, and argue. It affects relationships/ with spouses, with children, with colleagues and with clients. Many lawyers suffering from depression are actually brought into the disciplinary process.

How does this happen? Lawyers referred to ALAP who are suffering from depression, are often intelligent and successful professionals. They are dedicated to helping their clients, often to the extent, that they neglect their own well-being. On any given day, lawyers are exposed to distraught, frightened, and anxious clients, seeking immediate relief from their problems. Many of these clients are victims of devastating circumstances or perpetrators charged with horrific crimes. Their freedoms, their finances, their homes and their very lives are often at stake. This type of day in and day out exposure is emotionally wearing. It becomes even more difficult for lawyers when they take on the burden of their clients, as if they were their own. Taking care of oneself is critical. Lawyers who are able to detach, relax and participate in healthy ways of relieving stress are far better equipped to handle the difficult situations they confront. Lawyers also encounter adversarial opponents, grueling schedules, overwhelming client loads and unpredictable outcomes, which only add to the increasing stress.

In presenting programs to local bar associations, I often ask, "How many of you bring your cases home? How many of you obsess about your day's performance? All hands usually go up. In addition, when I inquire about the number of working hours, many have reported an increase in the time spent at the office and a decrease in free time or down time. This type of behavior fuels tensions at home and tends to cause personal relationships to suffer.

I recently had a lawyer in my office who had isolated him self to the point that colleagues in his area thought he had stop practicing, that he had been diagnosed with a terminal illness or died. All attempts to contact him were to no avail. He was in fact alive, but he did not go to his office and he did not return phone calls. He explained to me that he knew he had pressing deadlines but he just could not face them. He explained that he had lost interest in all of the things that once brought him pleasure and satisfaction. This behavior is typical for individuals suffering from depression. Other signs to look for include;

- Persistent feelings of sadness or irritability
- Changes in weight or appetite
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Feelings of guilt or hopelessness
- Inability to concentrate or make decisions
- Fatigue
- Thoughts about suicide or death
- Avoiding friends and family

Persistent overstress without relief affects every body system and increases the risk for depression, heart disease, insomnia, obesity and digestive disorders. Prolonged stress responses also diminish the body's immune system, increasing susceptibility to infections. Fortunately, however, skills can be developed to help avoid some of life's daily stressors and to limit the effects of others.

I often ask bar members "What are you currently doing to take care of yourself and how is that working for you?" Knowing what needs to change is the first step. Breaking it down into specific behaviors or thought patterns not only avoids additional stress, but also helps you to identify specific and attainable goals for lasting change.

Stress, and the depression that sometimes results from a busy practice, can be managed. Medication can help but often more is needed. Correct breathing, meditation, and being quite and still without thought are all methods that have been used to relieve stress and to achieve a tranquil less anxious state. ALAP is here to help with extensive resources and a network of lawyers who understand. So, if you need help get help. Our services can be accessed by calling our direct line at (334) 834-7576 or by visiting our website [@alabar.org](http://alabar.org) All inquires are confidential.