



Karen DeMeola is the 94th president of the CBA. She is the assistant dean of student life at UConn School of Law, where she plans, manages, and oversees programs and services for the student body, including career planning, disability services, and student services. She advises students confronted with a variety of issues, including academic advising, personal matters, and wellness challenges such as addiction and mental health concerns. In addition, Dean DeMeola is charged with implementing and managing diversity programming as well as professional and community development activities.

The American Bar Association (ABA) outlines a series of core values for success in law school and the practice. Typical skills such as problem solving, critical reading, strong writing and research skills, and good listening and oral communication. Lawyers are smart, passionate, dedicated, analytical, self-directed, strategic leaders. We are resilient and unflappable—and we are also human.

In my work, I am responsible for law student life. I am engaged in the national conversation regarding a variety of issues impacting students, including well-being. I think a lot about the impact of law student

Lawyer Well-being: Moving the Conversation Out of the Shadows

By Karen DeMeola

health on their academic journey but also on their careers as lawyers. Studies on law student satisfaction and well-being reveal that law students experience higher levels of depression than their professional school counterparts. The rates of depression, though equal to the general public upon entry, increase as students progress through law school.¹ The stress, addiction, and dissatisfaction follow many into the profession. Lawyers are the most frequently depressed professional group and rank fifth in the incidence of death by suicide. This is shocking.

I advise students about the importance of self-care, of managing time and stress, and direct those who need it to Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, which provides six free sessions with an appropriate counselor. I do not always practice what I preach. I, like many lawyers, spend more time working than anything else. I love working, I always have. I say “yes” a lot, and am constantly running to the next thing. Let’s face it—I’m not really running, just moving. Food is my comfort, and always has been. I manage depression and anxiety, and a bag of peanut M&Ms is far more appealing to me than any other substance. I spend exactly one hour per week for scheduled self-care. I know this is not enough, but I can never seem to find additional time. I just move to the next

event, meeting, student, or function.

This summer I received a copy of *The Addicted Lawyer: Tales of the Bar, Booze, Blow, and Redemption*, by Brian Cuban. Cuban gives readers an account of his life as a lawyer and addict chronicling the ups and downs of his career, how he coped with and hid his issues, and how he started on the road to recovery. Shortly thereafter, the *New York Times* published, “The Lawyer, the Addict,” an account of a Silicon Valley attorney whose addiction was uncovered by his ex-wife after his death.² This third-person account shed light on the subject of attorney addiction. Though each piece is different in terms of outcome, length, and author, the use of the narrative to explore issues has been an important tool for change. Through storytelling we can learn about others and ourselves.

I related to the two stories and noted the result of the lack of long-term self-care, and the many excuses used to avoid well-being. Many of the traits that make great lawyers allow us to analyze, rationalize, and cover our challenges. And it is our resilience that allows us to get back up and move forward. Unfortunately, not all of our colleagues are able to overcome their demons but so many of us are. The collegiality and general care that we have as a profession can allow us to provide the supportive environment in

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which to address these issues. But we don't. The answer lies, in part, in our inability to take the time to be introspective about our own needs. But also in cultural and professional stigmas regarding professionalism and competence. There is also something about being too personal or invasive; it just feels wrong. What I liked about the article and the book, is the narrative tone. I have long been a proponent of the narrative as a tool to break barriers, increase communication and understanding, and decrease bias and stigmatization of important issues. Storytelling allows us to connect with people we might not otherwise associate. In addition, and more importantly, as more people talk about challenges, professionally or personally, the more likely some are to come forward, seek help, or ask for support.

Recently, the National Task force on Lawyer Well-Being was initiated by the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs (CoLAP), the National Organization of Bar Counsel (NOBC), and the Association of Professional Responsibility Lawyers (APRL). They created a report outlining a

blueprint for law schools, law firms, judges, legal employers, bar examiners, lawyer assistance programs, insurance providers, and bar associations interested in joining the cause for lawyer well-being.³ Recognizing and acknowledging issues is difficult, especially when those issues are perceived as being for the weak, unprofessional, and for "them." Mental health and addiction issues cut across all axes of identity. Moving the conversation out of the shadows can help reduce stigma and allow for honest conversations around well-being.

Focusing on well-being is, in my opinion, within the purpose of the CBA. Our mission is, among other factors, to facilitate the delivery of competent legal services, promote diversity within the bar and the bench, to develop collegial interaction among members of the bar, and to safeguard the dignity of the legal profession. When attorneys are suffering with addiction, stress, and other issues impacting well-being, there are resulting consequences to civility, professionalism, and ability to zealously advocate for clients.

Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL) has been instrumental in the lives of law students, attorneys, and judges.⁴ Programs focused on lawyer wellness and well-being are another important step to help de-stigmatize the issues impacting our profession. Many have taken seminars as part of the CBA's Healthy Lawyer Series and law students and lawyers have found the benefits of yoga, meditation, and mindfulness to assist in their own self-care. Continued collaboration with LCL, as well as educational programs and conversations, are necessary to advance the movement forward. **CL**

Notes

1. See, Dave Nee Foundation and J. M. Organ, D. Jaffe, & K. Bender, *Suffering in Silence: The Survey of Law Student Well-Being and the Reluctance of Law Students to Seek Help for Substance Use and Mental Health Concerns*, 66 J. LEGAL EDUC. 116 (2016).2. Id.
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/business/lawyers-addiction-mental-health.html>
3. National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/images/abanews/ThePathToLawyerWell-BeingReportRevFINAL.pdf>
4. Visit www.lclct.org for more information on Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers.

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