



IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

December 2004
Issue No. 56

REFLECTIONS ON DEPRESSION: TEN YEARS LATER

*In Memory of Martin D. Sharp
1945-1994*

In 1994, Martin Sharp, my brother-in-law and a well-known attorney in the Portland area, ended his life without warning. Some readers may recall the Summer 1994 *In Sight* article entitled “Out of the Blue,” which described the day of his death, including the search for him and the growing realization that he was gone. It has been 10 years since that dark day, yet the impact continues to be substantial. I offer my personal viewpoint here to encourage attorneys who might be depressed, or who know someone who is not doing well emotionally, to seek help. As a psychologist, I am aware that many books and articles are written on depression and suicide. This article conveys the perspective of someone who has been directly affected by the tragedy of suicide.

In my experience, attorneys and other professionals tend to hide or minimize their depression. They have an image to maintain, and others look to them for guidance, consistency, and competence. Depression does not fit well with others’ expectations, nor their own. Thus, many professionals try to deal with depression themselves. Attorneys make decisions, give advice, and exercise judgment on behalf of their clients. These responsibilities can make attorneys quite vulnerable to depression, because every day they face the consequences of decisions made in their own lives – as well as in the lives of their clients. Many engage in behaviors

that provide short-term relief or distraction but in the long run are likely to be destructive, such as self-medicating for anxiety using alcohol.

If depression worsens, the depressed person may consider taking his or her life and may begin to have specific thoughts about how to carry out the plan. This becomes a kind of mental rehearsal, which significantly increases the probability of a suicide attempt. Because professional people are in general successful, they unfortunately are also likely to be “successful” in their self-destruction. The combination of hiding one’s difficulties and a history of success can be deadly if combined with a plan. A severely depressed individual can be triggered into acting on the plan by acute stress, intoxication, or likely both.

Considerable distortion in the mind of the depressed individual warps thinking and judgment. Relationships with others are influenced by low self-esteem. Underestimation of one’s importance to others is common, and suicidal ideation produces a tendency to believe that those who are left behind will “get over it.” However, loved ones of those who kill themselves often never do “get over it.” The pain of the suicide endures. People whose parents have committed suicide are overrepresented in my practice, even when these events occurred many decades ago. People who have experienced the suicide of a close friend or relative often think, “I wasn’t good enough to stay for.”

Friends and relatives left behind often attempt to make sense of what has hap-

OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

503-226-1057
1-800-321-OAAP
www.oaap.org

Lawyers Helping Lawyers

- Alcohol & Chemical Dependency
- Career Change & Transition
- Gambling Addiction
- Mental Health
- Procrastination & Time Management

*A free, nonprofit,
confidential program
for you.*

pened by trying to reconstruct the events and by pondering what they might have done to save the person's life. Unfortunately, professionals tend not to disclose much about themselves, leaving few, if any, warning signs to "read" ahead of time. Such ambiguity can leave perpetual questions about "why" and whether this could have been prevented by having been more sensitive to the person's distress. Over time and with more information, hypotheses about "why" may change and then change again.

Our family members continue to talk about Martin. We remember his birthday and the anniversary of his death. At holidays and special events, we tell stories about him. We count the amount of time since his death. The ambiguity about the reasons for his suicide remains, which may explain our persistent need to revisit memories of the events that led up to his death. I believe that many families cope with the aftermath of a suicide in a similar way, although some never discuss it openly.

I often reflect on how things could have been different for Martin and how they could be different for others who suffer from depression. Martin, like many other professionals, believed that he had to handle almost everything himself. He tended to "keep his own counsel," even when help was very available. He lost sight of how much he meant to others and how they would have helped him through his difficult times. Martin's loss of perspective was deadly.

It's my hope that sharing these personal experiences will encourage people who are struggling with depression to get help at an early stage. Attorneys in Oregon have the Oregon Attorney Assistance Program, in addition to the option of seeing mental health professionals in private practice. These resources can help you think clearly and keep problems in perspective – so they don't grow to seem insurmountable. Trying to handle it all yourself, for as long as you can, can be a disastrous plan. Instead of enduring the depression, reach out and accept help.

Michael Christenson, Ph.D.