



Unfortunately, many lawyers still struggle, despite their best efforts. The Ontario Lawyers Assistant Program (OLAP) is there for lawyers who need help.

Who are we?

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. During business hours, OLAP case managers take calls directly, while after hour calls go to a counselling centre for intake by qualified counsellors. OLAP is available to all 44,000 lawyers, law students and their immediate families throughout Ontario.

The program is confidential as 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 fear that a call may trigger

a report to the Law Society or LAWPRO. Only statistical information is shared with the OLAP Board and the identity of all callers is completely private.

OLAP has a small staff, but it strives to employ knowledgeable people who are equipped to deal with the many issues lawyers may face. OLAP has two case managers on staff. They are both lawyers who have practised law and know how the profession operates. Our clinical team consists of two social workers with masters degrees in social work. Finally, the volunteer director, peer support and liaison is a retired lawyer who writes and speaks about his experiences and efforts to live a balanced life. OLAP relies on volunteers to be peer-to-peer counsellors to deliver its primary service: support.

Who do we help?

Fourteen hundred callers accessed OLAP in 2010. The program was used by approximately 55 per cent women and 45 per cent men. Generally speaking women tend to seek help before a crisis. Men often try to deal with problems without help, which can be some of the most challenging and pressing issues we deal with. Approximately 60 per cent of callers are sole practitioners or from small firms, who often don't have access to privately funded employee assistance services.

We deal most often with issues around work, addiction, relationship, family and situational problems. We see, and are equipped to help with, everything from alcohol and drug addictions, work conflicts, desire to change careers, family or marriage counselling, elder- and child-care issues, and personal health problems.

Most calls come from the Greater Toronto Area where the majority of lawyers practise. When OLAP is unable to connect a caller with a peer-support lawyer (and volunteers are always welcome,) we connect lawyers with free counselling service within their community. OLAP also can arrange out-of-town counselling, if lawyers feel uncomfortable seeing someone within that community.

How can we help?

OLAP peers are volunteer lawyers who have faced personal challenges and offer their experience along with a non-judgmental ear to provide ongoing support face-to-face or over the telephone. They 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.

Short-term counselling services are provided free of charge by a nationally-certified employee assistance company. These four-to-six week sessions help lawyers identify the issues, deal with them, or refer lawyers to longer-term counselling (which OLAP provides.)

Disturbing trends in suicide rates

The increase in suicide rates among lawyers is a disturbing trend. It is notable that in 2008, OLAP had seven serious suicide situations and two actual suicides. Six of the seven took place between October and December. Serious means not just suicidal thoughts, but situations that require intense support and perhaps medical intervention or hospitalization. In 2009 and 2010, we know we had 10 serious suicidal situations with four completed suicides. At press time, 2011 has seen eight serious suicide situations with three acts of suicide. The figure for going through with suicide is low; however, not all suicides are reported as such because sometimes doctors or families disguise death

as heart failure or some other cause to avoid embarrassment and stigma. While there is nothing wrong with that, it does mean the actual suicide rate is higher than the numbers suggest. We simply don't have the statistics available. This is an issue of concern requiring greater attention and awareness.

If you are feeling suicidal, whether with suicidal thoughts, planning or attempts, please immediately go to the emergency room of your nearest hospital, call your family doctor, call OLAP or call your local Distress Center line now. ■

John Starzynski is volunteer executive director with OLAP.

Crisis intervention, problem-solving and early loss prevention

OLAP is proactive in providing assistance to the profession. OLAP runs 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 include: "shining the light on mental illness," "financial fitness" and "building your best law career."

For more details, to get on the mailing list or to register for an event, 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 support of other lawyers meet at the Ontario Bar Association offices at 20 Toronto Street, Toronto.

The portia group – On the second and fourth Wednesdays from 5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. at the OBA Meeting Centre, there is a 12-Step Group for Women Lawyers for women at any stage of recovery.

You can contact OLAP by calling 1-877-576-6227 (In Toronto – 905-238-1740). The OLAP website at www.olap.ca has plenty of information and resources.

Taking stock



Take stock of your personal well being – no one but you can do it

Your taxes are in. A new government is in power. New benchers are sitting at the Law Society.

Now's as good a time as any to take stock of your personal and professional wellness. New mandatory professional education guidelines require three hours of professional and ethical courses, with free seminars offered by the Law Society. Continuing education is an important way to maximize your practice and develop professionally.

But of equal importance is your wellness and balance between work and personal life – and only you can account for that. Do you have a healthy balanced worklife? Need some help?

Pull out our healthy-living checklist and make sure to check something off each day:

1. Physically

- Take three deep breaths and then exhale when under stress and before speaking.
- Eat three balanced meals a day.
- Get eight hours of sleep a night.
- Exercise at least three times per week for at least one-half hour at a time.
- Cut out or cut back on smoking, caffeine and the consumption of alcohol.
- Drink lots of water.
- Laugh as often as possible.

2. Emotionally

- Have a good, trusted friend to talk to, confide in and laugh with.
- Get a pet – they are great non-judgmental listeners, get you out for walks and always are happy to see you when you get home.

- Read non-law literature out of office hours.
- Spend time with your family.
- Learn to say “No!” to demands that are too much and know what too much is.
- Get a hobby and do things you are passionate about.
- Do something nice for someone daily without them knowing about it and with no expectation of acknowledgement or reward.

3. Spiritually

- Laugh lots.
- Pray, if you are so inclined, to whomever or whatever is your higher power.
- Read daily affirmations or meditate.
- Kiss your spouse or partner often.
- Hug those close to you.
- Say “I love you” daily to those you cherish. ■