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Addicted Lawyers Start as Addicted Law Students

BY MEGHAN VIVO

Lawyers are at roughly twice the risk of becoming addicted to drugs or alcohol as people in other professions. They also have higher incidence of depression, anxiety, suicide and other mental health issues than the general population. While many cite long hours, huge caseloads and the stress of the field as reasons for these problems, one judge warns that the seeds of addiction are planted long before an attorney begins practicing law.

According to Hon. Robert L. Childers, a judge in the Circuit Court of Tennessee since 1984, who has served on the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs (CoLAP) since 1999, substance abuse and mental illness often begin in law school.

On the first day of law school, studies show that the average law student is “normal” in terms of their happiness, mental health and wellness. Within the first six months, early signs of psychiatric problems, such as depression, anxiety, hostility and paranoia, can be detected. After the first year of law school, as many as 40 percent of law students suffer from depression. Symptoms often persist through law school and into their later legal careers.

Does Legal Training Make Students Depressed?

Substance abuse and depression are prevalent on law school campuses across the country. Why? In studies, law students have reported using alcohol to “relax or relieve tension” and to “get away from problems.” Experts speculate that the following factors are also at play:

- Stress caused by excessive workloads and intense competition
- Emphasis on analysis rather than connection with morals, values or feelings
- Intimidating teaching style
- Type of individual attracted to legal profession (often overachievers or perfectionists)
- Increased access to drugs and alcohol
- Relying on academic success to build self-worth
- Loss of connection with original reasons for attending law school (such as helping people or passion for the law)
- Emphasis on image, status, affluence and impressing others, which leads to sacrifice of positive values and subsequent loss of self-esteem and personal satisfaction
- Training to ignore emotional and personal reactions and represent positions that are in opposition to their own opinions and beliefs

Many attorneys turn to drugs or alcohol because they have compromised their ethical principles and moral values. They may bend the rules to hold onto a key client or pursue “winning” at all costs. When Judge Childers speaks with law students and young lawyers, he emphasizes the importance of practicing law in a way that doesn’t go against their values. Stress turned inward, he warns, often results in health problems, depression and addiction.

“In some ways, the legal profession has become more of a business and less of a profession,” says Judge Childers. “There are lawyers who cut corners and do things that are against normal ethical or moral standards. Then when the guilt and shame build up, they try to bury those feelings with drugs or alcohol.”

Awareness & Prevention Efforts

A legal education is an honorable pursuit, but there are a few precautions law students should consider before school begins. According to Judge Childers, stress management and self-care are critical to long-term success as an attorney.

“The stress of law school continues as students graduate into young lawyers with billable hour requirements and the stress of legal practice,” says Judge Childers. “Since the stress will always be there, students can set themselves up for success by embracing a healthy lifestyle, eating a balanced diet, exercising, staying close to their faith and developing a solid social support system.”

Since addiction and mental health problems appear in law school, he says, it is during this time that education and prevention must begin.

In his role as member and past chair of CoLAP, Judge Childers has dedicated much of his career to educating law students about the risks of substance abuse and the prevalence of addiction and mental illness in the legal community. One of his goals is to teach law students to recognize the signs of addiction and seek help early on.

In support of this goal, Judge Childers helped get a rule passed in 2008 that allows impaired law students to get a conditional license to practice law if they get treatment and monitoring. Young lawyers with conditional licenses do not have to disclose to employers or clients that there are conditions on their admission to the bar. If lawyers remain sober during the conditional period, they earn an unconditional license

Judge Childers was also involved in the development of a toolkit that has been given to all ABA accredited law schools. The toolkit includes information about the signs and risk factors for addiction as well as education about lawyer assistance programs, and is designed to help law school administrators address substance abuse among students.

As a result of growing awareness surrounding law students and substance abuse, a number of law schools are instituting health and wellness programs for their students. Judge Childers and other advocates are working on law student assistance programs and other resources for this high-risk population.

Help for Law Students Struggling with Addiction & Mental Illness

Almost every state offers a lawyer assistance program (LAP) that provides advice, counseling and drug rehab referrals to legal professionals and law students struggling with substance abuse, addiction and mental illness. LAPs accept calls – in many states, seven days a week, 24 hours a day – from a variety of concerned parties. The services are free, confidential and available to law students as well as lawyers, judges and bar applicants.

There are also drug rehabilitation centers that specialize in treating law students, lawyers, judges and other professionals. These programs can assist with interventions, assessments, short- or long-term treatment, and monitoring and aftercare.

Law students and young lawyers who struggle with drug or alcohol addiction suffer significant consequences, including health problems, financial troubles and the threat of job loss. For every lawyer struggling with addiction or mental illness, there’s a family, circle of friends and a full book of clients who are also put in danger. If you or someone who know is suffering, get help today. **H**

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