

Depression Could Never Happen To Me – I'm a Lawyer!

It didn't happen all at once. It sort of snuck up on me because of my belief and those of the legal profession that I could not have a problem because I solved them.

Depression and recovery have become a way of life for me. So it might help you to hear what and how this illness started.

I was a contented lawyer happily practicing matrimonial litigation. Don't get me wrong. I didn't like the senseless conflict and the damage inflicted on families. But I felt comfortable and competent in my practice. I was married happily for 18 years with two wonderful children. I was the Chair of the Board of a children's mental health facility. I led the fundraising drive at my church. I sat on the Board of the Boys and Girls Club. Life was good but then over a span of two years, things started happening.

My sleep was the first thing to go. I began to have early-morning wakening getting up anywhere from 2:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m. after a nightly nightmare of burning to death. I would get out of my death bed, shower, get dressed and go to the office. I averaged about 4 hours of sleep a night. And I started to get tired physically. Niggling things went on. I had strange back pains and phantom heart attacks. Tests showed nothing. I got a migraine every afternoon at 3:00 p.m. I took Tylenol every day increasing my dosage almost weekly until I had a huge daily intake. I tried to cut back but I got rebound headaches. Tylenol and I became very good friends that took me a time to stop.

Emotionally, I became a wreck. I would cry easily. I isolated myself by closing my office door when before it had been an open-door policy. My temper flared and my composure was spotty. There was no fun in life. Everything was tinged with black.

Spiritually, I was dead. I didn't believe in God anymore. I let my relationships with other people lapse. My relationship with my wife was strained. I had nothing for my kids.

What happens to a practice when this goes on? I tried my best to carry on. I devoted long hours doing what I used to do in shorter time. My files became messy and disorganized. My handwriting became lazy and scrawly. This was big for me because I prided myself on my penmanship. Another sign of decay. Phone calls went unanswered. Billings were not made. Money became tight. Staff were concerned and shunned. Court results were poor.

Eventually, I was afraid to close my eyes and go into the nightmare of burning to death again. I did not sleep for four days. When I went to my doctor, I collapsed in tears. I stopped practicing and my business fell apart. I went bankrupt.

But the good thing of all of this is that I went to treatment in a series of hospitals for the next three years. I learned a great deal about depression, its causes and its treatments. I learned to refocus my life in three areas – physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Physically, I learned that my mother was right. Eat three meals a day; get eight hours of sleep a night; and get exercise three times a week. Cut out or cut down on alcohol, nicotine and coffee. My doctor advised me to get a dog – it would make me walk and at least someone would be happy to see me when I got home.

Emotionally, I learned to connect with other people. Whenever I was asked how I was I had said “fine” No matter how many different times or ways my doctor asked me, I always said “fine”. It is a throwaway word that avoids feeling and connection. I learned to be honest and answer the question with truth even if the question is a formality by the questioner as a conversation starter. I never say fine anymore unless I am not doing well. It is a sign.

My doctor asked me if I had a good friend. I had lots. Did I have anyone I trusted with my hopes, dreams and fears. No one. Who might fit that bill? I suggested my wife. We worked on rebuilding our relationship and dealing with my isolation. I developed connections with my sons. I nurtured the friendships I had allowed to lapse. All this took time and was and still is a process but this has made my life much richer with the effort.

Spiritually, I was not ready to talk about God. Instead, my doctor and I talked about humanity or connection with others. He asked me to do a Mission Statement. Most organizations have them. They state who you are, what you believe and how you are going to get there. I wrote one. It was a pile of crud because I wrote what I thought others wanted to hear. Now, I have a statement about me that I am proud to have on my wall where other can see it. It is really impressive to clients to see this in the waiting room and office above your head.

My doctor asked me if I had an obituary. I thought he needed the help now. He told me the story of Alfred Nobel who made his money from dynamite. He made lots of money. He lived in a small town. His brother, who also lived in the town died. He picked up the morning paper to see that they thought he had died. They called him a merchant of death, a blight upon humanity and that the world was better off without him. He was stunned to read his legacy. He changed his life and established the Nobel prizes. The doctor’s point was that I could change my life with finding out my legacy. I have changed my life and I do have my obituary.

Finally and at the same time as the talk therapy work, my doctor and I worked on the proper medications to stabilize me. Over the last 18 years, I have taken 35 different medications along with numerous combinations. I am stable now with my cocktail. Patience and persistence have gotten me here.

The final myth of the legal profession was that if anybody found out that I was mentally ill, they would think less of me, not trust me and believe that I was dangerous. Not true. People have been wonderful with the exception of a few misguided souls.

Depression has been my gift. It has made me a more complete person. It has made me live in the moment and be real.

And yes, I can have problems and still help others solve theirs.

John Starzynski is the Volunteer Executive Director of the Ontario Lawyers Assistance Program, a 24 hour, confidential, peer support and counseling program that assists lawyers, law students and their immediate families with issues of stress, burnout, addictions and mental wellness concerns. This is his story. He can be reached at 1-877-584-6227 or at john@olap.ca. To reach the Program Manager, Leota Embleton, MSW, leota@olap.ca, and the Case Managers, Doron Gold, LLB, doron@olap.ca, Terri Wilkinson, LLB, RN, terri@olap.ca, and Jill Fenaughty, BA, MA, LLB, jill@olap.ca, call 1-877-576-6227. The website is www.olap.ca.