

# Taking Care of Each Other

By Jonathan M. Shapiro

So what can we do? There is no simple answer. Since the 2016 study, bar associations and law firms have tackled substance abuse and mental health with newfound vigor. The CBA launched its well-being website this year, which contains resources to aid our members in taking care of themselves. The Well-Being Task Force also started its well-being video series, which provides a forum for members to share their inspirational stories and help members with similar experiences know they are not alone. If you have not seen the website, go to it now at [cbalawyerwellbeing.com](http://cbalawyerwellbeing.com). It contains invaluable resources.

IN 2016, THE AMERICAN Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs, in collaboration with the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, took on the task of studying behavioral and substance abuse among attorneys. Nearly 13,000 attorneys throughout the country were surveyed. The results were eye-opening, confirming what many had surmised: lawyers suffer from a high level of mental health issues and substance abuse. Over 20 percent of attorneys screened positive for hazardous, harmful, and potentially alcohol-dependent drinking. Twenty-eight percent showed symptoms of depression, 19 percent experienced anxiety, and 23 percent struggled with stress. Rates among younger attorneys were higher than their older peers.<sup>1</sup>

We are more aware of mental health issues than we have ever been, but the problems only seem to be getting worse. I am betting that every person reading this article has had a personal experience with someone suffering from either drug or alcohol dependence, or other mental illness. And I bet almost everyone that reads this has been touched by a friend or family member taking their own life. I have. I have friends and family members who have suffered from alcoholism and depression. A little more than a year ago, my neighbor took his own life.

I know I am not alone. And when tragedy strikes, you often feel helpless. You question whether there was anything you could have done to prevent the tragedy. What if I paid a little closer attention? What if I called more often? Maybe I would have noticed something.

Providing these resources to the members of our profession is just the start. We need to do more. We need to remove the stigma associated with mental health issues. The Connecticut Bar Examining Committee's decision this year to remove mental health questions from the bar application is another step in the right direction. Not only does it help to reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues, but it will hopefully ensure that our fellow and potential members of the bar seek the treatment they need.

This profession is hard enough. It can be an unrelenting and unforgiving grind. We have all seen it—remember that. At the end of the day, we are all in this together. We need to help take care of each other. I believe it is part of our professional responsibility. Talk to your colleagues. Take the extra minute and ask how they are doing. If you feel something is wrong, make sure our fellow attorneys are aware of the resources available to them. Make sure they are aware of the Wellbeing website. Make sure they are aware of Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers. You might just make a difference in someone's life. ■



**JONATHAN M. SHAPIRO**

*Jonathan M. Shapiro is the 95th president of the Connecticut Bar Association (2018-2019). He is a partner in the Shapiro Law Offices LLC in Middletown, where he practices in corporate transactions, employment matters, and complex commercial and general litigation, as well as in arbitrations and mediations.*

## Notes

1. See The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys, *Journal of Addiction Medicine*, Krill, Patrick R. JD, LLM; Johnson, Ryan MA; Albert, Linda, January/February 2016, Volume 10, Issue 1, available at: [https://journals.lww.com/journaladdictionmedicine/Fulltext/2016/02000/The\\_Prevalence\\_of\\_Substance\\_Use\\_and\\_Other\\_Mental.8.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/journaladdictionmedicine/Fulltext/2016/02000/The_Prevalence_of_Substance_Use_and_Other_Mental.8.aspx)