

A banner advertisement for LexisNexis. On the left, there are three panels labeled 'CASE ASSESSMENT', 'DISCOVERY', and 'RESEARCH' with small images of people working. To the right, the text reads: 'DOES YOUR LITIGATION TEAM CONNECT THE DOTS? Only LexisNexis® lets you harness your team's thinking. Every case, every task.' Below this is a call to action: 'CONNECT THE DOTS TODAY' with a red dot icon, and the LexisNexis logo.

Final Option

Sidebar

## The Less Final Option

**For lawyers suffering from depression, there is help**

*November 2009 Issue*

By [Mark Hansen](#)

She never knew what hit her.

At one point, “Marie” had a good job, a busy social life and hardly a care in the world.

The next thing she knew, she was out of work, avoiding friends and family, and sinking deeper and deeper into a debilitating depression.

It got so bad she stopped eating, couldn’t get out of bed and found herself contemplating when—and how—to end it all.

“I felt absolutely worthless,” says the 55-year-old Chicago lawyer, who didn’t want her real name used for fear of ruining potential job prospects. “I thought everybody would be better off without me.”

She threw out her work clothes, organized her affairs and tidied up her apartment so her sister “wouldn’t be left with a big mess.”

Then she downed 40 or 50 prescription pain pills, climbed into bed and had a sudden change of heart.

“I realized I didn’t want to die,” she says.

Marie called her sister, who helped nurse her back to health. Then she called the Lawyers’ Assistance Program, where Susan Riegler, a psychologist and clinical director of the Illinois program, talked her back from the brink.

“She saved my life,” Marie says of Riegler.

That was almost three years ago. Marie is now in therapy, working part time and looking for a full-time job in the legal field, preferably as a corporate counsel or procurement officer.

She wouldn’t pronounce herself completely cured.

But she’s learned how to deal with life’s daily ups and downs.

“I still have my down moments,” she says, “but I keep my thoughts and feelings in check.”

Marie apparently has lots of company.

In the last fiscal year, ending June 30, the Lawyers' Assistance Program served a record-setting 296 clients, a 9.2 percent increase from the previous year and a 363 percent increase since 2001-2002.

Last year, for the second year in a row, the largest single category of cases by far involved psychological issues, particularly depression, which 44 percent of all clients reported as a significant impairment.

Of special concern, says Janet Piper Voss, the Illinois program's executive director, is the issue of suicide, which officials are seeing on a much larger scale than ever before. In 2007-2008, the organization fielded only one call from a lawyer contemplating suicide. Last year, it experienced two client suicides, four attempts and nine cases of suicide ideation.

How much of that is associated with the current economy and concerns about job loss or not having enough work is not clear, Voss says. But a similar phenomenon is being reported by other lawyer assistance programs throughout the country, she and others say.

Don Carroll, director of the North Carolina Lawyer Assistance Program, says he has seen a significant uptick in cases in the past year, particularly among young lawyers who can't find a job or have been laid off.

"It's very frustrating to be out there looking for work and not being able to find a job, especially when you're fresh out of law school and carrying big student loans," he says.

## **A PROFESSIONAL PROBLEM**

Robert L. Childers, a trial court judge in Memphis, Tenn., who chairs the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs, says the legal profession has always been prone to a higher incidence of depression than the general population.

He cites one 1990 study by Johns Hopkins University that found lawyers as a group were nearly four times as likely to suffer from depression as the average person. Other studies have shown that lawyers are two to six times more likely to be clinically depressed than people in other lines of work.

Tennessee had nine lawyer suicides in an 18-month period between 2005 and 2006, Childers says. And bar officials in several states have told him more recently that they are averaging one lawyer suicide a month.

Childers says he knows of no hard data showing that the current recession has exacerbated the situation but adds he "can't help but think" that it has.

"It undoubtedly adds to the amount of stress lawyers are experiencing, which can lead to depression and, if left untreated, will cause some people to believe that suicide is their only option," he says.

Fortunately, lawyers in distress do have other options.

Every state has some form of confidential support program for lawyers struggling with substance abuse or emotional problems. Many state bars have affiliated programs while others run separate nonprofit groups staffed by volunteers. The programs vary, though most offer personal and career counseling, as well as referrals to other resources. Some offer individual and group therapy sessions. Some also serve law students and judges.

The ABA commission develops educational materials for lawyers about substance abuse, stress, depression and other mental health issues, and it works closely with lawyer assistance programs run by state and local bar associations. A directory of those programs, along with other training and educational materials, publications, products and related resources, is available on the commission's website at [abanet.org/legalservices/colap](http://abanet.org/legalservices/colap).

The commission also maintains a referral hotline for lawyers in crisis at 1-866-LAW-LAPS.

*See related story, "[A Death in the Office.](#)"*

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