



Barristers – Bridging the Gap
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Session 3

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“Competency:

Reaching Out When

Times Get Tough”

When Everything Changes and We Need Help

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All of a sudden, we can't go to the office because we work in crowded buildings and courthouses. Being around other people is unsafe for each of us personally and as it turns out, for those we love. As we temporarily work from home, if lucky enough to do so, we wonder if things will ever return to the way they were before the "disease". How long we can last without new income being generated through new clients? Will there be a need for the type of work that we do? How will the wheels of justice turn in the future and will I financially survive? Living in the grip of uncertainty is nothing less than torture. The brain is constantly creating and updating a set of rules that can predict how your world works and now it is impossible to predict what will happen to us. Scientists and politicians are trying to bring us a sense of safety by recommending community guidelines and precautions but it is clear that none of them can predict what will happen. There are no answers that we can rely upon causing a feeling of a lack of control that is downright debilitating.

Everything about our personal and professional lives has changed. There is no denying that most of us are feeling anxious and are suffering for it, right now. There have been some measurable consequences connected to these uncertain times. Alcohol and drug usage amongst lawyers is skyrocketing and depression has hobbled the ability of many to complete tasks and interact with others. Unhealthy relief from emotional and psychological stress and anxiety ranges from drinking too much and abusing illicit and prescription drugs to pulling the covers up over our heads and refusing to get out of bed. Isolation is a trigger for this kind of behavior which might be exacerbated by cancelled medical and psychological appointments. Suicide and violent behavior is on the rise. Paradoxically, when companionship is most necessary and appropriate for improved mental health and healing, people pull away and isolate.

As a professional who responds specifically to lawyers with these kinds of issues, I have noticed a pronounced increase in requests for help. You, or someone you know may be suffering and are not sure what to do. It is helpful to understand why this is happening, what to look for and what can be done to make career and life saving changes.

On March 16, 2020, Patrick Krill published a timely article at law.com entitled, "In a Year Full of Worry and Division, How to Protect Your Mental Health". The article sets forth solutions for lawyers experiencing high levels of isolation and loneliness during these uncertain times. As a lawyer and therapist Krill advises:

"Fighting isolation and loneliness amid a broad public health concern might seem more challenging, but the best way to do it is generally the same as in the absence of an outbreak: with intention and commitment. Schedule time to check in (by phone or video) with family and friends and keep the appointment. Even if you're tired, make the calls and give yourself permission to be fully present for the conversations. In a time of increased stress, a sense of connection can be transformative and, for some, lifesaving."

Coincidentally, "Lawyer Well-Being Week", began in early May and was designed to highlight the kinds of skills that are necessary to get through even the toughest of times. The concept that

lawyers may need strategies for successful living that include emotional, intellectual, occupational, physical, spiritual and social toolkits is one that has gained a lot of traction nationally. There is now a National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being that takes a holistic approach to lawyer wellness. These strategies may prevent troubling behaviors before they become problematic, but for some lawyers out of control behaviors have already taken hold. For some, the pandemic has exacerbated behaviors that used to be somewhat controllable, but now the drinking, drugging and/or depression is having its way. Asking for help to make the necessary changes may be the hardest thing that a lawyer ever has to do. For those who find themselves gripped by alcohol, drugs and/or depression, it is important to know that you don't have to live that way anymore, there is confidential help available. The Other Bar is a good place to get started on a new path. It is a private nonprofit corporation that helps lawyers, judges and law students to find freedom from addictive disorders and mental health concerns so that they might practice law competently and productively. The organization provides a confidential statewide community of recovering legal minds who help each other to accomplish their goals in a sober and sane way. It is, quite simply a free resource for the legal profession that has helped thousands of struggling lawyers to change their lives for the better.

In addition to the Other Bar, here are some resources that may be instructive and helpful in creating life-saving and career-saving changes to meet the new challenges that all of us are facing during this unprecedented time:

- <http://calbar.ca.gov/lap>
- www.drugabuse.gov
- www.nami.org
- www.aa.org
- www.samhsa.gov/find-treatment
- www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline

Note: The author is a former attorney and practicing Addiction Specialist and consultant to the Other Bar, working specifically with lawyers, judges and law students who are facing alcohol, drug and mental health issues. Resources are just a phone call or email away: 1(800) 222-0767 or Gdorst2@gmail.com **All communications are confidential.**