

Debunking the ‘lone sufferer’ myth once and for all

Conventional wisdom in our society about lawyers is that they’re high achieving, productive, successful, disciplined, pulled-together people. They’re ‘pick themselves up by their bootstraps’ types. For prospective clients, it’s reassuring to think that the person you rely on to negotiate your deal or fight for your rights in court is solid and true, unfettered by the petty personal problems that plague the average Joe or Jane. Also true is that members of the profession themselves readily buy into this stereotype.

Undoubtedly, legal professionals are achievers. You cannot get into law school, let alone graduate, complete articles, get called and practise, without significant fortitude and ability. Running that gauntlet is no small feat, especially when you take into account that life is not only about professional endeavours but also involves personal pursuits such as marriage, raising children, caring for aging parents, keeping healthy and leisure.

And so, there’s no question that we’re an impressive bunch. It’s no accident then that non-lawyers are almost always impressed when they discover a specific person is a lawyer – even if they view the profession generally in a negative light. More than one member of the bar has heard an individual waxing indignant over the transgressions of the legal profession – lawyer jokes included – only to then, once advised as to the listener’s vocation, utterly gush over that person’s admirable professional status. It can all be very confusing.

Still more confusing is the assumption that legal professionals are immune from personal distress. Take, for example, the family lawyer engaged in a pitched battle with opposing counsel over every issue that arises in a matter. While many counsel keep it civil and are even professionally friendly with the other side, many more attempt to maintain a veneer of emotional detachment and super-control. They’re on top of every detail and fear nothing. To quote Sun Tzu: “Invincibility is in oneself, vulnerability is in the opponent.” When in battle, to some it makes only good sense to put up a strong, invulnerable front. It intimidates. It demoralizes. And it deprives the adversary of ammunition.

The reality behind the façade

Without question, many lawyers live healthy, productive lives. When they come across as ‘together’, it’s because, by and large, they are.

But what of the other significant segment of these professionals? What of the litigator who boisterously plows through adversary after adversary in court, but can’t find a way to stop herself from finishing a bottle or two of wine on her own once she reaches home at night, with all of the attendant destructive consequences this poses to her health, family and career? What of the articling student who can’t seem to find a job no matter how many interviews he gets, with the spectre of the Call quickly approaching? He can’t help but fear that

all of his work was for naught because the big bad legal profession won’t let him in, and he’s got loans to pay off and a family to support, not to mention a career to build. What about the associate who needs to keep it together and meet her billing targets while suffering from debilitating depression and anxiety that make it hard to even get out of bed in the morning?

These vignettes are not anomalies in an otherwise idyllic system. Each day, the Ontario Lawyers’ Assistance Program (OLAP) fields calls from lawyers, judges and members of their families across Ontario struggling with various forms of stress and distress.

We’re not understating the situation when we say that issues such as depression, addiction and anxiety disorders, among many others, are more the rule than the exception throughout the Ontario bar. As hard as it is for many to believe, we have among us heroin addicts, those with bipolar disorder, gambling addicts and those paralyzed by fear and anxiety. They suffer terribly. More disturbingly, they usually suffer alone.

The inspiration for the topic of this article is the shockingly consistent strain that runs through the experience of most of the lawyers suffering these divergent challenges: They think they’re the only ones out there like them. Like clockwork, OLAP staff wait for the question and more often than not, it comes: “Is there anyone else out there going through this?”

OLAP can field 20 calls from those who suffer depression and 15 of them may separately proffer this query, oblivious to the malady they share with so many others like them. And so, they suffer alone, convinced that they're weak, wrong, bad and with irretrievably flawed characters. After all, as was noted earlier, lawyers are bootstrap picker-uppers. They run gauntlets and survive. They defeat powerful enemies. "Then why can't I stop crying?" "Why am I letting my life disintegrate over this damn pill that I can't keep from taking?" "Why am I terrified to open that file?" "I'm a complete failure."

Why does this happen?

Many reading this will wonder if it's even true. It comes across as so unusual. "Just talk to someone!" or "Just get help!" is the default attitude.

The problem with that is two-fold. First, people have trouble self-diagnosing. It would not be unusual to hear a person declare that he is tired all the time, has lost interest in things he used to love doing, has trouble sleeping and often feels hopeless. Then he'll confidently declare: "But I'm not depressed."

The same holds true for addictions and even abusive situations. Have you ever come across a person in a physically and emotionally violent relationship who refuses to let you call it 'abuse'? The label is scary and unnerving. To many, it connotes failure. If you don't label it, maybe that's just the way life is.

The second problem is that once a person realizes she is at the end of her rope and

just can't do it on her own, she may be too ashamed to reach out for the much-needed assistance. A lawyer who is used to figuring things out on his own and being a self-starter in his practice, vehemently resists the concept of reaching out. He muses: "I got myself into this, I can get myself out of it."

The problem is that in the throes of depression or addiction, one's reserves of resiliency are depleted. Besides, depression, addiction and other such diseases – and they are diseases – powerfully distort the perception of the sufferer. Minor challenges become pressures that are so overwhelming that for some, suicide seems the only escape. That's a distorted reality. That's what the disease does to a person.

Further, often you'll find a lawyer suffering from a condition that renders him or her terribly sad; and instead of getting treated or even simply being kind to him or herself, he or she will add a layer of self-abuse to an already painful circumstance. These people may heap frustration and abuse on themselves for what they perceive as failure or weakness. At the very time that they desperately need care, acceptance and the total absence of judgment, they judge themselves more harshly than anyone else would. It's a self-sustaining system and in all of it, they convince themselves that they're the only one of their peers going through this.

Let the myth die here

From the perspective of a helping professional able to see the larger picture, the irony of 20 people suffering the same

affliction all believing they're the only one might be amusing, were it not so utterly sad and debilitating. That belief keeps those individuals from reaching out for help when that help is readily available and undeniably effective. They're ashamed. They need to know that they're not the only one. They haven't identified their dearth of character, they've illuminated their humanity. All of us, from time to time, face challenges that seem insurmountable. That's not failure, it's life.

So let's put this 'Lone Sufferer' myth to bed once and for all. We in the profession share not only our professional pursuits and accomplishments, we share also a humanity that allows us to sometimes be vulnerable to disease or hardship without it connoting a personal failing. We share not only keen intellect but also the emotional resiliency to face down personal distress – with the help of others – and to reclaim the lives we've worked so diligently to build. No one need suffer on their own, so long as they know they're not alone.

Doron J. Gold is a case manager at the Ontario Lawyers' Assistance Program. In addition, having previously practised law, he is now a Certified Personal Coach with a private coaching practice working primarily with lawyers. He can be reached at the OLAP offices at (toll free) 1-877-576-6227 or in the GTA at 905-238-1740.