

# *IN SIGHT* for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## PREVENTING SUICIDE: A CHALLENGE TO THE LEGAL PROFESSION

Virtually every American knows that approximately 3,000 Americans were killed by terrorists on 9/11. What most Americans don't know is that ten times that many Americans kill themselves *every single year*, leaving hundreds of thousands of loved ones, colleagues, and friends to grieve.

Unfortunately, many people are familiar with suicide, its awful consequences, and its devastating effects on loved ones and those left behind. In most adult audiences, 90 percent of people will indicate that they have lost to suicide someone they knew on a first-name basis. No doubt some of you reading this know someone who committed suicide – a law school classmate, a college roommate, a colleague, a client, an old friend, or even a family member.

### Lawyers as Gatekeepers

The United States lagged behind other first-world countries in developing a national suicide-prevention plan, but now we have one. Because lawyers play a pivotal role in the lives of many distressed people, lawyers were identified as possible “key gatekeepers” in the 2001 Surgeon General’s National Strategy for Suicide Prevention. Strategy Goal 6.7 states: “By 2005, increase the proportion of divorce and family law and criminal defense attorneys who have received training in identifying and responding to persons at risk for suicide.”

Attorneys have unique opportunities to identify and refer potentially suicidal clients, employees, and colleagues. They

are often in the thick of stress, loss, and the psychological combat of conflicted relationships. With their enhanced literacy in mental illness and substance abuse, attorneys are uniquely positioned to act as gatekeepers in the implementation of the first U.S. national suicide-prevention effort.

The aim of Goal 6.7 is to address the “missed opportunities” to identify and refer potentially suicidal persons who may otherwise remain undetected and unassisted. Although attorneys have no legal requirement to intervene in the lives of potentially suicidal persons, many of them feel an ethical, humanitarian, and professional duty to take considered and positive action when they encounter someone suicidal.

### Suicide Prevention Is Also About You

We all know lawyers are not immune to personal crises, mood disorders, and substance-abuse problems. We also know that many lawyers, while excellent at referring other distressed people for help, are often loath to seek that same help for themselves.

Unless we are much mistaken, this means *you* – especially if you are a man. Compared with women, men are much less likely to ask for help, which may account for a fourfold higher rate of suicide among men than women. However, smart men make smart choices, and smart choices include taking care of one’s mental health.

Self-referral takes courage. Sometimes people in distress are simply unable

### OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

503-226-1057  
1-800-321-OAAP  
[www.aaap.org](http://www.aaap.org)

#### Lawyers Helping Lawyers

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

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for you.**

to make that call for help. More than ever, attorneys should be alert to colleagues who appear to be struggling. Don't be afraid to reach out and ask whether things are okay.

In addition to the usual stresses of the legal profession, many lawyers are now forced to contend with the recession and its ramifications. Faced with client cutbacks, lower pay, layoffs, and poor job prospects, attorneys who already suffer from anxiety, depression, or addictions may find their coping skills stretched beyond their capacity.

How many of the approximately 32,000 suicides in the United States each year are lawyers? How many are family members of lawyers? How many are law students? How many are employees, co-workers, clients, or citizens being served by our judicial system?

No one is quite sure. But if the United States has more than one million lawyers and law students, and if they experience the same rate of suicide as the general U.S. population (11 suicides per 100,000 people per year), then an estimated 800 lawyers and law students have died by suicide since 9/11— and it may be worse.

A study of Canadian Bar Association (CBA) members suggests that the suicide rate among attorneys is actually five to six times higher than the national average, or 55 to 66 per 100,000 per year. If American Bar Association members are like CBA members, the number of U.S. attorneys and law students who have died by suicide since 9/11 could exceed 5,000.

### Suicide Prevention Works

We know what is needed and what works. We have lawyer assistance programs. We have effective treatments. Recovery is real. We have strategies and interventions that work. Lives can be saved. What we need now is participation and leadership.

Among others, Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, (who lost his father to suicide and had the courage to tell his story in the U.S. Senate) and former Oregon Senator Gordon Smith (who lost a son to suicide) have stepped forward and helped pass the Garret Lee Smith Memorial Act, which now funds millions of dollars in suicide-prevention programs. These survivors of loved ones' suicides are helping to power the national movement with passion, brains, and determination.

### A True Story

Some may recall a little-known member of the Illinois bar, a lawyer who suffered from suicidal depressions as a young man. After losing his true love to an early death, he became so despondent he told others he felt like killing himself. Recognizing his despair, his friends and colleagues in the bar rallied to his support, took away his pistols and knives, spent time with him, and even locked him up to protect him from himself.

Thus did Abraham Lincoln survive his suicidal crisis and learn to live with and gain insights from the depressions that revisited him throughout his life. If one life lost to suicide is too many, imagine the cost of not preventing the suicide of our next Abraham Lincoln, who may, right now, be attending law school.

Former Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher said, "Suicide is our most preventable form of death." If true, then we are all in a high-stakes race between education and tragedy.

If you or someone you know needs help, call the OAAP at 503-226-1057 and ask to speak to an attorney counselor. It's confidential. It's free. It can save a life.

### SKIP SIMPSON AND PAUL QUINNETT

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*Skip Simpson practices law in Frisco, Texas, where he specializes in handling suicide and other psychiatric and psychological malpractice cases; he may be reached at [ssimpson@skipsimpson.com](mailto:ssimpson@skipsimpson.com). Dr. Paul Quinnett is president and CEO of the QPR Institute ([www.qprinstitute.com](http://www.qprinstitute.com)), a suicide-prevention institute in Spokane, Washington; he may be reached at [pquinnett@mindspring.com](mailto:pquinnett@mindspring.com).*

## Preventing Suicide: What You Can Do

### Learn the Warning Signs

Are you worried about someone you know? Look for the following warning signs:

- Threatening to hurt or kill oneself or talking about wanting to hurt or kill oneself;
- Looking for ways to kill oneself by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means;
- Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide when these actions are out of the ordinary for the person;
- Feeling hopeless;
- Feeling rage or uncontrolled anger or seeking revenge;
- Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking;
- Feeling trapped, like there's no way out;
- Increasing alcohol or drug use;
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and society;
- Feeling anxious or agitated, or being unable to sleep or sleeping all the time;
- Experiencing dramatic mood changes; and
- Seeing no reason for living or having no sense of purpose in life.

### Learn QPR

QPR (Question, Persuade, and Refer someone for help) is an emergency intervention (like CPR) for those who may be considering suicide. A one-hour training program is available from certified QPR instructors nationwide or online at [www.qprinstitute.com](http://www.qprinstitute.com). The training takes one hour and can save a life.

### Access These Free Resources

- Dr. Paul Quinnett has donated his best-selling book, *Suicide: The Forever Decision*, to the public in electronic format. It may be printed, distributed, given away, and shared with anyone who needs it. The book can be downloaded for free at [www.qprinstitute.com](http://www.qprinstitute.com).
- "What Lawyers Need to Know About Suicide During a Recession: Prevention, Identity and Law Firm Responsibility": Download this free MP3 audio program at [www.abanet.org/abastore](http://www.abanet.org/abastore).

### Don't Wait; Get Help Now

- The Oregon Partnership Lifeline/National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a 24-hour, toll-free suicide-prevention service available to anyone in suicidal crisis. *If you or someone you know needs help, please dial 1-800-273-TALK (8255).*
- Hopeline Network (toll-free): 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433).