



‘Depression and Burnout in Lawyers - Know the Signs and Symptoms Before They Bite You in the A!’**

by

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It is well-documented that lawyers suffer from higher rates of depression, divorce, and substance abuse than the rest of the population. Clinical depression can easily creep up on a busy professional lawyer. It certainly crept up on me when I was a practicing solicitor in London, England, Hong Kong, and an attorney in New York. The result was a major burnout and an unsteady path to get back on track to where I am today, a life coach for lawyers. As a life coach, I derive great satisfaction from helping attorneys identify what they really want in their personal and professional lives, find the best work/life balance for them, and to research and then make any necessary transitions as smoothly as possible. Of course, having all that personal experience helps!

I believe part of the problem is many of us have that stubborn, Type A over-achiever style of personality and very few of us are willing to admit a ‘weakness’ in ourselves, such as exhaustion or depression. We also tend to believe we shouldn’t have problems, and if we do, we should solve them ourselves. Does this sound familiar, at all?

There are, of course, rational reasons for this reluctance to self-identify as ‘depressed’. There are serious consequences to ‘falling by the wayside’ in terms of professional prestige and opportunities, and we naturally fear being stigmatized by any label of ‘mental illness’. Mental illness strikes at our very identity as competent professionals.

Yet our preferred way as lawyers of dealing with these challenges is to ignore what we are feeling and ‘white-knuckle’ our way through. This would be fine if the cost of untreated depression wasn’t so high – but it is sometimes literally fatal. Do – did - you know, or at least know of, a lawyer who committed suicide as a result of clinical depression, even though s/he seemed to have everything to live for? In the more everyday case, it is not just the depressed lawyer who is suffering. Our life partners and families, our clients, our colleagues and partners, and our entire community are all paying the price, too because we are not able to be at our best for them.

Isn't it worth knowing enough about depression and burnout to be more aware of the early signs in yourself, you family, and your colleagues?

Some lawyers experience a gradual worsening of symptoms while others are felled by it seemingly overnight with no warning. Some of your colleagues are almost certainly suffering from the former. They are probably struggling to hold it together so that you *don't* notice. Yet, once diagnosed, treatment for depression can be easy and effective. Left to itself to take hold, it tends to become more difficult to cure.

Signs and Symptoms: I shall divide these into physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, although there is, of course, overlap.

Depression usually begins with physical symptoms that include –

- Digestive problems or headaches
- Disturbances in sleep
- Extreme weight gain or loss
- Excessive snacking or eating
- Fatigue and a lack of energy
- General pain with no specific cause
- Loss of sexual desire

The cognitive difficulties that particularly impact the lawyer's professional life include –

- Difficulty concentrating
- Memory problems
- Indecisiveness
- Imagining suicide
- Lack of interest in work
- Pessimism about the future

The emotional signs of depression include –

- Emotional pain
- Feelings of guilt
- Feelings of resentment
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness
- Inability to feel pleasure in life
- Irritability
- Sadness
- Unexplained shame
- Overwhelmed

Finally, the behavioral signs and symptoms of depression and burnout include –

- Being uncommunicative
- Crying spells
- Neglect of personal hygiene
- Neglect of responsibilities
- Restlessness
- Slowing down
- Substance abuse
- Withdrawal

The situation is complicated because exactly how depression and burnout manifest themselves depends on the individual and the types of stress they are under. Moreover, not everybody experiences all of these symptoms, and some people may only find one sphere of their daily existence affected, such as their relationship with their significant other, and may not appear to have problems in other areas, such as their professional lives.

Ironically the last thing that a lawyer on the verge of burnout typically does is to cut him/herself some slack. I can testify to this from my own experience of burnout, which I have written about elsewhere, and please get my article from Life Coaching for Lawyers website at www.lifecoachingforlawyers.com for some suggestions.

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