

Tough times and suicide:

How to help lawyers in distress

In the first three months of 2009, three lawyers (that we know of) considered suicide. That comes hard on the heels of six serious suicide situations and two suicides (again, that we know of) in the last quarter of 2008. We know of only one serious suicide situation in the first nine months of 2008.

Legal assistance programs in Canada and the U.S. are reporting similar trends. The number of serious calls for help, and the number of attempted and successful suicides has shot up sharply.

Why is all this happening? Certainly the deteriorating economy contributes to unemployment, severe depression, desperation and erosion of hope. Many are struggling to make ends meet. As well, lawyers work long hours, experience high levels of stress and pressure, lack of appreciation from clients, and a stigma

attached to our work by the public. Add in financial concerns, lawsuits, client claims, negligence allegations, job dissatisfaction and trauma, you have the recipe for a potentially tragic event.

What to look for

What are the common warning signs that we can look for in others or in ourselves for that matter?

Among the red flags that we should notice are:

- neglecting personal appearance;
- chronic or unexplained illnesses;
- nagging aches or pains;
- sudden weight loss or gain;
- inability to enjoy friendships;
- anxiousness, exaggerated fears, or sadness;
- tension, agitation or lethargy;
- daydreaming, loss of ability to concentrate or loss of rational thought;
- changes in personality – for example an outgoing person becomes withdrawn;
- feelings of worthlessness;
- unexplained misuse and abuse of alcohol or drugs;
- sexual promiscuity;
- changes in sleeping and/or eating patterns.

Indicators that call for immediate action include:

- moving beyond being depressed into the realm of suicide-risky behaviours such as threats of suicide especially when there have been previous attempts;
- feelings of extreme isolation, hopelessness, helplessness or futility;
- loss of rational thought;
- increased risk-taking such as careless driving or dangerous use of firearms;
- giving away prized possessions;
- suddenly making a will, or writing stories about death or suicide, or writing goodbye letters or “taking care of business.”

Resources to access:

DIRECT SERVICES:

- www.olap.ca – Ontario Lawyers Assistance Program – 1-877-576-6227
- www.ontario.cmha.ca – Canadian Mental Health Association – 1-866-531-2600
- www.dcontario.org – Distress Centres Ontario – 416-486-2242
- www.ospn.ca – Ontario Suicide Prevention Network – 905-897-9183
- www.suicidehotlines.com – 1-800-SUICIDE

INFORMATION SITES:

- www.suicideinfo.ca – Centre for Suicide Prevention
- www.casp-acps.ca – Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention
- www.lawyerswithdepression.com – Lawyers created depression resource
- www.livingworks.net – Suicide – safer communities – saving lives for tomorrow
- www.psychcentral.com – independent mental health network

Dispelling myths

What are the myths surrounding suicide?

1. **Talking about suicide may give someone the idea.** Talking about suicide does not increase the risk. The best way to identify the intention to commit suicide is to ask directly. Open talk and genuine concern is a source of release for the person considering suicide and a key element in preventing the immediate risk of suicide.
2. **A person who attempts suicide is only looking for attention.** For some, these behaviours are serious invitations

to others to help them live. For others, it is a final exit.

3. **Those who attempted suicide in the past won't try again.** Four of five people who have died by suicide have made at least one previous attempt.
4. **A suicidal person wants to die.** A person may not want to die but rather to avoid life in its present form. Escape from pain may be the intention.
5. **Suicide is generally carried out without warning.** In about one-third of suicides there are warning signs (see list on previous page).

Stepping in to prevent suicide

What do you do if you think someone is suicidal? Difficult as this situation may be, there are some strategies to help:

- Talk to the person, tell them you are worried about them and ask them directly if they are thinking of committing suicide or taking their own life.
- Listen without judgment even if you are shocked by what you hear – be non-judgmental.
- Talk about upcoming events such as a planned holiday, dinner next Sunday, how their sports team is doing; try to re-establish looking to the future and a connection to the present.
- Give the person a hug or hold hands to establish a physical presence – bring him or her back into the tactile, real world.
- Get him or her something to eat and drink – establish contact with here and now and with their bodies.
- Ask the person to look at you and keep eye contact so that he or she cannot avoid direct questions.
- Keep talking – get their feelings out into the light of day where they can be examined.
- Do not leave him or her alone! Stay and talk for as long as the person wants to talk.
- If you can, take the person to the hospital emergency room to get professional help.

Facts on suicide

According to Statistics Canada, suicides increased 10 per cent between 1997 and 1999, to 4,074 from 3,681. In Ontario alone, suicides rose to 1,032 in 2001 from 930 in 1997. Suicide is the leading cause of death among men aged 25 to 29 and 40 to 44, and among women aged 30 to 34. It is the second leading cause of death among youth aged 15 to 24.

Women attempt suicide at two times the rate of men, but men complete suicide at a rate four times higher than that of women, usually by violent means.

How does this relate to lawyers? First, consider that more than 90 per cent of suicide victims have a diagnosable psychiatric illness. According to a 1990 Johns Hopkins University study of depression in 105 professions, lawyers ranked number one in the incidence of depression, a major factor in suicide, and were 3.6 times more likely to have this illness. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 15 per cent of people with clinical depression commit suicide. An upcoming American Bar Association program description on suicide states that "Attorneys have the highest rates of depression and suicide of any profession." Anecdotally, it has been said that lawyers commit suicide at three times the rate of the general population.

Note that not all suicides are reported as such but are often listed as death by accident, physical or natural causes to save the families and the deceased from the stigma that comes with a suicide.

Are you considering suicide?

If you are reading this and are suicidal, call for help. Right now! Please.

Call a family member or friend you trust.

Call your local crisis line – you can get the number for where you live at www.dcontario.org. Crisis lines are listed at the front of the phone book (my book has it on page 2 on the left side, about three-quarters of the way down).

Go to the hospital with a friend or family member and tell them you are suicidal – they will immediately help you.

Call the Ontario Lawyers Assistance Program at 1-877-576-6227. Someone is always available to help. After hours, a counsellor is available if the matter is urgent. Be sure to indicate that you are feeling at risk when you call. If you can be specific about your feelings and thoughts of suicide, say the words out loud so they become real to you, and your situation

can be addressed quickly. Do not be alone. Act to save yourself.

Suicide is a death that leaves more questions than it answers. Survivors wonder why, and what they could have done to save a loved one or friend. Survivors suffer terribly. In my personal experience, I have seen persons struggle with their battle to live or die. I have seen others lose the battle. I see the early loss of life as tragic and avoidable with proper help. And I bear the scars of those losses.

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If you think someone is suicidal or if you are yourself, immediately call the Ontario Lawyers Assistance Program at 1-877-576-6227.