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# GETTING HELP FOR OURSELVES OR OTHERS

*“Don’t Tell Someone to Get Over it.  
Help them Get Through It.”*

~Sue Fitzmaurice

BY SARAH MYERS ESQ., LMFT, LAC

**T**he practice of law is a demanding vocation. We are exposed to factors known to contribute to poor physical and mental health: unpredictability, contact with highly stressed or traumatized clients, long hours, and perfectionism. In addition, our skills are called upon in adversarial, fast-paced, and results-driven environments. This is not to mention the plethora of personal struggles and worries we might each be facing, such as financial stress, relationship issues, concern for children or aging parents, and so on. For many of us, these demands can lead to maladaptive coping strategies, from problematic self-medicating with substances like alcohol or prescription drugs, to sabotaging professional or personal obligations and relationships, to social withdrawal, isolation and other forms of emotional numbing.

Terms like “functioning alcoholic” or “normal neurotic” might be used to describe someone who is experiencing a behavioral health issue, but who can make it through school, advance a career, and maintain relationships without severe consequences. But what about the internal suffering that person goes through, whether that relates to personal or professional problems? What if we find ourselves continuously stressed and restless, hypervigilant, irritable, obsessing about the negative or the past, and/or worrying or obsessively trying to plan for the future (i.e., anxiety)? Or what if we are often exhausted, have difficulty concentrating, miss deadlines, experience sleep disturbances, and are persistently sad, pessimistic, and numb (i.e., depression)? Or



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what if we start self-medicating with alcohol or other drugs, experience blackouts, or compromise our personal relationships or professional reputation because of it?

Some signs that you, a family member, or a colleague could benefit from confidential assistance include:

- ◆ Eating or sleeping too much or too little;
- ◆ Increase in use of drugs or alcohol;
- ◆ Pulling away from people and usual activities;
- ◆ Feeling numb or like nothing matters, or having low or no energy;
- ◆ Feeling unusually confused, forgetful, on edge, angry, upset, worried, or scared;
- ◆ Exhibiting hostile, inappropriate, or readily tearful/overwhelmed behavior in personal or professional situations;
- ◆ Missing deadlines or appointments;
- ◆ Not returning calls; or
- ◆ Struggling with record-keeping, managing funds, and so on.

For a profession dedicated to helping others, we are notoriously deficient in helping ourselves. Many of us put our clients', firms', or employers' needs ahead of our own, and, in some cases, ahead of our coworkers, colleagues, family, and friends. Most of us are so dedicated to the "superhero" identity that we can't even recognize when we might need help ourselves. After all, lawyers are a competitive group of highly intelligent type-A perfectionists who are extraordinarily hard on themselves, creating a culture of "suffering in silence" and putting work above health, well-being, and our social networks of family and friends. Many lawyers report that they would rather struggle with their issues than ask for help due to concerns it might impact their license or make them appear weak, and yet they simultaneously report suffering from higher levels of behavioral

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health issues than the general public.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the ability to ask for support for personal or professional issues is a characteristic of successful individuals—it demonstrates both intelligence and resiliency.

Neurologically speaking, when we're faced with a difficult problem, our stress response (fight or flight) activates in a way that prevents the brain from processing experiences in a helpful way. Unless we have developed resiliency and stress management techniques, we will need others to help us calm our nervous systems enough to resolve the problem. Despite the misperception that we should know everything because we solve problems for a living, we are just as human as everyone else, and it's very difficult for the human brain to process problems, particularly our own, when we're stressed, overwhelmed, anxious, depressed, or overusing psychoactive chemicals like alcohol that compromise problem-solving abilities.

To exacerbate the issue, many of us stop listening when we hear terms like depression, anxiety, behavioral health, mental health, substance use, and addiction. Likewise, when we observe colleagues, family, or friends exhibiting signs or symptoms of suffering that could be attributed to such issues, many of us make excuses for the behavior rather than expressing concern or offering to help. Fear of the unknown and stigma often play a role, but mostly it's because we don't believe these issues affect us, we don't realize these issues relate to high levels of stress, or we don't believe we can do anything to assist someone else with these issues. We don't have to be "diagnosable" to experience distressing behavioral health symptoms that impact our personal or professional lives.

While these circumstances might feel unsurmountable when we are dealing with them, they are not. In fact, we've all gone through difficult times in our lives and there are many resources available to get through them in ways that increase our resilience, grit, intelligence, and potential for success. We aren't superheroes, and we aren't invincible to suffering. Maybe you can't identify exactly what is wrong, but you know that something isn't going well and you could use some direction on how to process it, or you could use some help figuring out how to help someone else you care about. If that is the case, there is no need to tough it out alone. ●

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<sup>1</sup> L. Albert, R. Johnson & P.R. Krill, The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys, 10 J. Addiction Med. 46 (2016).

Sarah Myers, Esq., LMFT, LAC, is the Executive Director of the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). COLAP is the free, confidential and independent well-being program for the legal community of Colorado. For more information, go to [www.coloradolap.org](http://www.coloradolap.org). For a confidential consultation, discussion about your stressors, or to obtain helpful resources, contact COLAP at 303-986-3345 or [info@coloradolap.org](mailto:info@coloradolap.org).