What Every Attorney Needs to Know About Depression, Anxiety, and Suicide

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From the ABA/Hazelden Study

• 12,825 attorneys surveyed
• Depression rate is 3.6 higher among attorneys compared to other occupations (Krill, Johnson, & Albert, 2016)
• 1 in 5 lawyers reported substance abuse problems
• 11.5% of the surveyed attorneys reported suicidal thoughts at some point during their career, 2.9% described inflicting self-injury behaviors
• 0.7% (n=89) reported at least 1 prior suicide attempt.
The arc of adult development and of the law career

1. Develop mastery;
2. Connect skills with purposeful work;
3. Make a contribution;
4. Develop a role in conserving cultural and institutional values, and ultimately,
5. Create an integrated and meaningful life.

Vaillant, 2008
What Makes a Lawyer?

- Perfectionism
- Persuasiveness
- Passion
# The Weight of Expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Law School</th>
<th>Associate</th>
<th>Partner</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal or family pressure</td>
<td>Billing, billing, billing</td>
<td>Billing, billing, billing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heavy study load</td>
<td>Client demands</td>
<td>Need higher paying clients</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Just deal with it”</td>
<td>Poor work/life balance</td>
<td>Don’t take time off or you become obsolete</td>
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Eat What You Kill

• Adversarial win/lose nature for litigators = Chronic stress
• Someone is always mad at you (Client, spouse, opposing counsel)
• Income correlates to successes, so winning and losing become personal
• “Loss of civility”
Common understandings

• No mental health breaks, or your clients won’t believe in you
• Big book (high money clients) = fewer hours
• Just deal with it
Early Career Attorneys (≤30 years)

• Higher rates of substance abuse among younger attorneys
• Highest rates of substance abuse among female early career lawyers
Late Career Attorneys

- Firms may encourage early retirement to make way for younger (read: cheaper) associates
- Mortality depression
- “Is that all there is?”
- Career security vs “working a law job”

From The Wall Street Journal
The toll of chronic stress

• Alcoholism and drug abuse
• Depression
• Anxiety
• Interpersonal difficulties
Am I Depressed?

• Depressed mood
• Loss of interest
• Sleep problems
• Fatigue
• Feeling worthless or guilt
• Thinking and concentration problems
• Hopelessness
• Suicidal thoughts
Am I Anxious?

- Panic/panic attack
- Feeling unreal or detached from your body
- Persistent worry
- Internal dialogue that is difficult to shut off
- Fearfulness
- Holding breathe
Signs of Substance Use Problems

- Excessive tardiness or absenteeism, with patterns of missed days after weekends or holidays
- Changes in appearance (disheveled, malodorous, etc.)
- Physical symptoms including shaking, changes in gait/walk, looking disoriented, constant runny nose
- **Mood changes including paranoia, irritability, isolative behaviors (e.g. avoiding coworkers after lunch), crying, short tempers**
- Sleeping at work
Let’s talk about hopelessness

• [Tough day at work + busy (maybe fraught) homelife] x 30 years
• “Today is hard, tomorrow is hard, why did I go into this business?”
• A lot of things not working at one time
• Can lead to distressing thoughts and rationalizations (“I can’t keep doing this,” “I’ve messed up everything,” “They deserve better than what I’m able to do”)
Mental Health Across the US

• Stress in America (APA, 2020)
• The coronavirus pandemic (slowed economy = less work = less income)
• Uncertainty about the future of our nation (across party lines)
• Police violence toward People of Color (regardless of race)
• Parenting and family responsibilities
• Discrimination
• With more than 50% of Americans reporting stress in each respective area, there is need for resources that support mental health and wellbeing.
The Public Health Impact of Suicide

Suicide is a lifespan problem – affecting all ages

United States
• 2nd leading cause – 10-34
• 4th leading cause – 35-54
• 8th leading cause – 55-64

Kentucky
• 2nd leading cause – 10-34
• 4th leading cause 35-44
• 5th leading cause 45-55
• 9th leading cause 55-64

U.S. & KY Suicide Rates, 1990-2017

KY Suicides by CMHC Region, 1990-2017

Sources: Kentucky Violent Death Reporting System, CDC Wonder
KY Suicide Rates By Race & Gender, 2005-2017

- **White**: Male rate 5.8, Female rate 2.4
- **Black**: Male rate 9.6, Female rate 2.4
- **Hispanic**: Male rate 9.7, Female rate 2.7

Male rates are represented by navy bars and female by bronze bars.

Sources: Kentucky Violent Death Reporting System, CDC Wonder
KY Suicide Circumstances By Sex & Age, 2005–2017

Older Adult (65+):
- 47% Physical health problem
- 44% Depressed mood
- 44% Current mental health problem
- 34% History of mental health treatment

Adult (Ages 25-44):
- 52% Current mental health problem
- 47% Depressed mood
- 36% History of mental health treatment
- 30% Current mental health treatment

Middle Age (45-64):
- 48% Current mental health problem
- 44% Depressed mood
- 38% History of mental health treatment
- 32% Current mental health treatment

Youth/Young Adult (10-24):
- 57% Physical health problem
- 45% Depressed mood
- 41% Current mental health problem
- 34% History of mental health treatment
- 29% History of mental health treatment

Men:
- 25.6%
- 25.6%
- 13.2%
- 8.9%

Women:
- 33.4%
- 27.3%
- 8.6%
- 7.9%

Percent may not total 100% due to rounding.

Sources: Kentucky Violent Death Reporting System, CDC Wonder
Kentucky Suicide Method, 2005-2017

**Suicide Rates By Method and Sex**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Male Rate</th>
<th>Female Rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Firearm</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanging/Suffocation</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poisoning</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
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*Includes decedents with missing or unknown method.

Less common methods of suicide include sharp instrument, fall, and drowning.

Sources: Kentucky Violent Death Reporting System, CDC Wonder
How do I save my own life (or that of my colleague)?
Step 1: Acknowledge the Toll

- Notice that the feelings/mood swing/intrusive thoughts are happening
- Drinking more?
- Increased fighting at home?
- Performance suffering?
- Fatigue, insomnia, etc.?
- These are signals that you may need to take action
Step 2: Challenge the Myths (i.e. this is your life and you get to live it)

• Counter the “I should just suck it up” thoughts
• Assert within yourself that you deserve peace, rest, even joy
• Consider the available resources that will help sustain you and even restore you
Step 3: Seek Help

• Resources exist to help keep you alive
• Therapy can happen online, days, nights, or weekends
Common Myths About Suicide

• Myth: Talking about suicide will trigger someone to be suicidal, so it’s best to avoid the topic
• Myth: Suicidal people keep their plans to themselves
• Myth: People who think about or attempt suicide are crazy
• Myth: Not everyone is at risk for suicide, only certain types of people
Warning Signs of Suicide

• Anxiety (specifically untreated)
• Agitation
• Hopelessness
• Sleep disturbance, nightmares
• Perceived burdensomeness
Suicide Facts

• # of suicides in 2019 = 47,511
• Suicide is the 10\textsuperscript{th} leading cause of death in the US
• For each death by suicide, 135 people are exposed/affected (Cerel, 2019).
The **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** 1-800-273-8255 is:
- Free and available 24-hours
- Para Español oprima el 2
- Veterans Press 1
Your call will be routed to the nearest crisis center to you.

**Crisis Text Line** Text HOME to 741741 in the US

**Veterans** can also text to 838255
Or chat online at [www.veteranscrisisline.net](http://www.veteranscrisisline.net)

**IM Alive Chat**
Online suicide crisis chat [www.imalive.org](http://www.imalive.org)

**The Trevor Project**
Hotline for LGBTQ Students 1-866-488-7386  
[www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)
TrevorText - Available Fridays (4:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.).
Text “Trevor” to 1-202-304-1200.
TrevorChat - Available 7 days a week (3:00 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.)

**Trans Lifeline** 1-877-565-8860
Hotline for transgender people experiencing a crisis.
KYLAP’s DIRECT NUMBER: 502-226-9373

OR
THROUGH THE MAIN NUMBER AT KBA: 502-564-3795, Option 8

Emergent Support
• Baptist Health - 502.897.8100
• Centerstone – 502.589.4313
• Lincoln Trail Behavioral Health - 270.351.9444
• Norton Hospital – 502.629.1935
• Our Lady of Peace - 502.451.3333
• The Brook – 502.426.6380 or 502.896.0495
• University of Louisville Hospital (EPS) – 502.562.3120
• Wellspring Crisis Stabilization Unit – 502.561.1072 and 502.637.4361
• Wellstone Regional Hospital – 812.284.8000