



Alcohol Abuse and Mental Health Concerns among American Attorneys

By Robert B. Thornhill

A comprehensive national study funded by the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation and the American Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs was recently published. The title of the study is, “The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns among American Attorneys” (*Journal of Addiction Medicine*; February 2016–Volume 10- Issue 1-p 45-52). Prior to this study, the most recent and most widely-cited statistics and information regarding alcohol use and mental health concerns among attorneys came from a 1990 Washington state study involving some 1,200 attorneys. This recent study involved 12,825 licensed and employed attorneys in 19 states (Alabama participated in the study) and provides current and reliable statistics.

Here is a brief list of findings from the study:

- More than 20 percent of licensed lawyers drink at levels considered “hazardous, harmful and potentially alcohol-dependent”—three times higher than the rate of alcohol abuse among the general public.
- The highest problem drinking rate overall was among younger lawyers under age 30 (31.9 percent) and junior associates at law firms (31.1 percent).
- A high rate of depression—28 percent—compared to 8 percent of the general population experienced depression in a given year. (Forty-six percent reported concerns at some point in their career.)
- Symptoms of anxiety were experienced by 19 percent. (Sixty-one percent reported concerns with anxiety at some point in their career.)
- Twenty-three percent experienced symptoms of stress.

These findings clearly show that attorneys experience “drinking that is hazardous, harmful or otherwise generally consistent with alcohol use disorders at a rate much higher than other populations.” Depression, anxiety and stress are also significant problems for attorneys. We have known for many years that use of mood-altering substances such as alcohol have been strongly associated with stress, depression and anxiety. These “co-occurring disorders” are the rule and not the exception!

Many begin to abuse alcohol (or other substances) as a way to cope with stress, anxiety or depression. Many others begin to experience depression, stress or anxiety as a result of abusing alcohol or other substances.

The Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program (ALAP) is dedicated to providing confidential assistance to lawyers and law students who may be experiencing problems with alcohol or other substances, or a mental health issue such as depression or anxiety. The Alabama State Bar has demonstrated strong and consistent support for our program since its inception, and understands the supreme importance of maintaining complete confidentiality for those who have the courage and willingness to come forward and seek help. We have a dedicated committee of volunteer attorneys, most of whom are in recovery themselves, scattered around the state. They are ready and willing to assist! They have experienced the life-changing miracle of recovery, and the value of therapy and treatment.

Most attorneys are self-reliant, ambitious, perfectionistic and highly motivated to provide good service to their clients. As a group, however, attorneys are among the last to seek assistance, or to even acknowledge a problem. The fear of damaging their reputation is pervasive and keeps many attorneys from receiving the assistance and treatment that they need.

It is my hope that we can all use the information obtained in this new study as a motivation to actively reduce the stigma associated with addiction and mental health issues, and to encourage ourselves and our colleagues to reach out for help. We have seen many lives, families and careers transformed through our work in this program. Unfortunately, we have also seen families, careers and even lives lost due to untreated addiction or mental health issues. *These maladies do not get better on their own.* They are progressive and get worse over time without treatment. If you see yourself among these statistics, or know of a colleague who is suffering, please contact us. Your involvement with the Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program will be strictly confidential. We hope to hear from you! ▲

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