



President's Column

We Get By With a Little Help From Our Friends

BY CHERYL CAMIN MURRAY

In June of this year, two Texas lawyers and one friend of the Dallas Bar Association (DBA) tragically took their own lives. Mental health challenges are not new. Each of us have our own struggles or know someone who has or had a mental health concern. Like any other health condition, it must be treated, and it may come back with different levels of severity. We must continue to stay engaged and either seek treatment or resources ourselves, or help others to do so. As a healthcare attorney, this topic is near and dear to me.

My friend and former DBA President, **Michael Hurst**, forwarded me an article, by Dan Roe, entitled *There's a Lot of Backlog to Address: Why Mental Health in the Legal Profession is Getting Worse*. This May 18 article was published in *The American Lawyer* (ALM) and describes the ALM 2023 annual Mental Health Survey, which is comprised of a series of questions and responses from approximately 3,000 attorneys. According to the survey, 71.1% of the attorneys surveyed had anxiety, 38.2% stated they were depressed, and 31.2% revealed they had another mental health issue. In full disclosure, I felt anxiety with the anticipation of writing this article. I was not surprised by these statistics.

These percentages are considerably higher than the survey results from 2022, which reflect a trend of increasing mental health concerns in our profession. Over 50% of the lawyers who participated in this survey "said they felt a sense of failure or self-doubt, lost emotion, felt increasingly cynical and negative, and had decreased satisfaction and sense of accomplishment." In addition, over 60% of the surveyed attorneys explained that they were fatigued or overwhelmed physically or mentally, "felt moody or irritable, exhausted, or struggled concentrating." Approximately one-third of the lawyers felt detached, helpless, alone, or trapped.

In addition, the survey reflected that approximately 50% of the lawyers were aware of colleagues who had mental health concerns or were depressed. The surveyed attorneys also disclosed that 44% of them know co-workers who had alcoholism struggles, and approximately 15% of these lawyers knew a legal professional who, within the past two years, took his or her own life.

Likewise, according to statistics published by the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program, 32% of lawyers 30 years old or younger have a problem with alcoholism. We are seeing an increase in law students and young attorneys with mental health instability. The seclusion felt by these young people from the COVID-19 lock down in 2020 and 2021 certainly did not help the situation.

We are blessed to work in a profession that provides us with challenging work, opportunities to help others, leadership experiences, and supportive colleagues. However, as attorneys we are rewarded financially and socially for unhealthy behaviors, such as billing/working long hours, reduced sleep, and tackling stressful and complex legal matters for clients. The legal profession is not alone in encouraging mentally unhealthy activities in return for kudos. The good news is that the legal profession can be a leader in taking steps to address head-on these challenges.

Leaders from the DBA and Dallas Association of Young Lawyers (DAYL) recently met to collaborate on additional steps we can take to better support mental health and suicide prevention in our profession by reaching more attorneys in our community beyond the members of the DBA. I had the opportunity to brainstorm on ideas and help prepare a DBA Statement on Mental Health with DAYL President **Nicole Munoz Huschka**, DAYL Executive Director **Cherie Harris**, Tax Litigation Attorney and Mental Health Advocate **Jay Spring**,

DBA Controller **Sherri Evans**, DBA Executive Director **Alicia Hernandez**, and Criminal Defense Attorney and Mental Health Advocate **Terry Bentley Hill**.

Our Law Firm Engagement and Promotion Committee led by **Vicki Blanton**, **Hilda Galvan**, and **Justice (Fmr.) Douglas Lang** has also met and plans to host another Managing Partner Forum with a focus on reducing the stigma associated with mental health and to develop tools to address and alleviate mental health concerns. This breakfast program will take place on September 13 at the Arts District Mansion.

All of us can be advocates for helping others in distress. Here are some steps that we can take. First of all, if you see someone who is struggling, do not be afraid to periodically and appropriately check-in on the person, as well as listen, support, and provide information. We can take advantage of the incredible resources that are available for free to help ourselves and others, which include:

1. Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program wellness quick clips; support phone and text line (1-800-343-TLAP); CLE programs on depression, suicide prevention, and other mental health topics; TLAP Support Toolbox; and success story blogs and videos. (For more information visit www.tlaphelps.org/.)

2. American Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs Substance Use and Mental Health Toolkit for Law School Students and Those Who Care About Them, Well-Being Template for Lawyers and Legal Employers, and destigmatizing mental health materials and video (which is powerful and worth watching). (For more information visit www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/.)

In addition, many employers, including perhaps yours, have an employee assistance program (EAP). An EAP is a benefit, through a third-party vendor, that employers provide to their employees and family members, which includes confidential counseling, materials, and resources for coping with both personal and professional issues, including mental health and well-being concerns. The EAP often provides these services at no cost to the employee.

My firm, Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP, hosts an EAP. This EAP has a website with e-health and other mental health awareness videos, health assessments, suicide prevention and national crisis resources, webinars, a 1-800 help line, and a large variety of other topical resources.

To give it a try, I called the 1-800 number on a Sunday morning, and I was connected to a live person within seconds. I learned that our EAP offers eight free counseling sessions, in person or virtually, per life event per year. In addition, there is unlimited telephone counseling and "in the moment support" 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They also provide complimentary financial benefit consulting and legal advice. In addition, they have an online interactive program to improve mental health and well-being with videos and articles. There are also resources for childcare, elder care, and those looking for a new place to live. All of these benefits may be taken advantage of by the employee, and any household member of the employee.

All of us have fluctuations in our mental health status, similar to our physical health condition. The unfortunate stigma and bias associated with substance use disorders and mental health add an extra layer of difficulty in confronting these challenges. We need to address them like any other healthcare condition and take preventative steps to keep our mental health in check. We are all so very busy, and it is difficult to stop and take the time to help ourselves and others. However, I feel confident that if each of us does so, we can have a dramatic impact on saving lives for years to come.

Cheryl

HEADNOTES

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Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program

TLAP provides confidential help for lawyers, law students, and judges who have problems with substance abuse and/or mental health issues. In addition, TLAP offers many helpful resources, including:

- Live Ethics CLE presentations
 - TLAP Newsletter
 - Request of specific educational materials
 - 1-1, group telephone calls on topics
 - Friday noon AA telephone meeting
- 1-800-393-0640, code 6767456

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