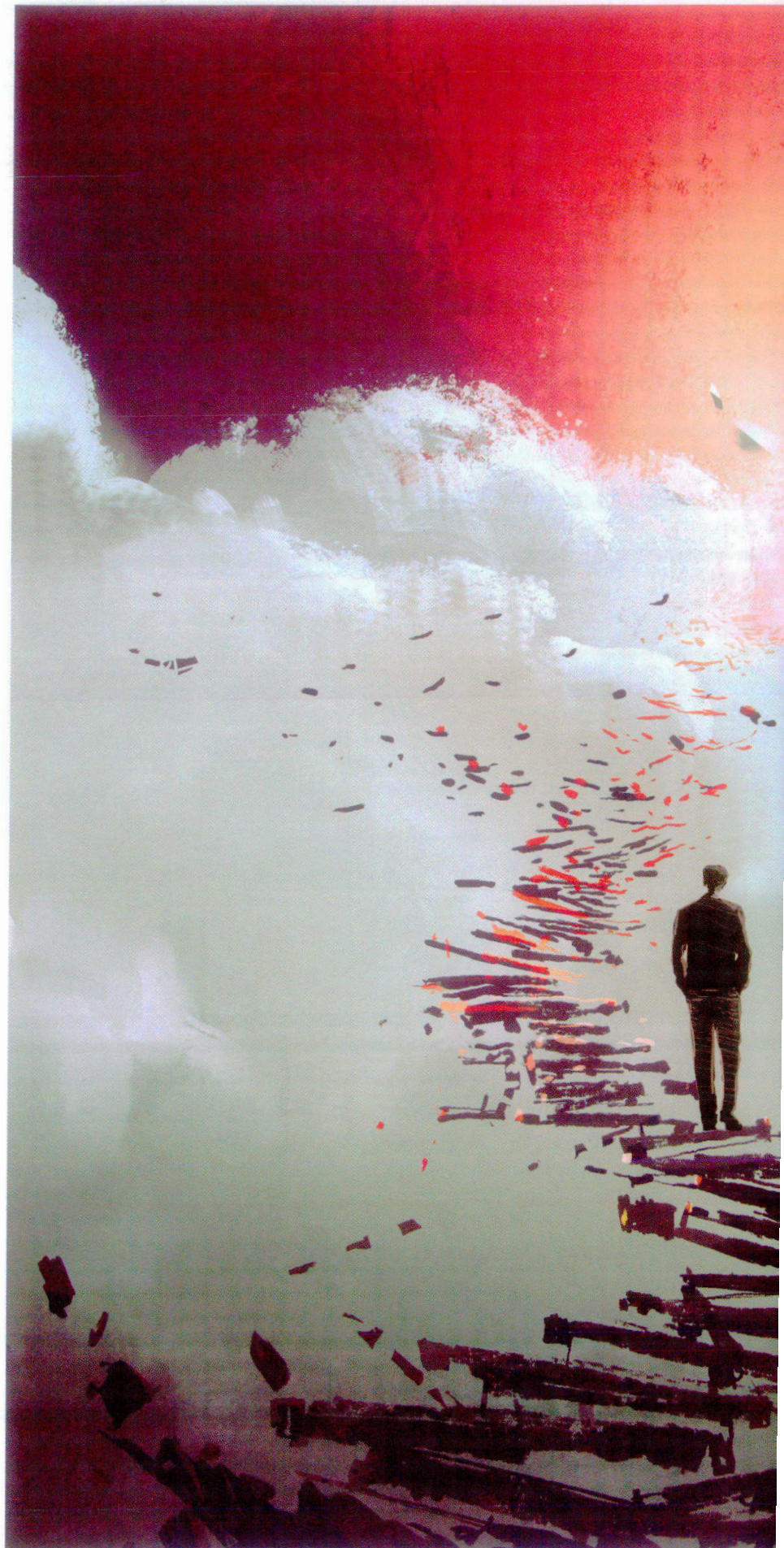


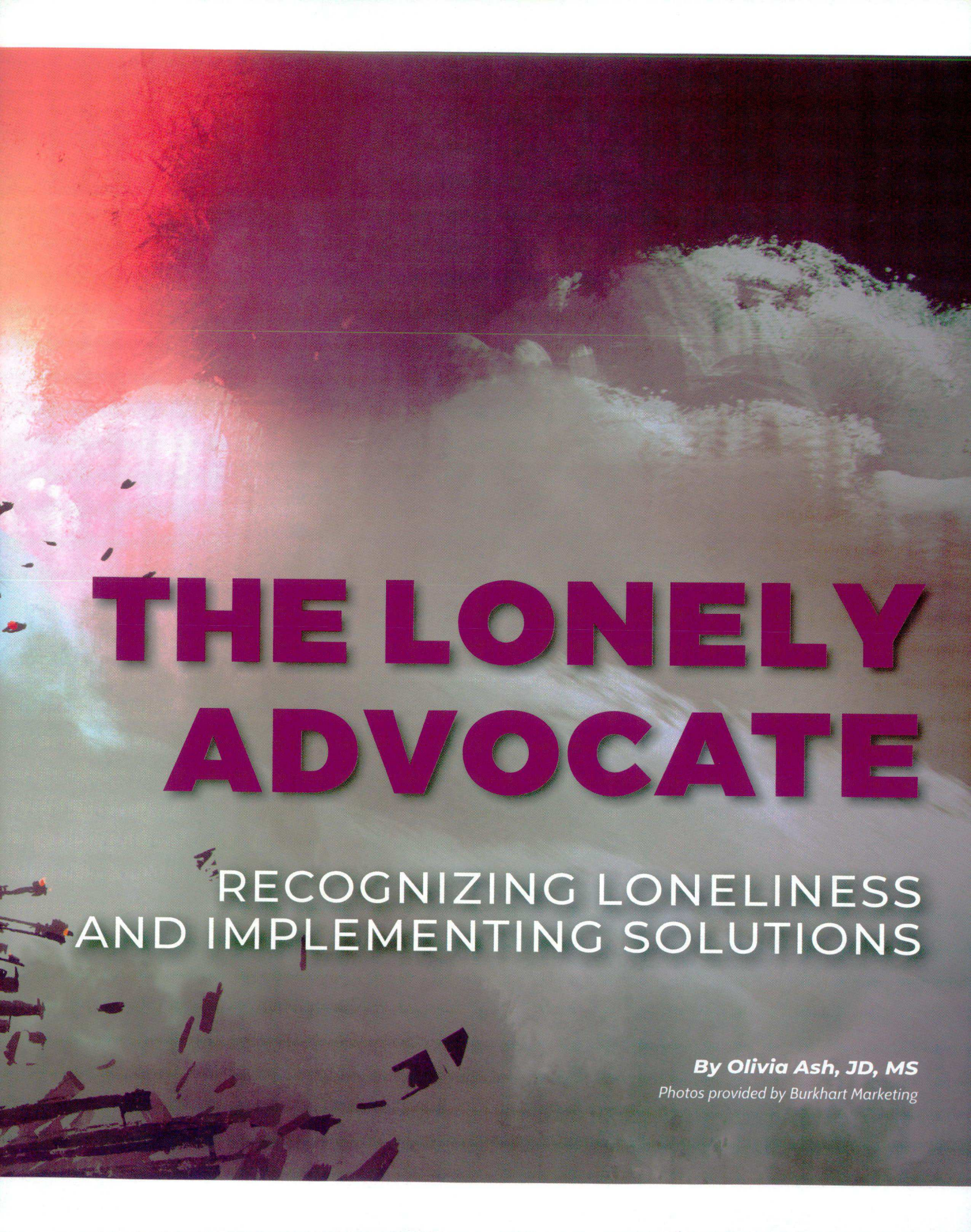
Loneliness has been described as “one of the most toxic environmental conditions we can possibly encounter.”² “Feeling lonely” is no laughing matter. A 2018 survey of 20,000 Americans revealed 46 percent sometimes or always “feel alone” with an average loneliness score of “high.”³ Lawyers lead the weary. In 2018, *Harvard Business Review* reported lawyers as the loneliest of America’s workers, with doctors in second place.⁴ Even sovereigns are heading off the growing epidemic. The United Kingdom recently appointed a “Minister of Loneliness” to address the alarmingly prevalent rate of U.K. subjects reporting they “often or always feel lonely.”⁵

Research on this mental health concern is challenging. Not only is loneliness a subjective emotion, and therefore difficult to assess, people must overcome attached stigmas to secure relief. Loneliness is perceived isolation,⁶ an aversive, distressing emotion. It feels like a “deficiency” in a relationship in terms of type, quality, or quantity related to a perceived need.⁷ Loneliness signals “danger” that a need is unmet; specifically, that humans (as a social species), need consistent, healthy, interpersonal interactions to remain mentally and physically well.

Loneliness is not social isolation; it is possible to be isolated without being lonely and to be lonely without being isolated.⁸ What causes loneliness? Physical isolation and lack of companionship feed the insatiable void; however, the lack of a useful role at work, in society, or at home brings distress.⁹ Loneliness is a person’s sense of lacking social or familiar contact, community involvement, or access to services to the extent they are wanted or needed.¹⁰ Simply put, loneliness is a perception discrepancy, i.e., “gap,” between what we want (or need) and what we perceive we have (or don’t).

A 75-year Harvard University study





THE LONELY ADVOCATE

RECOGNIZING LONELINESS
AND IMPLEMENTING SOLUTIONS

By Olivia Ash, JD, MS

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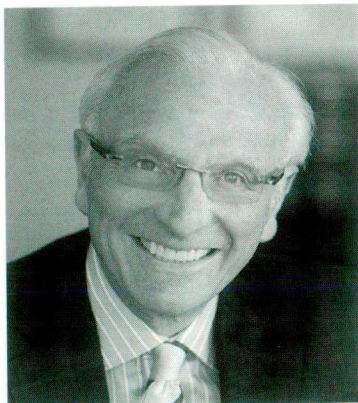
determined that the *quality of people's relationships* is the single clearest predictor of physical health, longevity, and quality of life.¹¹ Meaningful relationships are essential; when lacking, we begin to feel negative physical effects. High

"training to argue the finer points, to parse the syntax."

levels of loneliness are associated with an increased risk of becoming physically ill over time.¹² Loneliness is tethered to negative coping mechanisms, such as poor health, heavy drinking, lack of work or study, and low income.¹³ Research proposes that loneliness *causes* poor health, *not* that poor health causes loneliness.¹⁴ Loneliness is found to increase a person's risk of early death by 26 percent.¹⁵ It negatively affects mental well-being because it removes the positive effects of social support, *i.e.*, friendship, and the benefits it brings, *e.g.*, being around trusted others and having a "safety net."¹⁶

Practicing and studying law eats time with loved ones and put our minds and bodies squarely in the middle of stressors: hours of reading, writing, analyzing, strategizing, balancing, arguing, and so on. Add to the mix each lawyer's perception of how "well" they are managing "everything," and inevitably anxieties appear. The volume of knowledge to manage is staggering. The brain is under stress; the body is under stress. Without balance to mitigate stress, detriments appear. Loneliness is often siloed as a "mental health" issue; this is not the case. One cannot disassociate the brain from the body, nor the body from the brain: they are a system. To buffer loneliness, it's best to start in our heads.

Research exists evaluating law student well-being, but there is little focus on lawyer loneliness. This is changing. To mitigate loneliness, lawyers and firms must address personal wellness behaviors and office environments. Positive well-being will shift when there is a shift in thinking. "An increase in bad habits, dysfunctional behaviors, stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses characterizes many law students' metamorphosis from law student to lawyer."¹⁷ Within the profession exists "a self-imposed stigma and isolation" attached to "requesting or needing help" as a legal professional; this concept is discussed throughout research.¹⁸ Couple the stigma with traits common among lawyers, and the fog lifts, revealing factors driving loneliness: an independent, competitive nature, and years of "training to argue the finer points, to parse the syntax."¹⁹ Loneliness internally isolates; it needs no assistance from the work environment. Firms play a huge



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role in supporting staff well-being by creating a healthy environment. Legal professionals must be able to manage personal wellness without fear of ramification. Healthy lawyers are better lawyers.

STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE LONELINESS²⁰

Lawyers and legal professionals

- **Name the problem:** Accept feelings of loneliness; if possible, identify factors driving it. Consider speaking with a mental health professional who can offer targeted strategies to managing emotions.
- **Put yourself first:** Sleep, eat a balanced diet, and exercise – move every hour. Cultivate emotional self-regulation, reflection, and compassion.
- **Extend yourself:** Try new activities.
- **Connect with people:** Seek opportunities to increase diversity of personality and experience.
- **Vary your routine:** The mind and body need variety for optimal functioning.
- **Vary work tasks:** Take a break from the brief! Change your focus and change your perspective.
- **Seek involvement:** Make efforts to integrate socially and at the office.

Law firms

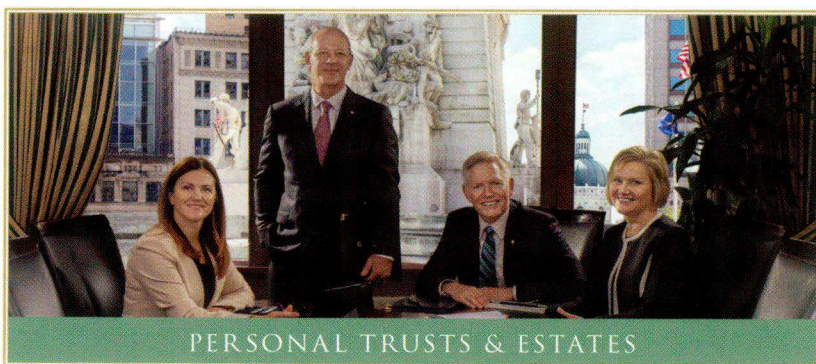
- **Build relationships:** Focus on team-building activities to encourage positive staff relationships.
- **Cultivate purpose and meaning:** Partners can lead by example; share the firm's vision, values, and goals.
- **Mentor young lawyers:** Seasoned lawyers should be a resource, not a hurdle, for young lawyers. Focus mentoring activities to aid professional development and relationship.
- **Provide constructive feedback:** Critical feedback often damages. Consider firm-wide training

on constructive, positive communication behaviors. 

1. Excerpts from “The Prevalence and Effects of Loneliness in the General Population, Lawyer Well-being, and a Survey of Law Students,” an award-winning doctoral thesis written by the author in fulfillment of her J.D. requirements from Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law, Indianapolis, Ind., May 2019. Olivia is the

recipient of the George O. Dix Award for the best thesis in the academic year.

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[com/2018/01/17/world/europe/uk-britain-loneliness.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/world/europe/uk-britain-loneliness.html). The U.K. appointed Tracey Crouch as the Minister of Loneliness following a 2017 report indicating more than nine million British people often or always feel lonely. www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/world/europe/uk-britain-loneliness.html.

6. Cacioppo, J. T., Fowler, J. H. & Christakis, N. A., “Alone in the Crowd: The Structure and Spread of Loneliness in a Large Social Network,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97(6), 977-99, 981 (2009).

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18. Brown, David J., “Depression Ethics,” *The Benchers*, 2 (September 2005). Research nearly 20 years later in 2010 revealed lawyers suffer from major depression at levels more than three times the rate of nonlawyers. Ethical demands of the model rules place attorneys in difficult situations, and self-reporting seems impossible. It is no fun to report friends and associates struggling with problems. *Id.* at 4; Cho, Jeena, “Lawyer Loneliness: Facing and Fighting ‘No. 1 Public Health Issue,’” *ABA Journal* (July 2018), www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/lawyer_loneliness_public_health; Robinson, Mary T., “The Professional Cost of Untreated Addiction and Mental Illness in Practicing Lawyers,” *The Alabama Lawyer*, 152, (March 2010) at 154.

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