



My Story of Struggle and Survival

By Mary Turner Roberts

I walked in the door... late.

The third day that week I had been late for work. Everyone in the office knew why I was late. All of those standing in the common area looked at me with that look, that look of disappointment and shame. Then, they all looked away. Silence. I could feel the temperature drop from the cold shoulders. My co-workers did not want to speak to me. They did not want to look at me. They did not want to be around me.

All but one—because he was in recovery. He had been where I was. He knew the signs of alcoholism. The Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program had helped him a year before. He knew what to do. He came up to me and suggested I go speak with my older brother about my drinking. My brother was also a lawyer and his office was across the street. At my co-worker's insistence and with him by my side, I went to see my brother.

I had always looked up to my older brother and probably became a lawyer because of him. I timidly walked into his office and sat

down. I told him that my co-worker suggested I talk to him about my drinking, but, of course, I didn't know why. I didn't have a problem. And I desperately wanted my brother to agree. I needed him to tell me that I did not have a problem, I didn't need to go to treatment and that I wasn't an alcoholic.

As we talked, I began to share my struggles. At first it was hard for me to even admit that I was struggling, but as we continued to talk, it became easier. After all, my brother knew when my struggles began—when I was 16 years old.

I was going to a movie with some of my high school friends. When they came to pick me up, my dad called me over to give me a kiss goodbye. I was 16. My friends were watching. I was embarrassed, but I walked over to my dad and he kissed me goodbye.

We got to the theater, found some good seats and sat down, waiting for the movie to begin. The manager walked into the theater and called out one of my friends by name and told her to come to the office. I walked with her so she wouldn't have to go alone.

When we got to the office, the manager said she had a phone call. As my friend talked on the phone, I could tell something was wrong. She hung up and told me we had to go to the hospital. They were taking my dad.

My dad had had open heart surgery about two years earlier. I thought he must have had a heart attack so we rushed from the theater to the hospital, but when we arrived, my dad wasn't there. So I called our house, but a policeman



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answered the phone. As the officer was telling me to go to the hospital, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a stretcher. I recognized my dad's pants. My mom and younger brother were walking behind. I ran to mom and asked her if it was a heart attack. Her answer still rings in my ears. "No, he tried to kill himself."

My dad was still alive. I got to see him. Tell him I loved him. Tell him to keep fighting. In my mind, though, I knew he would not survive. I knew it was goodbye. So I kissed him, just like he had kissed me hours before.

I didn't handle my father's death well. I began to drink and tried to numb the pain his death caused. Even though I had done well as an undergraduate, graduated law school and passed the bar, I was still struggling with my father's death, and by the time I sat down

in my older brother's office, my drinking was out of control.

Since my father's death, my older brother had assumed the father role in our family. He listened to me talk about my struggles and my drinking. When I finished, he told me that I needed help and that he was going to take me to treatment so I needed to go home and pack my bag. I was stunned, but it was just the jolt I needed.

That was 26 years ago. July 18, 1990. My AA birthday.

Through recovery, I was able to learn to grieve and work through my anger. I was able to start living my life on life's terms. I worked hard to re-gain the trust and respect of my co-workers. I went to my meetings and I learned how to cope with the struggles that led me to be an alcoholic.

Eventually, I married and had two children. As our family grew, we needed to look for a new house, so one day, my husband and I drove around town looking at houses listed for sale and talking to our realtor on the phone.

That's when I got the second call. Something was wrong. I had to call my mom's house. Again, a policeman answered the phone. Twenty-five years after my father's death, my mother died in the same manner and in the same bedroom.

I remember saying to my husband, Jim, I cannot go through this again. My husband said "Mary, you can and you will."

I could not go back to drinking. I had to find another way to deal with the pain and anger. I found a group in Birmingham called Survivors of Suicide which I attended for a year until I started a

Tuscaloosa version of the same group.

As any survivor of suicide will tell you the biggest struggle we face is trying to answer the question “why?” Why would our loved ones take their own lives? Why would my parents do this? I may never know the answer, but I’ve found one common truth. Mental illnesses such as depression are dangerous and life-threatening. And mental illness can affect anyone. Even lawyers.

In a 2014 report by CNN, lawyers were found to be 3.6 times more likely to suffer from depression than non-lawyers. The report also quoted data from The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention which ranked lawyers with the fourth-highest suicide rate by profession as compared to suicides in all other occupations and professions.

The very nature of our profession is extraordinarily stressful which often leads to depression and substance abuse. We have clients who bring us their problems expecting a quick fix or who look over our shoulder at everything we do. Partners and judges we have to please. A general public who constantly criticizes us. And a workload that seems to eat away at more and more of our free time every day. All of this wrapped in an adversarial process in which another lawyer is fighting against everything we do.

Really, it is no wonder that lawyers are more prone to depression. And because we are supposed to be problem-solvers, it’s no wonder we are less likely to get help, leading to more suicides.

I’m one of those lawyers who suffered from depression, but after

learning too late that my parents had suffered from depression and kept it hidden from the rest of us, I knew the danger of not seeking help. And, I was not going to let the stigma of depression and mental illness shame me into doing nothing. In addition to the Survivors of Suicide Group, I sought counseling for my depression and, soon, I was better.

I was also determined to use my experiences to help others. I became an advocate for the prevention of suicide. I began speaking at various mental health functions, lecturing at social work and psychology classes at the University of Alabama and even going on the radio to discuss the need to fight the stigma of mental illness and to encourage friends and loved ones to seek help.

I found even that was not enough when I discovered my older brother was also one of those lawyers who suffered from depression.

It was July 18, 2011. My AA birthday. Seven years after my mother died and 32 years after my father died when I got the third call. My brother had texted his wife, telling her that he loved her and saying goodbye.

I was no stranger to the call. I knew what my brother’s text message meant. He had died by suicide just like my mother and father. What I didn’t know was that my brother was suffering from depression.

When I needed him to be there for me, to give me that jolt, to make me seek help, my brother was there. Every day I wish that my brother had walked into my office to talk to me about his struggles, his depression.

Fortunately, the signs of my alcoholism were clear and a friend told me to go talk to my brother. The signs of my brother’s depression were not clear and that’s one of the most frightening aspects of depression and mental illness—those suffering learn to cover it up to avoid the stigma.

Looking at the statistics I mentioned above, it’s clear that we, as lawyers, are more susceptible to depression, as well as alcoholism and substance abuse. We must do a better job of recognizing the signs in our fellow lawyers and encouraging them to seek help. And we must be on the forefront of erasing the stigma of mental illness.

Helen Keller said, “Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.”

Our profession is an honorable, yet difficult one. There are many issues attorneys face which can lead to mental health crisis. Our profession is full of suffering, but it is also full of the overcoming of it. Awareness, encouragement and the type of assistance provided by the Alabama Lawyer Assistance program can help us overcome even more. ▲

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