

Trends in lawyer wellness in Ontario in 2009

The Ontario Lawyers Assistance Program



Ontario Lawyers' Assistance Program

The Ontario Lawyers Assistance Program (OLAP) is a confidential, 24-hour peer support and counselling program that assists lawyers, law students and their immediate families with issues of stress, burnout, addictions and mental wellness concerns.

Last year, 1,400 callers accessed OLAP. The program was used by approximately 55 per cent women and 45 per cent men. At the end of 2009, there were 994 ongoing open cases, with 314 cases referred to and active in counselling. The areas of assistance are work, addiction, relationship, family and situational issues. This includes alcohol and drug addiction, work conflict and desire to change careers, the need for family or marriage counselling, eldercare and childcare issues, and health problems. Any issue is dealt with by referral to counselling and/or with peer support. About 60 per cent of callers come from the sole practitioner and small firm category. This is understandable, as that constituency does not have employee assistance services available, as they are too expensive to fund privately. OLAP is the employee assistance program for the profession even if a firm has a private plan. OLAP is available to all 34,000 lawyers in Ontario along with law students and their immediate families.

Most calls come from the Greater Toronto Area as, proportionately, most lawyers practise in the GTA. However, the rest of the province calls OLAP consistent with the population in those regions. It is important to note to the profession that the OLAP peer support and counselling network extends across the province. While OLAP may not have a peer support lawyer in a specific area (volunteers across the province are always welcome), the counselling service provides counsellors to deal with issues in the community of the caller. If the city or town is too small for a caller to feel comfortable seeing someone in that community, or if a caller may feel

more comfortable going to another accessible place to see a counsellor, OLAP will arrange that.

The program is confidential and this concept and promise is enshrined in the Commentary to Rule 6.01(3) of the *Rules of Professional Conduct*. This is the cornerstone of being able to offer assistance to the profession without the fear that a call may trigger a report to the Law Society or LAWPRO.

Peer support has been mentioned earlier. OLAP peers are lawyers who have faced personal challenges and offer their experience along with a non-judgmental ear to provide ongoing support on a face-to-face or telephone basis. Peer support volunteers give you the chance to talk to another lawyer who knows the lawyer culture, the stresses of law and the personal impact of trying to live a balanced life.

Similarly, OLAP has three case managers. All three are lawyers who understand lawyers because they have all practised law and know how the legal profession thinks and works. Our clinical staff consists of two social workers who have achieved the education level of masters of social work. The volunteer executive director is a retired lawyer who writes and speaks about his experiences and efforts to live a balanced life.

The Legal Profession Assistance Conference reports that lawyers have three times higher rates of alcohol and addiction and mental wellness issues than the general population. It is believed that lawyers have a suicide rate of two to three times higher than the population rate. Among law students, studies have shown that, on entry to law school, the general population rate for depression is the same for law students at about 10 per cent. After year one, it climbs to 20 per cent and after year two, it soars to 40 per cent! This is why OLAP is so vital to our law schools.

Crisis intervention, problem-solving and early loss prevention

OLAP is being proactive in providing assistance to the profession. Our hands-on support includes the following face-to-face meetings:

Women's Work and Wellness Group luncheon meetings

– Quarterly luncheons conducted in conjunction with the Women's Law Association of Ontario focus on issues relevant to women. Some past topics are "Shining the Light on Mental Illness," "Financial Fitness" and "Building Your Best Law Career." For more details, to get on the mailing list and to register, please contact **Jill Keaney at 1-877-576-6227**.

The Lawyers' Group – On the first and third Wednesday of every month from 5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., lawyers who want and need contact with and support of other lawyers meet at the Ontario Bar Association offices at 20 Toronto Street, Toronto.

12-Step Group: Lawyers Helping Lawyers

– This in no way replaces AA meetings, but does offer an additional "safe place" and the fellowship of other lawyers in recovery for alcohol and drugs. Meetings take place on Monday evenings at 7:30 p.m. at Bellwoods Health Services, 1020 McNicoll Avenue, Toronto.

Short-term counselling services are provided **free of charge** by a nationally-certified employee assistance company. The theory is that brief counselling of four to six sessions can help an individual identify and work on a problem. (OLAP provides long-term counselling after allotted sessions have been accessed where possible.) OLAP is a 24-hour accessible program in that after-hours calls go to the counselling centre for intake by qualified counsellors when OLAP case managers cannot directly take a call.

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Counselling services are available for the following issues:

Stress, emotional problems (including anger, anxiety and depression), workplace issues (including conflict and job loss), career counselling, physical and sexual abuse, addictions (drugs, alcohol, gambling, smoking), family problems (including parenting, child and adolescent), marital problems, relationship issues, bereavement and loss, harassment, aging parent concerns, single parenting, trauma, grief and crisis, medical/health issues, sleep disorders, fatigue, chronic pain.

The Health and Wellness Program looks at nutrition support services for weight loss/gain, eating routines and lifestyle changes along with smoking cessation and an online stress management tool measuring job disengagement, personal and social difficulties, work-life conflict, job overload, physical and intellectual stress.

In **Nutrition Matters**, a professional registered dietician will assess your eating

habits, identify dietary concerns and deal with issues such as lowering cholesterol levels, reducing blood pressure, regulating diabetes, preventing heart disease and preventing osteoporosis.

HomeCare Access links you to a network of qualified, on-call healthcare and home care professionals who will deal with post-operative, postpartum or palliative care options, care for loved ones affected by stroke, Alzheimer's disease, and rehabilitation services.

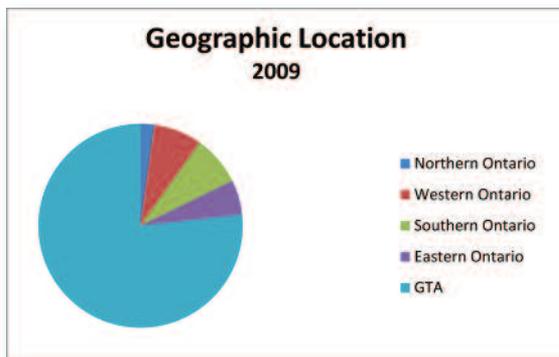
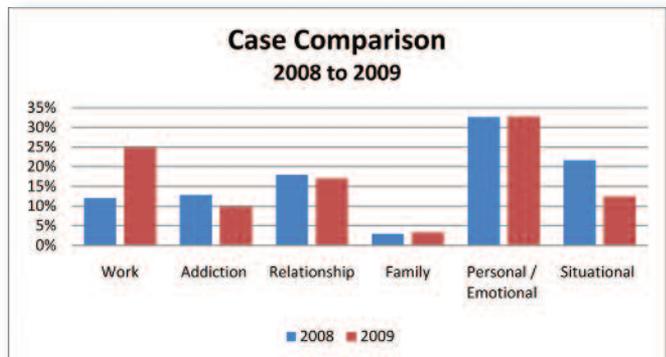
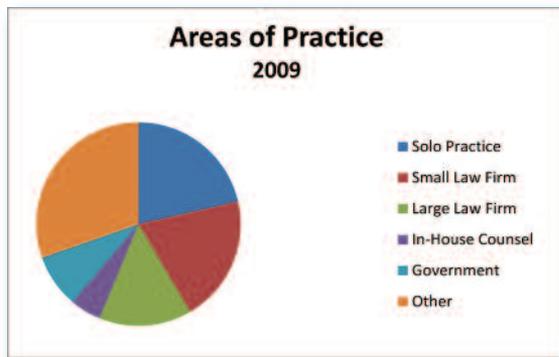
Family Support Services deals with finding a daycare, how to deal with caregiving emergencies and looking after older relatives. **Family Matters' Dependant Care Consultants** are specialists in assessing, identifying and locating caregiving services that include parenting classes, daycare centres and after-school programs, adoption, rehabilitation and home support programs and palliative care.

Legal Support Services gives you a referral to qualified lawyers for legal advice

on a variety of issues such as family law, criminal law and bankruptcy.

Financial Support Services helps you address personal and family-related concerns that are associated with financial issues. These counsellors can put you in touch with skilled financial advisors to help you take action and address specific financial issues such as credit/debt management, bankruptcy and early retirement.

The OLAP board is made up of representatives of the legal community in Ontario – lawyers in recovery, the Law Society of Upper Canada, LAWPRO, the Ontario Bar Association, the Women's Law Association of Ontario, the County and District Presidents' Association, the Criminal Lawyers' Association, the Advocates' Society and the Judicial Counselling Program. Only statistical information is shared, and the identity of all callers is private.



OLAP contacts

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