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Suicide Prevention: Every Lawyer's Opportunity

By Joan Bibelhausen

Recently, the *New York Times* published the article *A Suicide Therapist's Secret Past*. In it, Dr. Stacey Freedenthal, a therapist focusing on suicide prevention, described her own suicide attempt many years earlier. Even though she is well known in the field of suicide prevention, the stigma associated with this act kept Freedenthal from making it public. As I read her story, I thought about our profession and the stigma that can keep us from reaching out in our most desperate hours. If this was so hard for her, no wonder it is so difficult for us.

Not only are lawyers at risk, but our clients are as well. Clients in many areas of law are dealing with crises, loss, and other circumstances that can lead to a sense of desperation and hopelessness. Very similar cases may involve clients who respond to their situations very differently. If a client gives cues that they may be suicidal, attorneys have the opportunity to act.

We all know that working in the law is stressful. Press coverage of lawyer suicides has magnified the potential impact of that stress. As a profession, we experience depression and alcohol use problems at a significantly higher rate than the general population. We also experience greater rates of anxiety, chronic stress, and divorce, as well as a higher rate of suicide and suicidal ideation. If you have attended any CLE programs sponsored by Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL) in the past several years, you have heard us talk about this, but all of us need to keep talking.

The chronic stress we experience may trigger depression or other illnesses, and it may lead to a sense of helplessness, increasing anxiety, and the inability to complete even mundane tasks. We're paid to solve the problems of others, so, naturally, we feel we should be able to solve our own problems. We may feel shame because lawyers aren't supposed to feel helpless. That helplessness can become hopelessness, which increases the risk for suicide exponentially.

What are the signs? Symptoms of depression include:

- loss of interest in normally pleasurable activities
- difficulty concentrating, remembering or deciding
- changes in sleep, appetite, and weight
- fatigue
- having thoughts of suicide

At the same time, there may be a rising sense of anxiety, as if every unfinished project is a ticking time bomb. Suicide enters one's thoughts as a reasonable solution to a seemingly insurmountable problem. The suicidal person may express a wish to die or make statements that appear

to be saying goodbye. They may give away prized possessions, quickly wrap up files, or suddenly put their affairs in order. They may make a plan and acquire the means to carry it out. This could be something as simple as overdosing on alcohol. People who talk about their suicide, can die by suicide. We all need to talk about it.

Warning signs of suicide include:

- hopelessness
- withdrawal
- desperation
- increased use of alcohol and other controlled substances
- impulsiveness or high risk behavior
- deterioration in functioning

What can you do? Have the courage to ask and to act. Be sure you have the time to listen if you choose to reach out. If you observe these disturbing behaviors in someone you know, be direct and sincere when questioning them. "Have you thought of harming yourself? Are you in a lot of pain? Do you feel unsafe? Are you thinking of suicide?" *Never* ask in a way that suggests you need a "no" answer, such as "You're not thinking about suicide, are you?"

Asking directly allows the person to speak freely. If they say no and you are still concerned, rephrase it and ask again. Give a reason why you asked—the person who said no may be ready to change her answer if you ask again and show you care. The person who is so depressed that they are paralyzed and may not be able to affirmatively ask for help, but they may be able to answer a direct question honestly.

What happens next? Just listen. Give your full attention. Remember that this is not your crisis. If you believe suicide may be imminent, get them to professional help and be supportive as they get there. If they have a therapist, call that number. If not, consider taking them to an emergency room. Call 1-800-SUICIDE or 1-800-273-TALK – both are national suicide prevention hotlines. Counselors are also available 24/7 through LCL at 612-646-5590 or 1-866-525-6466.

Once the immediate crisis is past, support is critical to ongoing recovery. Therapy can help someone through the immediate mental illness-induced crisis, and it can provide tools to develop resilience in the future. Medications are often appropriate, especially in the early stages. If the lawyer is struggling financially, LCL can provide connections to resources to support the cost of ongoing treatment—all confidentially. Personal support and acceptance is critical to preventing suicide. If you're feeling suicidal, know that you are not alone.

If these words remind you of someone you're concerned about, or if you recognize some of these symptoms in yourself, please act. Dr. Freedenthal reported that as she began to feel the effects of her suicide attempt, her brain and body fought back and she lived. Knowing that one can come out on the other side of debilitating pain can provide incredible hope. Call for coaching if you need help on how to reach out to someone. Call for yourself if you find yourself realizing "I've thought about suicide." Hundreds of your Minnesota colleagues called for help last year on many different issues that cause stress or distress in their lives. You're not alone, and LCL is here to help.



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Ms. Bibelhausen is Executive Director of Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers. LCL provides free and confidential peer and professional support to lawyers, judges, law students and their immediate family members on any issue that causes stress or distress.