



Photo by Zach Porter Photography

by Robin Frazer Clark

# How to Save a Life

*Where did I go wrong, I lost a friend  
Somewhere along in the bitterness  
And I would have stayed up with you all night  
Had I known how to save a life*

– “How to Save a Life” The Fray

**S**uicide is a subject that most of us would consider unthinkable. Therefore, we don't think about it—until we are forced to do so when the unthinkable occurs and someone we are close to takes their own life.

Then, it's difficult to think of anything else except persistent questions: Why? What did I miss the last time I saw or talked to my friend? What could I have done to have kept this from happening? The answers don't come easy.

Suicide has touched me personally, many years ago and, unfortunately, this year. I am certain it has touched most of you. When I first brought up this subject during the last Board of Governors meeting on Jekyll Island, it was clear it had touched many in the room. It, unfortunately, touched the families and friends of an Emory

Law School student this year. My fellow bar presidents in our sister states are dealing with this very issue right now, too. In Kentucky, for example, five Kentucky Bar members committed suicide in the last several months.

It might surprise you to know that suicide is the third-leading cause of death among lawyers. Then again, it might not surprise you. The nature of our work presents a unique level of stress. Many of us handle life-and-death issues for our clients. Putting food on our families' tables, meeting payroll and other law practice expenses, repaying law school debt and business loans and generally keeping our heads above water financially is dependent on success in the courtroom and/or long days and nights compiling a required number of billable hours. As Judge Anne Workman put it in her address to the DeKalb Bar Association in 2008, “Our clients do not routinely believe we serve their interest. We are not admired by the public in general. Management of our workload overwhelms us. We are beset by ever-increasing overhead, by an overload of technological devices that tether us to the office around the clock, by unhappy and at times unmanageable clients, by a surfeit of mind-numbing work just to keep afloat and by a general malaise brought about by the combination of all these factors.”

Failure is not an option in a high-stakes profession such as ours. As a result, lawyers are three times as likely to suffer from depression as any other profession,

and the rate of death by suicide is two to six times that of the general population. These statistics come from the website of the State Bar of Texas, which has taken a leading role toward suicide prevention awareness in the legal profession. Soon, the State Bar of Georgia will follow suit.

If the State Bar of Georgia, with its resources, can save a life, then I think we should do it.

Next month, our Lawyers Assistance Program (LAP) Committee Chairman Charles B. "Chuck" Pekor Jr. will appoint a Suicide Prevention Subcommittee, whose primary goal will be to raise awareness among Bar members about addressing the dangerous situation within the legal profession, how to recognize the risk factors and warning signs of suicide, and the fact that help is available to Georgia lawyers through the LAP.

Pekor says, "Anxiety and depression can go hand in hand, and anxiety, if not depression, is almost impossible to avoid in this profession. Obviously, when depression gets severe enough, it can lead to the tragic results we have unfortunately seen lately more than once. I think it is important that as many members of the Georgia Bar as possible are aware that the State Bar has a very good set of resources in place for any lawyer dealing with these issues (including, obviously, substance abuse and other mental health problems), which is accessible with one totally confidential phone call to our LAP hotline which is on the Bar website."

He adds, "As a recovering alcoholic with 27 years in recovery, and in my work with the LAP Committee and program over the years, I have learned that it is amazing how much help you can get just by talking with someone who is sympathetic and willing to listen. We can't force lawyers who are in major/clinical depression to call us (or the other resources that are available), but we can certainly do all we can to at least make as many lawyers as possible know that help is one phone call away. We take calls 24-hours a day, and have very qualified counselors available all over the state. Our people will talk with any lawyer who calls 24-hours a day, and then get them to the help they need. If it will help, we also have attorney volunteers who will help any way they can. I suspect that many suicides could be prevented if the person had just been able to make a call to someone sympathetic and trained."

Pekor especially emphasizes the strict confidentiality of the LAP hotline, which he says is "almost stronger" than the attorney/client privilege. "I think that is sometimes a deterring factor even for lawyers who have heard about us, so the absolute confidentiality in the Bar rules is very important."

Our suicide prevention awareness initiative, which will be named "How to Save a Life," borrowing the title of the song by the rock band The Fray, will have a dual purpose, directed toward those who are suffering from anxiety and depression and may be at risk for suicide, as well as all Bar members, who need to recognize the severity of the problem and be able to identify warning signs among our colleagues.

## LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Stress, life challenges  
or substance abuse?

We can  
help.

*The Lawyer Assistance Program is a free program providing confidential assistance to Bar members whose personal problems may be interfering with their ability to practice law.*

Confidential Hotline  
800-327-9631

The Dave Nee Foundation, based in New York and created in the wake of the 2005 suicide of Fordham University law student Dave Nee, lists these 12 signs you might notice in yourself or a friend that may give cause for concern and at least point to a need to talk with someone:

- Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness, depressed mood, poor self-esteem or guilt
- Withdrawal from friends, family and activities that used to be fun
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
  - Are you sleeping all the time? Or having trouble falling asleep?
  - Are you gaining weight or never hungry?
- Anger, rage or craving for revenge
  - Sometimes people notice they are overreacting to criticism
- Feeling tired or exhausted all of the time
- Trouble concentrating, thinking, remembering or making decisions
  - Are you suddenly struggling in school or at work?
  - Sometimes academic or professional performance suffers and grades drop or work product worsens
- Restless, irritable, agitated or anxious movements or behaviors
- Regular crying
- Neglect of personal care
  - Have you stopped caring about your appearance or stopped keeping up with your personal hygiene?
- Reckless or impulsive behaviors
  - Are you drinking or using drugs excessively?
  - Are you behaving unsafely in other ways?
- Persistent physical symptoms such as headaches, digestive problems or chronic pain that do not respond to routine treatment
- Thoughts about death or suicide

If you are dealing with one or more of these issues or know someone who is, please take advantage of the State Bar's confidential LAP hotline at 1-800-327-9631. Staffed by trained counselors 24-hours a day, seven days a week, the hotline is for anyone associated with the legal profession—whether a lawyer, law student, support staff or family member—who has a personal problem that is causing you significant concern. LAP also offers up to three prepaid in-person counseling sessions with a licensed counselor per year. To help meet the needs of its members and ensure confidentiality, the Bar contracts the services of CorpCare Associates Inc. Employee Assistance Program, a Georgia-headquartered national counseling agency.


I have also asked Executive Committee member Elizabeth L. Fite to take a leading role in the "How to Save a Life" awareness campaign. Elizabeth recently attended "Uncommon Counsel," a panel discussion (including Chuck Pekor as a presenter) at Emory Law School. While the event was directed toward law students, she described it as an informative session that featured discussion of many symptoms of stress that, when combined, could mean the sufferer is on a dangerous path to substance abuse, malpractice or suicide.

"The best takeaway (from the panel discussion) . . . was that it really is OK to talk to other people about the stress you are feeling," Fite said. "People in law school, as well as members of the Bar, probably feel like there will be some negative repercussions for sharing about the stress they are feeling. I think that is an important aspect for us to emphasize, which is that talking about it won't land you in trouble, but not talking about it may." As the president of the Kentucky Bar Association, Doug Myers, wrote this month in his President's Page titled "You Are Your Brother's—and Sister's—Keeper," "Depression is a health

problem, not a character flaw. We should neither be ashamed nor afraid to seek treatment."

You will hear much more about the "How to Save a Life" initiative in the months ahead. We will be brainstorming for awareness—raising ideas such as panel discussions and CLE sessions on suicide prevention for professionalism credit, promoting the program on the Bar's website and others. Feel free to send me an email with any suggestions you have.

In the meantime, if you are worried a friend may be thinking about suicide, immediate action is critical. Call the LAP hotline, 1-800-327-9631, or the National Suicide Prevention Hotline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255), for a referral.

No one wants to be in the position of having to ask themselves, when it's too late, "Why didn't I do something?" Do something now. 

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