



# ARE YOU OKAY?

## The Most Important Conversation No One Wants to Have

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When a friend or family member commits suicide, often the first thing that goes through one's mind is the "if onlys." "If only I had seen the warning signs." "If only I had known." "If only I had gotten him help." The "if onlys" are the saddest, loneliest thoughts in the aftermath of suicide, especially when you consider the fact that suicide is largely preventable.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among lawyers. One study in 1991 by John Hopkins University found that lawyers are 3.6 times more likely to be depressed than average, and a 1997 study in Canada found that lawyers were six times as likely to commit suicide than the average person. By comparison, suicide is only the 10th leading cause of death in the general population. When I was President of the State Bar of Georgia, at least three Georgia lawyers committed suicide during my first six months. One did so in the parking garage of the State Bar Headquarters. I decided that if I ignored this crisis in our profession, I would be shirking my duties as President, so I took action, first by learning a lot about suicide. I was surprised to learn that suicide was largely preventable if the suicidal thought is detected or discovered in time. I then appointed Randy Evans to chair the State Bar's Suicide Prevention Committee, who along with other Committee members, all of whom had, in some way, been touched by suicide, could tackle this issue.

I also soon discovered that other state bar associations were being hit with the same problem of lawyer suicides. A friend of mine, Yvette Hourigan, the Director of the Kentucky Bar Association Lawyer Assistance Program (KYLAP), was already in the thick of the issue of lawyer suicide and thanks to Yvette, on the forefront of prevention and healing. Yvette said that in confronting this issue, Kentucky was in an absolute crisis:

"Over the course of approximately two years, there were at least 15 lawyer suicides – in Kentucky alone. The Kentucky Lawyer Assistance Program undertook a massive educational campaign over the next year on suicide awareness, recognition and prevention.

We're happy to report that in the two years following the (Wolfson) article, we know of only one or two lawyer suicides here in Kentucky."

Depression and substance abuse play a large role in leading one down the path to suicide. The nature of our work presents a unique level of stress. Many of us handle life and-death issues while trying to put food on our families' tables, meet payroll, pay off student debt and deal with billable hours just to name a few. The very qualities of a good lawyer that make him or her great at their job also make him or her vulnerable to depression, substance abuse and suicide: perfectionism and pessimism. The unique nature of the practice of law, in which you usually have an adversary trying his or her hardest to prevent you from being successful, magnifies the pressure. As KYLAP Director Yvette Hourigan so astutely says: "If you're a doctor everyone is working together to save the patient. You don't have someone come into the operating room to try to kill the patient while you are trying to save him."

Studies of suicide have proven that sometimes simply eliminating the means by which one could take one's own life can prevent that person's suicide. About 90 percent of the people who try suicide and live ultimately never die by suicide, which is a startling fact. In a fascinating article in *The Lancet*, "Means Restriction for Suicide Prevention," the authors write:

The probability of individuals attempting suicide decreases when they are precluded from implementing a preferred method, i.e., Suicide attempts are often method-specific. Moreover, if a highly lethal method is not available and some individuals do not defer their attempt, they frequently use less lethal, more common ones (e.g., drug overdose). From the perspectives of public health and injury prevention, the choice of a method that is less lethal than others can be advantageous if the attempt proves to be non-fatal.

The sudden, unplanned nature of many suicides implies that individuals tend to use the method most readily accessible

to them. When a lethal method is unavailable at the moment of potential action, suicide attempts might be delayed so that suicidal impulses will pass without fatal effects. - *The Lancet*, 2012 Jun 23; 379(9834):2393-9, Yip, Caine, Yousef, Chang, Wu & Chen.

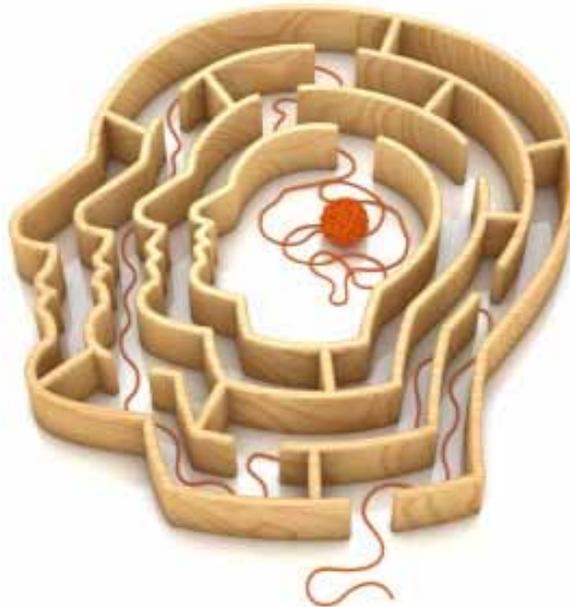
While mental health and substance abuse treatment must always be important components in treating suicidality, researchers like Cathy Barber, the director of the Means Matters campaign at Harvard Injury Control Research Center, are stressing this additional avenue of “means restriction.” In her recent article in the *New York Times* “Blocking the Path to Suicide,” author Celia Watson Seupel explores this new approach at suicide prevention that especially focuses on suicide in young people. (*New York Times*, March 9, 2015). “What people experience before attempting suicide is a combination of panic, agitation and franticness,” he said. “A desire to escape from unbearable pain and feeling trapped,” says Dr. Igor Galynker, the director of the Family Center for Bipolar Disorder at Mount Sinai Beth Israel.

We should all become knowledgeable of the signs to look for in our colleagues, partners and friends that indicate a downward spiral that could be signaling suicide, so we may have the opportunity to prevent further suicides in our ranks. I am proud to say that the State Bar of Georgia responded to the crisis of suicide in our profession with the creation of our Suicide Prevention program, “How To Save a Life.” We created a video which tells some personal stories of Georgia lawyers and how suicide has affected them and also discusses the warning signs of suicide and how you should take action should you see them. The Board of Directors of the Institute of Continuing Legal Education (ICLE) agreed to play the video at every ICLE seminar during the past year and Stephen Harper, Executive Director of ICLE reports that “30,845 registrants for ICLE programs from September 1, 2013 – September 1, 2014 viewed this video. This effort at suicide prevention in the bar is our attempt to eliminate the “if only” that always follow a suicide.”

As expected, not everyone in the Bar was a fan of this effort, particularly Bar members attending an ICLE seminar who complained about having to watch it on their “day off”, as the subject matter was depressing.

Unfortunately, the refusal to want to discuss suicide has far too long been the stumbling block for successfully preventing suicide. No one wants to talk about it, yet it is the most important conversation you may ever have. We must change this attitude. We know through the Kentucky Bar Association’s efforts to prevent lawyer suicides that simply having open conversations about the topic is a start and that promoting the existence and use of the Lawyers Assistance Program for mental health care works for prevention.

My hope is that by creating the State Bar’s Suicide Prevention Program we would open the conversation about this critical issue, which is the first step to actual prevention. We know for certain the efforts have, to date, saved the lives of at least two Georgia lawyers. Perhaps, one day, it will be the Bar Member who complained about having to watch the Suicide Prevention video whose life we save. Perhaps, one day, it will be yours.



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 at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) for a referral. Staffed by trained counselors 24-hours a day, seven days a week, the hotline is for anyone associated with the legal profession who has a personal problem that is causing

you significant concern. LAP also offers up to six prepaid in-person, **totally confidential** 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 encourage you to join the conversation. I encourage you to intervene should one of your friends or colleagues show signs of despondency and a downward spiral. Maybe together we can save a life.

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<sup>1</sup> This information was set forth in an article by the Louisville Courier Journal, by Andrew Wolfson, and was compiled by him from independent sources. KYLAP was not at all affiliated with the compilation of information. All contact with KYLAP is confidential. S.Ct.R. 3.990).