Depression Dominates Legal Industry, Starting at Law School

Summary: Depression and suicide emerge in law students at a higher rate than any other field but the causes and ways of preventing it are not that simple to fix.

Is a law school a breeding ground for depression? The Dave Nee Foundation reports that an average amount of students enter law school with depression, around 8-9 percent, but upon graduation, around 40 percent of law students will have depression. The leading cause of disability in the world and in the U.S. is depression. Some call depression an “epidemic,” which could very likely be accurate in the legal world.

The Dave Nee Foundation works to end the stigma of depression among lawyers. The foundation was established in 2006 after recent Fordham Law School graduate Dave Nee committed suicide while he was preparing for his bar exams. They estimate that roughly 10 percent of American suffer from depression with around 80 suicides each day.

There is no doubt that law school is a difficult process both physically and mentally but so are a lot of other upper-level training programs like medical school. The difference is that medical students don’t have to worry so much about how their career could be ruined by ending up at the wrong company. Law students are stressing about their future from the moment they start law school. Estimates suggest that 96 percent of law students experience extreme stress compared to only 70 percent of medical students. Upon graduation and entrance into the career world, lawyers continue to experience extreme stress at alarming numbers, leading to depression, anxiety, and suicide.

Some of the depression could be attributed to the teaching method during classes in law school. Law professors utilize the Socratic Method where they ask the class questions, often intended to stump the students. Several law students have attributed this method to a great source of their stress for fear of being called on and not knowing the answer. The other part of law school that stresses the students out is the fact that most grades rely on a single exam. Nothing else will matter for the law students if they don’t get at least a B on the final exam. Good grades equate membership on a law review, a prestigious clerkship, and interviews with the best law firms. What perhaps is even more stressful is that law professors must use a mandatory curve so even if the student gets an A on the test, if they don’t get the highest A then it doesn’t matter. It is actually impossible for everyone to succeed no matter how hard they try.

With such a competitive drive to achieve the top grade, law students turn on each other, eliminating trust and friendship with their fellow students. Law students end up feeling alone and desperate to find a way to succeed no matter what. A good mental health needs wholesome human connections. Instead there focus is moved from friendship to ones that eliminate happiness.

Former Fordham Law School dean William M. Treanor said, “Depression is a very important issue that often gets swept to the side. It’s a real concern and a problem in the legal profession. Studies indicate that it is common among law students and common among lawyers. Given that, it’s important to try to figure out ways to combat it and to let people know if they are suffering, they are not alone.”

So what steps are law schools taking to help their students prevent and combat depression? The struggle is getting students to reach out for the help law schools are offering. As attorney Andrew Sparkler said, “To admit that you are depressed [in law school], to yourself or to others..., is a weakness and if you’re in a shark tank of hyper-aggressive folks around you, you’d be hesitant to expose it because why would you fess up to anyone that you have a problem?”

Often, law students may not even realize they have depression. Unhappiness and dissatisfaction often get mixed up with depression. As Richard O’Connor, Ph.D. states, “We confuse depression, sadness, and grief. But the opposite of depression is not happiness, but vitality – the ability to experience a full range of emotion, including happiness, excitement, sadness, and grief. Depression is not an emotion itself. It’s not sadness or grief, it’s an illness. When we feel our worst, sad, self-absorbed, and helpless, we are experiencing what people with depression experience, but they don’t recover from those moods without help.”

Many law schools have tried to address the problem of depression by increasing access to therapists, holding awareness days and activities, and providing presentations on depression from those that have no experience as law students. Law students can sense the lack of sincere effort. Kate Mayer Mangan in a Huffington Post article stated, “Instead of glorifying good grades and prestigious jobs,
law schools can do more to help students cultivate internal motivators like purpose and autonomy. Schools might adopt teaching methods that don’t involve embarrassing students. Classes could emphasize achieving results for clients, such as in clinical settings, over grades. Professors and schools could publicize that there is almost no correlation between good grades and long-term well-being, as one recent study of over 6,000 lawyers found. Perhaps that would take some of the pressure off. Changes like these might begin to shift the culture of the legal profession, away from external validation and toward internal motivators that lead to happiness.”

What do you think law schools can do to combat depression in its students without making law school an easy joke? Tell us your thoughts in the comments below.

To learn more about depression in attorneys, read these articles:

- One in Three Attorneys Are Alcoholics
- Lawyers are Still Suffering from Clinical Depression
- Lawsuit Demands Removal of Dallas DA Who Suffered from Depression

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