

One Lawyer's Journey Through Depression

By Dan T. Lukasik

I am a 53-year-old lawyer and have suffered from clinical depression for the past 13 years. It is my hope that in writing about my experiences, I will reach those who need to get help and those who should not give up.

Depression is not just a problem in our profession — it's a five-alarm fire. Lawyers suffer from depression at a rate estimated to be double that of the average American. Some postulate that the types of people who go into law are prone to depression. Others cite stress, burnout and addiction. I believe that the problem stems from a combination of all these factors and, accordingly, recovery involves a mix of healthy strategies.

My Descent

My own journey with depression began when I turned 40. At that point, I had been a litigator in a high-stress job for 15 years. I had always felt the heat of stress, but I just assumed it came with the territory of the job and helped motivate me to do better. Over time, my fear turned into anxiety. I just couldn't shut off the fear-provoking thoughts and feelings I had as I ground out my daily workload. Eventually, the anxiety turned into something else. I began feeling tired all the time. I felt like cement was running through my veins.

I had sleep disturbances and would overeat, numbing myself in front of the television. I felt sad all the time, with little apparent reason to feel that way: I had a wonderful wife and family and a great job at a good law firm.

I started seeing a psychologist. When I explained my thoughts, he said, "Dan, that's the depression speaking." He suggested I see a psychiatrist, and I did. When I arrived at the doctor's office, I quickly went to the waiting room, hoping no one would recognize me. The room was huge. There was one elderly man sitting in the corner. I took off my overcoat, slumped into my chair and sighed. I felt like the loneliest person in the world. The psychiatrist saw me and told me that my fatigue and sadness were owing to the fact that I had depression and would need medication. "It's no different than suffering from diabetes and needing insulin," he assured me. There was a biochemical imbalance in my brain. I left content that at least I knew what was wrong with me. I had an illness — an illness that could be treated.

I decided that I had to tell my three law partners that I would need some time off to allow the medication to kick in. I felt guilty about this; after all, I was the managing partner at the firm. I was supposedly a superhero, a problem solver who fixed other people's

lives. I wasn't supposed to be the one with a problem, the one who felt vulnerable and broken. In a quaking voice, I told my partners about my depression and how serious a problem it was. One partner turned to me and said, "What in the world do you have to be depressed about? You have a beautiful wife, family, and a great job here. Just go on vacation!" His angry and incredulous voice made me feel six inches tall. One of the other partners, smiling, confidently said, "Dan, at 95 percent, you are better than any lawyer I know."

Both of these reactions, I would later learn, are typical. The first partner's exhortation to remember the good things in my life didn't help. Instead it shamed me and fell on depression's deaf ears. The second partner's attempt to minimize the problem was not helpful either. I told him that I wasn't at 95 percent — I was at 10 percent.

After a month, I returned to work. The drug made me feel somewhat zoned out, but I slogged through my days for another year. My doctor changed my medications in search of a better result. The new medication quickly produced great states of anxiety. I remember driving home from work on a beautiful summer's day and feeling as though my body was on fire. That led to a third medication.

This prescription did the trick, and I am still on it. It has been supplemented with another medication, but I feel that this cocktail has largely squashed the worst parts of depression. I know the depression is still there, but my medication keeps it at a safe distance and protects me.

Medication didn't fix my depression, but it did calm my mind and bodily symptoms so that I could examine other things in my life that contributed to the depression. In therapy, it became clear that my thinking was garbled. My psychologist calls it "twisted thinking" that emanates from depressive thoughts — thoughts that go unchallenged in the isolation of depression.

I needed a therapist to help me confront negative self-talk and replace it with more healthy, positive and self-caring thoughts. For example, I used to think — perhaps 50 times a day — "nobody cares about me." Yet, if I actually looked at my life, this really wasn't true — not even close. I had to learn to embrace the people in my life that really cared about me. I also had to open up and let them know the depth of my pain and *allow* them to care about me. Men, in particular, have a hard time with this for fear of being deemed "losers" or "whiners."

Turning It Around

What can lawyers do about their depression?

► Call the Louisiana Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (LAP) and get immediate, confidential support and dependable referrals to resources for treating licensed professionals.

► Don't try to manage depression by yourself. The problem is bigger than any individual. You may have a chemical imbalance that needs regulation by medication, and that's okay. In fact, for many, psychotherapy won't help until they quiet down their somatic complaints so that they can have the energy and insight to work on their problems.

► Whether you need medication or not, you will need professional help to effectively confront your negative thinking. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is particularly effective in treating depression. Call Louisiana's LAP for a referral to a LAP-approved therapist.

► Exercise. Of course, exercise is a healthy habit for everyone. But it becomes a critical choice for a person with depression. In his book, *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*

(New York: Little Brown, 2008), Harvard psychiatrist John Ratey devotes a whole chapter to the importance of exercise in treating depression.

► Access the spiritual. This can include formal meditation sessions and religious services or a casual walk in the woods. A lot of research suggests that people with established spiritual outlets are better able to handle depression. If you believe in God or a higher power (I am Catholic), avail yourself of help and support from that source. Or tap into another form of spirituality. Spiritual growth and development, in my opinion, are important pillars of recovery.

► Join a support group. I started a lawyer support group in my community, and it has been going strong for two years. It can be invaluable in helping you to see that you are not alone and that others share in the very same struggle.

► Get educated. Read some good books on the topic. As part of your education, learn about the powerful connection between stress, anxiety and depression. On this subject, I recommend Dr. Richard O'Connor's *Undoing Perpetual Stress: The Missing Connection between Depression, Anxiety and 21st Century Illness* (New York: Berkley Books, 2005). O'Connor proposes that depression is really about stress that has gone on too long. The constant hammering away of stress hormones on the brain changes its neurochemistry. This can and often does result in anxiety disorders and clinical depression. I list a number of other great books on my website, www.lawyerswithdepression.com. The site also offers guest articles, news, podcasts and helpful links for lawyers.

► Add some pleasure to your schedule. As busy lawyers, we have the "I will get to it later" mentality, especially when it comes to healthy things. Jettison that approach and make time *now* to enjoy pleasurable things. A hallmark of depression is the failure to feel happiness or joy. Create the space to experience and savor these feelings.

► Restructure your legal practice. Recovery requires change but presents challenges: Are you willing to do whatever it takes? Would you change jobs or even your career if need be? I have spoken to many lawyers who haven't been happy with lawyering, but the practice pays the bills and it's what they know how to do. They also fear being labeled a "quitter" and feeling

as if they have somehow failed. These are all very genuine concerns. However, your good health (as I learned the hard way) has to be a top priority. I changed the nature of my practice and am healthier for it. I do less litigation and have less stress, which has long been identified as a powerful trigger for depression. Restructure and change can be done and, with professional help, you can achieve a healthy balance.

► Practice mindfulness. In mindfulness meditation, we sit quietly, pay attention to our breath, and let our thoughts flow by. Normally, we would immediately react to these thoughts (e.g., "I will never get this brief done"), but, through mindfulness meditation, we learn, slowly, to allow the thoughts and feelings to stream by without reacting to them. If such an approach to depression seems far-fetched, read J. Mark G. Williams' compelling book, *The Mindful Way Through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness* (New York: Guilford, 2007), for an excellent primer on how you can incorporate mindfulness into your day. The technique has proven to be yet another effective tool in managing depression.

► Remember to be kind to yourself. Sounds simple? But I tell this to depressed lawyers and they look puzzled. They have rarely thought about it and are often unsure of how to accomplish this goal. Just begin with a conscious intention — "I am not going to treat myself poorly anymore." Depression is often built on poor mental/emotional and physical habits. Acknowledging that we are worthy of love from ourselves and others includes taking care of ourselves.

Dan T. Lukasik is a 1988 graduate of the University at Buffalo Law School in Buffalo, N.Y., and a founding partner of the law firm Bernhardt Lukasik, P.L.L.C. in Buffalo. He has litigated personal injury cases in state and federal courts throughout New York State. He is the creator of the website, www.lawyerswithdepression.com, and is a frequent speaker on the topic of lawyer depression. He is on the board of directors for the Erie County Bar Association and is a Fellow of the American Bar Association. He has been recognized by The Best Lawyers in America and Super Lawyers and is the recipient of the Distinguished Alumni Award for Community Service from the University at Buffalo Law School, among other awards. (danieltlukasik@gmail.com; 50 Fountain Plaza, Buffalo, NY 14202)

