



OAAP

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IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

A PREVENTABLE TRAGEDY

Suicide is hard to talk about. It's hard to even think about. If someone we know tells us that he or she has suicidal thoughts, ideas, or intentions, we may feel overwhelmed. We often don't know what to do or say. Much of our personal reluctance to talk about this topic, as well the challenges we face when confronted with the potential crisis of another person, is in large part because of the silence that often surrounds suicide.

Suicide and the Legal Profession

As lawyers, we are at markedly greater risk of suicide than most people; we rank high on the list of at-risk professions. Some of the primary risk factors for suicide include depression, anxiety, chronic stress, and substance abuse – all conditions that lawyers tend to experience at a higher rate than the general population. Additionally, we are more likely to be perfectionists and competitive – personality characteristics that can make us less likely to seek the help we need. The good news, however, is that those same traits make us good at what we do and can also serve as invaluable resources in treating the conditions that tend to contribute to suicide.

As a profession with an elevated risk of suicide, we must become willing to openly discuss the topic, acknowledging the vulnerability of our profession and the availability of effective treatments for depression and other mental health and substance abuse conditions that put us at risk. Only by open discussions can we reduce the stigma and shame often associated with these conditions, especially if we are to encourage those needing assistance to seek it.

Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors

Thoughts of suicide often occur during times of personal crisis, unrelenting stress, depression, or when we are confronted with a fear of failure or the prospect of what appears to be an unacceptable loss. Generally, the longer these conditions exist, the greater the risk that suicide may seem a viable option.

While a suicide attempt may occasionally be an impulsive act, most often people will have thought about it for days, weeks, months, or even years before they finally resolve to take action. They have gradually come to a point of helplessness and hopelessness, where suicide seems the only solution. Although the clues might be subtle, most people do, in fact, communicate their intentions before they act. These clues can be verbal or behavioral, direct, or indirect. Becoming aware of the primary risk factors and warning signs is crucial to identifying and helping a colleague in crisis.

Risk Factors

Many factors, and combinations of factors, contribute to the risk of suicide. They include:

- Previous suicide attempt(s)
- Depression and anxiety
- Alcohol or other substance abuse
- History of trauma or abuse
- Feelings of helplessness/hopelessness
- Impulsive or aggressive tendencies
- Isolation/lack of social support

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- Barriers to accessing mental health treatment
- Loss (relational, social, work, or financial)
- Major physical illness
- Easy access to lethal methods (e.g., firearms, prescription medications)

Lawyers in crisis can be reluctant to seek the help they need. We often consider ourselves to be the helper and the expert; the one others turn to for assistance. Along with the tendency of many in our profession to isolate, particularly when distressed, we try to go it alone. To seek support can feel like a weakness; those who could be of most help – our families, partners, colleagues, and health professionals – are frequently not considered resources to whom we can turn when in crisis. In truth, asking for help and accessing needed treatment are really acts of courage; admitting one's struggle to another person is really a sign of strength.

Warning Signs

The emotional crisis that usually precedes suicide is often recognizable. The warning signs include:

Thinking or talking about things like:

- Wanting to die
- Feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Feeling like a burden to others and/or that others would be better off without them

Behaviors suggestive of suicidal intent:

- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Being anxious, agitated, or reckless
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing from usual activities
- Isolation from others
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

The following warning signs demand immediate attention:

- Threats to hurt or kill oneself or talking about

wanting to hurt or kill oneself

- Talking or writing about suicide or death, especially when these actions are out of character for the person
- Obtaining or looking for ways to kill oneself
- Giving away prized possessions and other personal belongings or putting affairs in order

How You Can Help

When worried about a colleague's depression or other conditions that increase the risk of suicide, it is important to realize that he or she may need to talk with someone, but is paralyzed by inertia, exhaustion, or confused thinking and cannot reach out for assistance. This is the time to set aside social niceties and calmly, compassionately, and firmly show concern and offer help.

Things to Do:

- Start by expressing your concern for the person.
- Be direct and ask if he or she is depressed.
- Ask if the person is thinking of harming himself/herself.
- If so, ask if the person has formulated a particular suicide plan or method.
- Be willing to listen, without judgment.
- Encourage the person to seek professional help; you may need to make the call for the person or take him or her to a professional.
- Continue to support the person after the initial contact.
- Seek support. Call the OAAP or a suicide life-line if you have any questions about what to do or how to help. (See the sidebar for resources.)

Things to Not Do:

- Don't be afraid to ask whether the person is considering suicide and has a particular plan or method in mind.
- Don't attempt to argue someone out of suicide; rather, let the person know that you care, that he or she is not alone, and that depression can be treated.
- Don't be sworn to secrecy.
- Don't leave the person alone.

Resilience

While suicide warning signs need to be acted on quickly and treated professionally, there are things we can all do to build our own resilience in a demanding and stressful profession. Research over the last quarter century has clearly demonstrated that certain actions and attitudes can, with time, serve to buffer lawyers and others from many of the conditions that contribute to suicidal thinking. Below are some suggestions that can be effective.

- Cultivate close relationships with your family, friends, and colleagues.
 - Develop a positive view of yourself.
 - Have confidence in your strengths and abilities.
 - Become aware of negative thought patterns and practice reframing them to positive ones.
 - Learn healthy ways to express strong feelings.
 - Develop good problem-solving and communication skills.
- Distinguish between what you can control (what you think, say, and do) and what you cannot (other people, specific outcomes).
 - Seek help and resources, when necessary.
 - See yourself as resilient, rather than as a victim.
 - Deal with stress in healthy and balanced ways; avoid harmful coping strategies, such as substance abuse, isolation, and unhealthy acting-out behaviors.
- Be available to help others.
- Find positive meaning in life despite difficult or traumatic events.
- Practice good self-care.

(See the article, “Bouncing Back – A Short Guide to Resilience,” page 6.)

Conclusion

Suicide will always be hard to talk about. It will always be hard to even think about. By learning about suicide risk factors and warning signs, we equip ourselves with the tools we need to effectively identify and help our colleagues, and ourselves, in crisis.

Suicide is preventable. The conditions that cause it are treatable. The first step in preventing it is to talk

Resources

OAAP Attorney Counselors – 503-226-1057 or 1-800-321-OAAP (6227)

Volunteer Network of Assisting Judges – 503-226-7150

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Lawyers with Depression –

www.lawyerswithdepression.com

Suicide Awareness Voices of Education –

www.save.org

Dave Nee Foundation –

www.daveneefoundation.com

Suicide.org – www.suicide.org

QPR Institute for Suicide Prevention –

<https://www.qprinstitute.com/>

Oregon County Crisis Lines & Mental Health

Resources – <http://public.health.oregon.gov/preventionwellness/safeliving/suicideprevention/pages/cntymap.aspx>

Lines for Life - Formerly Oregon Partnership –

<http://www.linesforlife.org/>

openly about it. Our profession deserves it and our colleagues deserve it.

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ATTORNEY COUNSELOR

OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

If you or someone you know is depressed or considering suicide, call the Oregon Attorney Assistance Program at 503-226-1057 or 1-800-321-OAAP (6227). OAAP assistance is free and completely confidential.