

Alumni Counseling: Mental Health Resources for Lawyers

by Jeanine Dames

In May 2011, *Psychology Today* published an article entitled “The Depressed Lawyer.”¹ The article presents some staggering numbers on the mental state of lawyers in the United States, including a discussion about the nature of the practice of law and why it tends to lead to a higher percentage of depressed individuals than many other industries.

In addition to depression, lawyers also struggle with substance abuse, anxiety disorders, stress-related disorders, and suicide. The American Bar Association (ABA) estimates that 15% to 20% of lawyers suffer from some form of substance abuse. The Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission reports that substance abuse is a factor in approximately 50% of the disciplinary cases.² A study conducted by the National Institute for Safety and Health found that male lawyers between the ages of 20 and 64 are more than twice as likely to commit suicide than men of the same age in other occupations.³

As career counselors, we may work with attorneys who may be struggling at a variety of points in their careers. A recent alumnus may have difficulty adapting from the academic environment, or a senior alumna may be struggling to balance work, family, and other obligations. To assist these alumni it is important for us to know the limitations of our own profession and be aware of the available external resources that may assist these alumni.

Things to Look For

The vast majority of legal career counselors are not trained clinicians, so it is important for us to recognize when an individual is struggling and refer him or her to proper outside assistance. The fol-

lowing points are not an expansive list, but are some signs that may indicate an individual is in need of additional help:⁴

- Inability to meet professional or personal obligations;
- Trouble concentrating or remembering things;
- Loss of interest in usual activities;
- Changes in sleep, marked increases or decreases in time spent sleeping;
- Feelings of confusion, loneliness, isolation, or desolation;
- Thoughts of suicide.

Resources

The good news is many of these conditions are treatable with the right resources. Career counselors should check first with their law school and university mental health services to see if they offer treatment to alumni, or, alternatively, if they provide a list of local mental health providers.

The ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs (CoLAP) was created to “educate the legal profession concerning alcoholism, chemical dependencies, stress, depression and other emotional health issues, and assist and support all bar associations and lawyer assistance programs in developing and maintaining methods of providing effective solutions for recovery.”⁵

Through CoLAP, counselors and alumni can find information and support for alcohol abuse, compassion fatigue, compulsive behaviors, depression, drug abuse, stress, and suicide. In addition, the CoLAP website houses links to na-

tional and local resources, including a directory of lawyer assistance programs throughout the country. The CoLAP website is available at http://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance.html. Many of the assistance programs offer informational resources and confidential hotlines to assist an attorney on his or her way to finding appropriate help.

As career counselors, we often find that external factors play a significant role in the career paths of our alumni. For those alumni struggling with mental health issues, we can best assist by getting them to the right resources to assist in their recovery.

Endnotes

- ¹ Tyger Latham, Psy.D, “The Depressed Lawyer,” *Psychology Today* (May 2, 2011), available at <http://www.psychologytoday.com>.
- ² Alcoholism and Drug Dependency in the Legal Profession, Lawyer’s Assistance Program, available at <http://www.illinoislap.org/alcohol-and-drug-abuse>.
- ³ Debra Cassens Weiss, “Lawyer Personalities May Contribute to Increased Suicide Risk,” *ABA Journal* (April 30, 2009), available at http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/lawyer_personalities_may_contribute_to_increased_suicide_risk/
- ⁴ This list of symptoms, as well as others, is available on the New Jersey Legal Assistance Program website at <http://www.njlap.org>
- ⁵ ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs organization website, available at http://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance.html

Jeanine Dames is formerly of Yale Law School and prepared this Alumni Counseling Quick Tip on behalf of the NALP Law School Alumni Career Services Interest Group.