



FLA handling more mental health calls

By Kim MacQueen
Associate Editor

A 40-something lawyer — we'll call him Gene — recalls the enforced 20-day hospitalization following the first of his several suicide attempts. His wife is divorcing him and his children are afraid of him. His clandestine mistress of five years, who's just left him and made him want to kill himself in the first place, shows up at his bedside every few days to waffle about taking him back.

The paralegal working in Gene's solo-practice office periodically brings a stack of blank checks for him to sign; he thinks she's a lifesaver for keeping the place afloat in his absence. He later finds out she's bilked him out of more than \$90,000 and left him in the wake of eight Bar ethics complaints, staring down a \$2 million malpractice lawsuit. Too bad the malpractice insurance company had cancelled his insurance for failure to pay the premiums.

Diagnosed with clinical depression, Gene spent years going in and out of psychologists' and psychiatrists' offices, on and off antidepressants, and had a few more years of brushes with death before his parents called to tell him about an ad they'd seen for Florida Lawyer's Assistance, Inc.

A Changing Practice

Though they're often thought of as the guys who help lawyers with substance abuse issues, the organization increasingly assists attorneys in dealing with mental health illnesses ranging from single stress-related depressive episodes to more clinical problems like Gene's.

Several studies show that lawyers suffer much greater incidents of mental health problems than the general population. In a landmark 1991 study of 105 professions, researchers found that lawyers were the most likely to commit suicide.

FLA Executive Director Michael Cohen estimates that while about 12 or 13 percent of people calling FLA for help were suffering from stress-related depression five years ago, that number is now up around 50 percent.

"My hunch is that, in another couple of years, it'll comprise most of what we do," Cohen says.

Why are so many more lawyers calling?

"There are a lot more lawyers and there's a lot more financial stress. There's a lot more competition for fewer dollars," Cohen explains. "These are the conditions that are creating a lot of the unprofessional behavior we see out there. It leads to lawyers getting into situations they might not otherwise be involved in, trusting people that they wouldn't trust otherwise, being put in very stressful situations. It might not always lead to clinical depression — but it's definitely going to negatively impact their ability to practice."

Dr. Scott Weinstein has worked with FLA for three years, the last two as its full-time psychotherapist. He and Cohen seemed to view the increase in mental health calls as generally positive, as it meant that more lawyers were overcoming the stigma attached to depression and getting help, though usually not nearly as soon as their friends, families, and therapists would like.

"The things that make us good lawyers make us terrible patients," Cohen says. "We use our skills to argue that we don't have problems.

There's this perception that we never show weakness. That makes us progress longer into mental illness and get into more and more trouble before we'll admit we need help."

Until Gene walked through the door of his first FLA therapy session, he really thought his depression was something he had a handle on.

"I really thought the only person who could fix me was me," he said. "I thought, sooner or later I'll find a way to fix this, because that's what real men — real attorneys, real smart people — do."

'It was that night that I decided I really wanted to get well. I also made more progress in that hour and a half than I'd made in the whole previous year, talking to a psychiatrist for \$200 a pop!'

Paralyzed

It's this kind of thinking that stymies many lawyers suffering from mental illness, Weinstein says, whether they're dealing with a long-term problem or a more acute stress-related depressive episode.

"One of the things I find fascinating about working with attorneys is this notion of paralysis," he said. "They're trained to be so competent and they really have to be on the ball. So when things like this hit them, they tend to be hit harder than other people. It hits them on a core level, and it gets to their idea of self-worth and self-respect. It's a shock to the system.

"So often what happens is they ignore it as long as they possibly can, and the problem builds and the fire gets hotter, and they get deeper and deeper in trouble and more and more depressed."

Cohen says that "most of the time, by the time someone calls our office, they're sitting at their desk, looking at a mountain of unpaid bills, with no idea what to do. They're paralyzed."

The word "paralyzed" was used by all three men interviewed for this story to define the point many lawyers get to before they'll seek help. And often a family member or friend's insistence is the only thing that gets them there.

Gene's paralysis story was more literal. He describes waking up one morning knowing something was really wrong. He'd just lost an important case and was coming to grips with his dislike of the profession in general and his position as a litigator in particular — feeling "really, really uncomfortable with it all." He woke up that morning literally unable to move or communicate with his wife and then-infant daughter, with horrible visions of being buried alive in his own grave.

His wife found the business card of a psychiatrist given to him that week by a senior partner in his firm, and he started taking antidepressants and going to therapy. The sessions helped him realize a deep-seated anger, unhappiness, and entrapment in his profession as well as his marriage.

Uniquely Suited

By the time he walked into his first FLA meeting, Gene had been through years of therapy, as well as a divorce and the collapse of his solo practice. He'd also suffered more suicide attempts and didn't really feel like he'd gotten a whole lot of help.

"So my parents asked me to go to this FLA meeting, and I just went to get them off my back," Gene says now. "There were two therapists, both attorneys who had dealt with similar issues and who had clawed their way back to respectability. We talked for an hour and a half and

Help

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it cost me 20 bucks.

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Cohen says that's because FLA works hard not only to find therapists who can deal with attorneys, but takes pains to find people who are especially suited to dealing with their unique needs.

"An attorney can overwhelm a therapist," Cohen says.

Gene explains that "these people had been there. They knew all the mind games that attorneys with different mental illnesses can play on people, and they wouldn't let anybody get away with anything."

Gene found that not even his problems were insurmountable. As they do with each person who calls the FLA 800 number, therapists with FLA helped him to take apart the problems and deal with them in manageable pieces. An attorney in his group helped him deal with the

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Bar ethics complaints against him; another helped him find a divorce attorney he could trust.

"We really are uniquely set up to help attorneys before the problems get way out of hand," Weinstein says. "When they're in the midst of something we can support them throughout the entire process."

Now that he's remarried, employed in another area of the law that he loves and that's far from the litigation work he couldn't stand, Gene still attends FLA group therapy sessions, because it still helps.

"I like to go not so much because I need help with daily things, but so that I can continue to improve in understanding how I got as bad as I did," he says.

"We still get a number of people saying, 'I wish I knew about you earlier,'" Weinstein says. "There's a lot of pressure out there, but there's a lot of health being regained, too. That's what's really exciting for me. People are getting better."

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Florida Lawyers Assistance, Inc.

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