

# Preventing Depression, Burnout and Stress in the Legal Profession

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

The first step is acknowledging a problem exists. Lawyers and judges are extremely independent and self-sufficient by nature and it is not in our natures to admit anything that can be remotely perceived as a weakness. Plus, smart lawyers and judges are convinced they can think their way out of all the problems they encounter. Sadly, this is literally killing people in our profession.

Every lawyer and judge needs to become more aware of depression and burnout and how “white knuckling” through long periods of anxiety, stress and lower levels of depression can, without warning, crescendo into catastrophic events that take the lawyer by surprise.

Lawyers and judges all too often consider stress and depression to be acceptable components of their job description. They do not take care of themselves and rarely put themselves first. This results in an alarming number of mental breakdowns and, in the most heartbreaking cases, suicide.

These tragedies often hit close to home. One of my best friends from Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center jumped off the New Orleans Crescent City Connection Mississippi River Bridge in 2009 and fell to his death. He was in his early 40s and suffered from depression. Since Jan. 1, 2011, during my tenure as the new executive director of the Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc., one Louisiana lawyer has killed himself by gunshot to the head. Another is recovering from a near miss with suicide. As one would expect, these incidents are virtually never publicized and that results in the severity of the epidemic of depression and suicide being shielded from view.

Accordingly, the epidemic of depression in the legal profession still remains largely out of sight and mind. While members of our profession are becoming more cognizant of the alarming statistics, it is still extremely difficult to convince lawyers and judges that no one is immune from depression.

If you are feeling stressed out, burned

out and not exactly “happy, joyous and free” in the legal profession, here are some suggested courses of action<sup>1</sup> that lawyers and judges can employ to prevent or mitigate burnout and depression:

1. Re-assess your balance of career success versus personal fulfillment. Sacrificing time with family and rarely having time for interests outside work and the practice of law indicates a potential need for recalibration. Make it a point to set goals to better balance work and play.

2. Don’t allow yourself to become isolated. Get out of the office and the house and make sure you are still genuinely and openly involved with friends and engaged in extracurricular activities and hobbies that are NOT in any way associated with being a lawyer, judge or practicing law.

3. Listen to others. Pay attention to signs that perhaps you need to change problematic interpersonal habits and pessimistic thinking.

4. Beware of the “golden handcuffs” and becoming so entrenched in a high-income lifestyle that it is difficult to scale back billable hours as necessary to make time for a healthy personal life outside the practice of law.

5. Don’t bring your “lawyering” home with you. Being skeptical, judgmental and striving to always be “right” with friends and family can destroy those personal relationships.

6. Be cognizant that, as lawyers and judges, we are trained to operate at a high level of intellectual abstraction that is analytical and disconnected from personal emotions so as to allow us to represent clients effectively. That mode of thinking, however, can be severely damaging to our well-being if stress is allowed to fester. Mental health care professionals recommend that lawyers and judges take the time to develop and adhere to a daily routine of stress management tools such as exercise, diet, meditation, yoga and simple things such as learning to say “no” to new tasks when overburdened and stressed out.

All of these topics are rooted, first and foremost, in the issue of a need for an increase in general awareness. Until lawyers and judges become more aware of the true epidemic of stress, burnout and depression in the legal profession, and how it is impacting them personally, our profession will remain under siege.

The good news is that there are members of our profession making a difference and speaking out publicly about their personal experiences with mental health issues such as depression. The Erie Bar Foundation in New York has produced the short film, “A Terrible Melancholy,” that centers on Abraham Lincoln’s history of chronic depression. The film also, in part, features appearances by Dan Lukasik, a lawyer who recovered from depression and then spearheaded [www.lawyerswithdepression.com](http://www.lawyerswithdepression.com).

Lukasik’s depression website provides a plethora of information about depression: what it is, what causes lawyers and judges to suffer from it at shocking rates, and what can be done to combat it.

If you are interested in obtaining more information on ways to beat burnout, stress, anxiety and depression, or you feel that you could possibly benefit from an evaluation, contact the Lawyers Assistance Program. Your call is confidential as a matter of law and there is no obligation whatsoever. You don’t even have to give your name. Contact the Lawyers Assistance Program at: (866)354-9334; via e-mail at [LAP@louisianalap.com](mailto:LAP@louisianalap.com); or visit the web at [www.louisianalap.com](http://www.louisianalap.com).

## FOOTNOTE

1. These suggestions are derived from the article “Mental Health in the Legal Profession” by Scott Mitchell, *Diversity & The Bar*, October 2007.

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