

As Seen In the June 14, 2007 issue of the

# BUFFALO Law Journal

## Steps to wellness Lawyer launches Web site, support group for lawyers with depression



Lawyer Daniel Lukasik, left, and Web developer Brandon Michals meeting in April to discuss the site they created for lawyers with depression.

BY ANNIE DECK-MILLER  
Buffalo Law Journal

Share your experience, strengths and hope, Alcoholics Anonymous and similar self-help programs tell their members. Carry the message to others in need. Be a loving presence.

Like many others in treatment for mental illness, Daniel Lukasik has borrowed those mantras from the 12-step model as he's battled the clinical depression that he has "lived with ... for some time."

Now, as he launches a two-pronged effort to help other lawyers with depression, Lukasik, managing partner of Cantor Lukasik Dolce Panepinto, is taking seriously his responsibility to act out those AA-inspired directives.

Lukasik has started the Web site [www.lawyerswithdepression.com](http://www.lawyerswithdepression.com), and he also coordinated a support group for lawyers with depression that met for the first time June 1. Both resources are believed to be the first of their kind in New York state, and perhaps farther afield.

"I'm trying to use each of these things as a springboard to raise awareness," Lukasik says.

### Getting the word out

Lukasik first went public about his mental illness with the publication of "Depression: One Attorney's Story," an essay published in the newsletter of the New York State Lawyer Assistance Trust last year.

He'd previously taken a one-on-one approach, opening up to colleagues over lunch about his experiences and sharing articles to encourage them to explore the subject further.

That tactic wasn't always successful. At first, Lukasik's partners at his law firm couldn't believe what he was telling them; one suggested that perhaps a vacation was in order.

Another lawyer, an adversary from another firm, "was very uncomfortable

with what I was telling him about my depression," Lukasik recalls. "He was surprised that I suffered from it, and said he didn't really know anyone who suffered from depression."

But the next such lunch, with a lawyer from a large Buffalo firm, was highly encouraging. "He said, 'Dan, I suffer from clinical depression, and I must know like a half a dozen other attorneys who suffer from clinical depression.' We ended up talking for two hours," says Lukasik.

His partners in the firm put their support fully behind Lukasik once they grasped the nature and seriousness of his illness.

"By courageously dealing with his depression," Frank Dolce wrote in a companion piece to Lukasik's essay, "my partner has actually enhanced his professional practice and magnified his positive contribution to our law firm."

### 'I've been there'

Lukasik says he combed online and print materials, but couldn't find a comprehensive resource on lawyers and depression.

"What you're usually referred to are lawyers' assistance programs run through the New York State Bar Association or the local county bar associations," he says — and those programs tend to focus on alcoholism, drug abuse, gambling and marital problems.

"When you go to those Web sites, after clicking a bunch of times, you eventually get to depression," Lukasik says, "and it's usually not too much information."

The Lawyers With Depression Web site, which went live June 4, includes articles by Lukasik and others, an extensive digest of research material, links to other resources and tips on managing depression.

Created with Brandon Michals, a former lawyer who now does Web design as owner of Infindex in Amherst, the site will be updated at least monthly.

"It's meant to encourage people to take

care of themselves — first medically," Lukasik says. "You can be a productive, vital attorney who does meaningful, good work and have clinical depression, but there are steps you're going to have to take to treat your depression."

The support group also fills a previously unmet need. "A support group allows other people to say, 'I understand, I've been there,'" Lukasik says. "There's a tribal feeling to it, that we've shared these experiences and have that in common."

Paul Curtin, a Syracuse-area treatment provider who's assisting with the Lawyers With Depression Support Group, said he was pleased to see the "lawyers helping lawyers" model carry over from substance-abuse programs into the mental-health arena.

"To me, the major accomplishment of June 1st was that we had a group of eight people" — Lukasik reports that it was 12 — "who were willing to come together, share their experience, strengths and hope, and at the same time be of service to other people with depression," said Curtin, who is also Buffalo/Rochester outreach coordi-



Daniel Lukasik said he felt compelled to create a Web site and support group for lawyers with depression because he was shocked that such resources didn't already exist.

ator for the New York State Bar Association's Lawyer Assistance Program.

The support group will meet monthly. The next meeting has been scheduled for 12:30 p.m. July 13 at Bar Association of Erie County headquarters, 438 Main St., sixth floor. Call Lukasik at 852-1888 for more information.

After just one meeting, Curtin believes the Lawyers With Depression model is worthy of replicating elsewhere.

"There's an incredible buzz about the success of it," he says. "Hopefully in the fall we'll be able to start this up in other places."

## Why lawyers? The depression connection

Why target depression treatment and support resources specifically toward lawyers?

Because numerous studies have indicated that lawyers — as well as law students and judges — are much more likely than the rest of us to suffer from clinical depression.

An oft-cited Johns Hopkins University study of workers in 104 occupations found that lawyers were 3.6 times more likely than the general population to experience depression. And a Utah State Bar report determined that suicide is one of the leading causes of premature death among lawyers.

What are the contributing factors? Constant stress, for one.

"Paperwork, job stress, multi-tasking. Whatever kind of law you practice, you're faced with these issues," says Daniel Lukasik, managing partner of Cantor Lukasik Dolce Panepinto and creator of a Web site for lawyers with depression.

He estimates that as many as 15,000 lawyers in New York — a third of the state's legal practitioners — "have some problem with depression."

Lawyer personality traits are also telling. Lukasik points to the work of Florida scholar Susan Swaim Daicoft, whose 2006 book "Lawyer, Know Thyself: A Psychological Analysis of Personality, Strengths and Weaknesses" concerns the prevalence of pessimism and perfectionism among lawyers and law students.

"Those two traits are disastrous for somebody who suffers from clinical depression," Lukasik says. "Both can feed depression."

And lawyers are also particularly likely to be concerned about image and reputation — especially in the eyes of clients and judges.

"Most men — but all lawyers — are good at covering up their clinical depression, because they don't want to feel ashamed and they don't want to feel weak or vulnerable," says Lukasik, a veteran litigator who has been treating his own depression for several years. "But the reality is that those coping habits can make the illness worse, because it can isolate you, and it may prevent people from seeking treatment"

— By Annie Deck-Miller