

## Why Bother? And How To Help With Attorney Depression.

If you join a couple of attorney friends for lunch (a table for three), one of the three of you will suffer symptoms of attorney depression at some time during their legal career. Identifying which attorney at your table may be suffering from depression is challenging. Symptoms of depression are often the character traits of good attorneys. Good attorneys, for example, are often introspective and pessimistic (always anticipating what might go wrong).[1. ©2016 Brandon L. Blankenship, Image Credit: The Most Terrible Poverty ... by Renaud Photo CC flickr 26SEP2008.]

The legal services industry itself is often structured to manifest depression where attorneys are expected to fix problems, battle for clients and deal with client emotions but have no control of the results. It is hard to work in the legal services industry and not experience stress and anxiety.

### Identifying Depression

Probably the easiest indicator of depression is the loss of interest in something someone used to enjoy. This is distinguished from a season of life where someone has a hectic schedule and can't do something they enjoy. Rather, a symptom of depression is someone losing the joy of something they used to enjoy. Given the opportunity, they refuse because they "just aren't interested anymore."

Otherwise, symptoms vary person to person. That is, depression in some people may look like sadness and weeping. In others, it may look like anger and irritability. Consider some of these varied symptoms:

- Fatigue and decreased energy;
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering details;
- Difficulty making decisions;
- Insomnia;
- Early-morning wakefulness;
- Excessive sleeping;
- Eating significantly more or less;
- Thoughts of suicide;
- Suicide attempts.[2. See generally, Mental Health Awareness 101: Battling Burnout and Depression, American Bar Association]

### Why Bother?

Even with close friends, the prevailing response to depression is to not get involved. Just let things run their course and see what happens. Why meddle and risk a negative impact on our relationship?

The costs of not getting involved are simply too high. At a minimum, unchecked depression results in lost productivity, ethics complaints or malpractice claims for failure to act resulting from fatigue or forgetfulness. The severity worsens to substance abuse issues, divorce, wealth depletion and suicide. Why bother? The stakes are simply too high not to.

## **The Best Help**

Often someone suffering from depression does not know it. They may know that they are so fatigued that they cannot complete the same level of work. They may complain of waking at 2 a.m. without the ability to go back to sleep. But they may not know they are suffering from some level of depression. Simply suggesting that someone consider that they may be suffering from depression may be the best help.

How you approach someone will vary person by person. Approaching a person you have an established friendship with is different than approaching someone you only know casually. Often, pointing out changes in behavior that you have personally noticed is impactful, especially when coupled with an offer of help. Consider questions like these:

? This is the first year you haven't played softball with us, is there anything I can do to get you back?

? Several times I've heard you say that you are not sleeping well. My brother-in-law found a great doctor to help him with a similar problem, could I introduce you to my brother-in-law?

? You know, for as long as I've known you I remember that you take your wife out on a date every Friday. I've noticed that you haven't mentioned that in over a month. Is there anything I can help you with so you can get some free time?

Simply having an open conversation can be immensely helpful. Many attorneys know they are suffering from a symptom (like fatigue) but it never occurs to them that they may be suffering from depression. Once the discussion starts, you may find many opportunities to steer your friend toward objective help.

## **Objective Help for Attorney Depression**

A friend may be more willing to receive help from a helper outside of a friendship and you should encourage them to do so.

The ability to objectively evaluate depression in our friends is often clouded by all that we know about them. If you personally know someone to have a keen memory, it is sometimes difficult to admit that their memory is failing. If you personally know someone to have a strong work ethic, it is difficult to admit that their work is slipping due to fatigue. A third-party helper can analyze

symptoms more objectively and provide valuable advice and resources.

Also, someone who has studied depression or had experience with depression is better equipped to identify red flags of increasing severity (like substance abuse or suicide) and they are better equipped with resources to help.

More and more resources are available for attorneys suffering from depression. Consider these three:

## A Depression Coach

[Dan Lukasik](#) is an attorney who suffers from depression. He has created a national coaching practice to help other attorneys. Dan is a great first step for attorneys struggling with depression symptoms who want to talk with someone that has both legal experience and experience with attorney depression.

## Medical Help

Beyond coaching, attorneys seeking medical advice often confer with [G. Andrew H. Benjamin, J.D., Ph.D., ABPP](#) for evaluation and treatment. Dr. Benjamin has a unique insight into attorney depression as he is credentialed both as an attorney and health services professional.

## A Local Attorney Depression Group

Unlike group therapy, a local attorney depression group is a meeting of attorneys who have identified that they struggle with depression. Many have developed coping skills and identified local resources that they are willing to share. If you don't have a local attorney group close to you, [consider starting one](#).

## Joy On The Other Side of Depression

Of course, in more acute situations, you may need to involve your [Lawyers Assistance Program](#). Even then, however, the goal is not just to navigate through an acute depressive episode. The goal is to establish a lifestyle that balances joy in the practice of law and in life beyond the law.

### Brandon L. Blankenship

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Brandon L. Blankenship is a continuing legal education presenter and business educator. He is the author of [Unmasking Hour](#). He writes weekly posts on the legal industry and is a contributor to the [Nobility Academy](#). He and his wife Donnalee live on their hobby farm south of Birmingham, Alabama.



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