

Keeping Lawyers Alive

Law is among the professions whose members have an elevated risk for suicide. Everyone can help keep people alive by learning more about the problem, showing kindness and connection to colleagues, and reaching out when we feel defeated about our own situations.

BY AMBER AULT

In a 2023 article titled “Stressed, Lonely, and Overcommitted: Predictors of Lawyer Suicide Risk,” researchers explored the possible correlations between several variables and lawyers’ well-documented elevated rates of suicide risk. The authors noted that “[l]awyers contemplate suicide at an exceedingly high rate. Suicidal ideation, defined as thoughts, ideas, or ruminations about ending one’s own life, is the first step to suicide and is predictive of suicide attempts. Prior estimates suggest that between 10 and 12 percent of lawyers in the U.S. have contemplated suicide, compared to 4.2% of adults ≥ 18 years of age in the U.S. population. Given the high rates of suicidal ideation among lawyers, it is crucial to identify factors that potentially contribute to their suicide risk.”¹

Factors Associated with Higher Risk of Suicidal Ideation

In their data analysis, the researchers reported a finding that may be surprising to some *Wisconsin Lawyer* readers: alcohol and substance use severity, age, and work-family conflict were not associated at a level of statistical significance with suicidal ideation.

Their statistical analysis resulted in a model that highlighted five other factors as predictive of lawyers’ suicidal ideation:

- Gender (men were two times more likely than women to endorse suicidality),
- History of a mental health diagnosis,
- Loneliness,
- Perceived stress, and
- Work overcommitment.²

The researchers found that lawyers with high or intermediate stress levels were 22 times more likely and 5.5 times more likely, respectively, to endorse suicidality. Suicidal ideation occurs more than twice as often among lawyers with “high work overcommitment” and is 1.6

times greater among lawyers with an “intermediate level of work overcommitment.”³

Similarly, lawyers who screened as “lonely” on a UCLA loneliness scale were almost three times more likely to endorse suicidality than lawyers who did not. Men in the study reported suicidality with twice the frequency of women. Lawyers with a history of at least one mental illness diagnosis were 1.8 times more likely to endorse suicidality compared to those without a history of mental illness.⁴

In addition to presenting worrisome evidence of the vulnerability to suicidal ideation among lawyers and identifying individual and subjective factors associated with suicidal ideation, the article implicitly reproduced the findings of one of the most famous studies of suicide, sociologist Emile Durkheim’s book, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, first published in 1897.⁵



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Based on a large demographic study of mortality causes, Durkheim assessed men as more likely than women to die by suicide, childless people as more likely than parents to end their lives, and highly educated people – white men, particularly – as more likely to die by suicide than people with less education, as well as both men and women from immigrant and minority groups. Durkheim’s theory looked beyond individuals’ feelings and perceptions of their situations to two issues greater than the individual: the structure of the social relationships within a group or class of people and the degree of *social integration* and *regulation* within the group.

Nature of Lawyering Work Increases Mental Health Risks

When it comes to the elevated risk of suicidal ideation among attorneys, Durkheim’s model points to important insights. The nature of the work of

lawyering often requires lawyers to establish boundaries in social and community relationships that are not required in many other professions, reducing their community integration, even with other lawyers; and the profession is highly regulated, in terms of what the law demands of lawyers and the moral and ethical culture of lawyering to which professionals hold themselves. Increasing the challenge is that, as Durkheim argued, in times of social confusion, chaos, and instability, individuals are more prone to suicide as normative systems of social integration and regulation become frayed, weak, and unstable.

In a recent article, “The Social Roots of Suicide: Theorizing How the External Social World Matters to Suicide and Suicide Prevention,” researchers mapped out the connections between identity and emotionality in the context of social groups, noting that identity is the nexus to social integration and

that emotions are shaped by the norms of the group and its regulation or expectations.⁶

It’s easy to make the case that the identity of “lawyer” functions as master status for many people with law degrees, men and women alike, and that emotional states such as pride and shame are, for lawyers, connected to identity in the context of the profession, when lawyers meet or violate the expectations they believe the profession has of them. Shame, in particular, is a very difficult emotion, and it has been connected to suicidality and other self-destructive behaviors in a number of contexts.

In many social-situations systems founded on masculinist ideas of honor, men may be vulnerable to believing that ending one’s own life is the honorable course of action after a perceived failure or “dishonorable” behavior, especially for people who are not closely connected to others with whom they can process a situation in which they are experiencing shame. As more women have entered the legal profession, they may be increasingly vulnerable to this line of thinking and the circumstances surrounding it.

One Lawyer’s Story

An autobiographical essay⁷ by Bruce Simpson, an attorney who practices in Kentucky, demonstrated the key findings and the review of sociological insights on suicidality in the two recent studies discussed above. After a painful professional situation that evoked feelings of shame and failure and challenged his identity as a member of the legal profession, Simpson made the decision to end his life (he is still with us).

“In January 2023, I received a shocking adverse decision from an appellate court that noted I had not filed a responsive brief in a case I won at the trial court level. Instantly, I was crushed by more anxiety than I knew existed. How could I not have filed a brief in a case I won? I could not believe I hurt



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my clients, and I saw my 'excellent reputation' disintegrate. I was up all night, overcome with grief, sorrow and humiliation.

"In less than 12 hours, I concluded that suicide was my only option. I had previously thought about suicide should my self-esteem ever be seriously threatened. I had to be perfect as a lawyer, and anything less was unacceptable. I never took any steps to ameliorate my depression and thoughts of suicide. Such is the nature of depression. A person suffering from depression often is constrained from seeking help."⁸

Simpson's essay laid bare the complexities of many lawyers' commitments to integrity, service, loyalty to clients, and competence and how the parameters of the profession often result in harsh self-criticism, isolation, and difficulty in offering oneself compassion in the wake of an undesired outcome, a mistake, or even a willful poor decision. The essay also made clear the different roles that colleagues and friends can play in other people's lives and the importance of interrupting the anomie that often accompanies suicidality, consistent with Durkheim's first study of the phenomenon. When people are isolated, they not only lose the benefits of social integration but also often bear the burden of shame that they are isolated, deepening their disconnection.

Social Connections and Support Systems Are Crucial

The takeaway here? Social connection is an important part of the antidote to high rates of suicidal ideation and

suicide risk among attorneys. It is important that lawyers find opportunities to become more deeply integrated into social networks and communities. This can be a challenge for lawyers, particularly in small towns and rural areas, where their professional status and identity can leave them feeling self-conscious and always "on stage" or "on duty." The burden can be especially heavy when a lawyer needs support around anxiety or depression or would benefit from a 12-step meeting but feels vulnerable seeking help in the local community.

Fortunately, multiple strategies for building better support systems exist. In general, committing to building community around non-work interests can be an effective strategy, and this includes joining preexisting organizations, such as a religious community, a local service organization, a community theatre group, or a club centered on a sport the individual enjoys or would like to learn. In the lawyering world, county bar associations offer important sources of affiliation and community, as does the State Bar of Wisconsin, which always welcomes volunteers and attendance at member-focused events.

For lawyers seeking support, coaching, strategy, or resources in times of difficulty, the Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP) provides easy-to-access, confidential consultations designed to respond to each caller's specific needs and circumstances. In addition to professional staff trained in suicide risk assessment, alcohol and other drug abuse concerns and

questions, and helping lawyers reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, WisLAP can connect lawyers and judges with others who volunteer as peer supports.

When WisLAP was founded by lawyers in 1995, the fundamental impetus was to provide lawyers with the opportunity to know that they are not alone; that they are special but not unique; and that even lawyers need to experience compassion and reassurance when they feel exhausted, demoralized, alone, or ashamed. Two of the most powerful things you can do to stem the tide of suicide in the profession are to extend kindness and connection to colleagues and to reach out when you are feeling defeated yourself. **WL**

WisLAP Can Help

WWW.WISBAR.ORG/WISLAP

The Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP) offers confidential support to lawyers, judges, law students, and other legal professionals as a benefit of State Bar membership. WisLAP staff can answer questions about mental health and substance use, provide guidance on well-being practices, and match members with attorneys trained in peer support.

To contact WisLAP staff: Call (800) 543-2625 or email callwislap@wisbar.org.

Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: 988. Call or text 988 if you or someone you know may be going through a crisis or contemplating suicide. For more information, visit the 988 website at <https://988lifeline.org>.

ENDNOTES

¹Patrick R. Krill et al., *Stressed, Lonely, and Overcommitted: Predictors of Lawyer Suicide Risk*, *Healthcare* (Basel) (Feb. 11, 2023), <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-9032/11/4/536> (internal citations omitted).

²*Id.*

³*Id.*

⁴*Id.*

⁵Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (Free Press 1997).

⁶Anna S. Mueller et al., *The Social Roots of Suicide: Theorizing How the External Social World Matters to Suicide and Suicide Prevention*, *Frontiers in Psych.* (Mar. 30, 2021), <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.621569/full>.

⁷Bruce Simpson, *Making It Back: Bruce Simpson Tried to Take His Own Life, Then He Started Healing*, *ABA J.* (Dec. 2023), https://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/making-it-back-bruce-simpson-tried-to-take-his-own-life-then-he-started-healing#google_vignette [available only to ABA members].

⁸*Id.* **WL**