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Maintaining Balance in the Practice of Law

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MAINTAINING BALANCE IN THE PRACTICE OF LAW

I. Introduction

It is well documented that lawyers have some of the highest rates of depression, substance abuse, and suicide for any professional field. In addition to affecting work and clients, emotional health issues can dramatically impact a lawyer's personal life and relationships. Fortunately, many state bar associations have taken action and established confidential resources to help lawyers, judges, and law students who may have difficulties with mental health or substance use issues.

But what are some ways to initially deter the hold of depression or substance abuse in this demanding and stressful profession? A good place to start is to find and constantly seek happiness. By identifying what happiness means to each of us, and by constantly seeking that personal happiness, we will likely find our work, as well as our lives outside of work, enriched and improved on a daily basis. In other words, constantly seek something awesome. Chances are that the rest of your life will follow suit and join you in the pursuit of awesomeness.

II. Diagnosing and Treating the Problem

Practicing law is a stressful and demanding profession. While friends and family may think that our day-to-day routines resemble an episode of *Suits* or *Boston Legal*, we know better. The heavy responsibility of being a zealous advocate for one's clients and the long hours that attend that responsibility can take their toll. Accordingly, it is important to be aware of certain mental and emotional health issues to which lawyers are particularly vulnerable and to know what resources are available to help find proper intervention and treatment.

A. Common Mental Health Issues among Attorneys

Depression

Depression is a common but serious mental illness that interferes with daily life and normal functioning.¹ Symptoms may include:

- persistent sad or anxious feelings,
- pessimism,
- irritability,
- insomnia,
- overeating,
- persistent aches and pains, or
- loss of interest in previously pleasurable activities.²

A landmark 1990 Johns Hopkins study found that **lawyers are 3.6 times more likely to suffer from depression than those in other professions.**³ Moreover, depression is the most likely trigger for suicide, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have identified **lawyers as having the fourth greatest proportion of suicide deaths within their profession** when compared to all other occupations.⁴

Fortunately, depression is treatable, and the great majority of those who seek treatment benefit from it.⁵

Alcohol Dependency and Abuse

¹ *Depression, Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs*, A.B.A., http://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/resources/depression.html (last visited June 24, 2015).

² *Id.*

³ Douglas Quenqua, *Lawyers with Lowest Pay Report More Happiness*, N.Y. TIMES (May 12, 2015), <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/05/12/lawyers-with-lowest-pay-report-more-happiness/>.

⁴ Rosa Flores and Rose Marie Arce, *Why Are Lawyers Killing Themselves?*, CNN.COM (Jan. 20, 2014), <http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/19/us/lawyer-suicides/index.html>.

⁵ *Depression*, A.B.A., *supra* note 1.

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