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Free: Employment Woes Fuel Uptick in Lawyer Depression

By [Vesselin Mitev](#)

July 20, 2009

The attorneys who attended a recent weekly support group in Manhattan were from different backgrounds and at varying stages of their careers, but one thing they all shared was a growing nervousness over the stagnant job market.

Depression increasingly has been recognized as a major problem among attorneys, members of a high-stress occupation vulnerable to anxiety even in good times. And these are not good times.

"There is anxiety and depression over being underemployed or unemployed, or marital difficulties if they lost their job and the question is, how do they handle the anxiety," said Eileen Travis, who heads the New York City Bar's Lawyer Assistance Program.

More lawyers are calling the program and a greater number have been suffering from depression that stems, at least partly, from the decline in their personal and professional prospects brought on by the economic downturn.

The organization this month started a support group, where for an hour each week for six weeks, lawyers can commiserate and share stories about their struggles. Thirty-one people signed up for the first session, led by Sylvan Schaffer, a licensed psychologist who also is an attorney.

"I was getting quite a few calls from people that were depressed, burned out," Mr. Schaffer, who is of counsel to Jackson Lewis, said in an interview. Since many attorneys are "kind of embarrassed" about traditional psychotherapy, he said, the group meetings are an attempt to encourage frank discussion.

"A lot of them say the same type of things—people don't respond to resume solicitations, not even a call back," Mr. Schaffer said. "There's a sense of desperation."

The support group has two main focuses, according to Mr. Schaffer: helping attorneys stay positive by sharing their stories and hearing encouragement from other members and coming up with creative job-hunting methods.

One attorney, a corporate lawyer, was concerned that taking a job offer in litigation would derail his career. After discussion, the consensus was that in this job market, practicing in a different field is better than a blank spot on the resume, Mr. Schaffer said.

"Attorneys really don't get sympathy. People assume that attorneys are rich and have jobs," Mr. Schaffer said, adding that he knows of lawyers who are reluctant to apply for unemployment benefits because of the "stigma that [doing] that really makes me unemployed."

Other bar associations with lawyer assistance programs—there are 17 run by county associations in New York as well as the New York State Bar Association for the rest of the state—agree that attorneys confronting personal problems may be reluctant to seek help.

"It takes a while for people to screw up the courage to call us," said John Crowe, the director of the Monroe County program.

Patricia Spataro, who heads the state bar's lawyer assistance program, said that after a short spike of depression-related calls beginning in October 2008, the volume had dropped back to around six per month.



Psychologist and attorney Sylvan Schaffer leads a depression support group last week at the New York City Bar.
NYLJ Photo/Rick Kopstein



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"My theory is that the lawyers who have been profoundly impacted by the economy are struggling to right themselves and survive, and they are not paying too much attention to their increased stress level, depression, increased drinking," Ms. Spataro said in an e-mail interview. "Perhaps we might see these calls when the dust settles and the psychological effects are felt in full force."

In addition to substance abuse, a lack of job prospects can trigger the onset of depression, which in extreme cases may even lead to suicide.

The subject is familiar to Andrew Sparkler, an attorney whose close friend and Fordham University School of Law classmate, Dave Nee, took his own life in June 2005.

"We were studying for the bar and Dave had had these long absences the previous semester, which in hindsight may or may not have been calls for help, and then he didn't show up for a day or two and at the time we didn't think it was a big deal. When we found out it was really just mind blowing, a uniquely terrible experience," Mr. Sparkler, a Manhattan lawyer with the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers, said in an interview.

Mr. Nee's death at 29 prompted Mr. Sparkler and some mutual law school friends to start The Dave Nee Foundation, a nonprofit organization that aims to support efforts at curbing suicide among adolescents and young adults.

According to Mr. Sparkler, law students and lawyers, who tend to be competitive and unaccustomed to seeking assistance, often ably mask symptoms of depression.

"If someone is the stereotypical lawyer, they are motivated and intelligent and proud and these are traits that...don't always allow a person to acknowledge that they need help," he said.

The current economic environment applies even more pressure to law students looking to get jobs, Mr. Sparkler said, especially given the method of grading most prevalent in law school today.

"The exams determine [class] standing—there is a forced curve and the pressure to get a job in this environment is ratcheted up even more," he said.

Law School Stress

This fall, board members of the foundation, including Mr. Sparkler, will meet with Fordham Law students in small groups to discuss ways to deal with stress, anxiety and uncertainty, all factors that could lead to depression.

The project, called "Uncommon Counsel," will also distribute brochures with statistics and treatment information to faculty and students as well as update the school's Web site with similar details.

The goal is to make students "realize that the law school has the resources available and just to take care of your friends and know where you can get anonymous counseling," said Mr. Sparkler. "You don't have to feel like you are the only person going through this in law school."

William M. Treanor, the dean of Fordham Law, said that depression is a "very important issue" that often gets swept to the side.

"It's a real concern and a problem in the legal profession," he said. "Studies indicate that it is common among law students and common among lawyers. Given that, it's important to try and figure out ways to combat it and to let people know if they are suffering, they are not alone."

Getting the message out about depression is one of the main goals of Daniel Lukasik, managing partner of Buffalo personal injury firm Cantor Lukasik Dolce Panepinto, who has suffered from depression since turning 40 seven years ago.

Mr. Lukasik runs a Web site about lawyer depression, www.lawyerswithdepression.com, and is working on a documentary on lawyers and depression that he hopes to distribute to the 15 law schools in the state. The film, funded by state and Erie County bar association money, will feature Mr. Lukasik and other lawyers talking about their experiences with depression.

"I don't want people to go through what I went through," Mr. Lukasik, who will speak to Syracuse University College of Law students at a seminar this fall about depression, said. "When I speak to these young people and say, 'This could be one of your brethren,' I [hope] it carries a lot of weight."

Mr. Lukasik pointed out that traits generally associated with susceptibility to depression—neurotic and individualistic tendencies—are typically considered positive attributes in the legal field.

"Being pessimistic is generally rewarded in the law," he said. But if that pessimism carries over to a

A List of Resources

New York State Bar Lawyers Assistance Program: Call 800-255-0569 or visit www.nysba.org.

New York City Bar Lawyers Assistance Program: Call 212-302-5787 or visit www.nycbar.org.

Dave Nee Foundation: www.daveneefoundation.org.

Daniel Lukasik's site: www.lawyerswithdepression.com.

lawyer's personal life, he said, it may become a catalyst to depression, when coupled with other stress-inducing events, like financial problems.

"Financial stressors are triggers, so with the insecurity of not having a job...these [become] very loaded issues," he said.

@[|Vesselin.Mitev@incisivemedia.com](mailto:Vesselin.Mitev@incisivemedia.com)

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