

Make Mental Health a Priority

The Bencher—March/April 2020

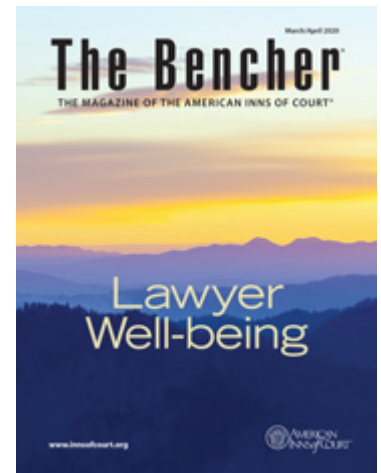
By Christopher W. Todd, Esquire



"The brain is a very flexible organism."

I have heard this quote several times. Try to picture someone with a mental illness. The picture you call to mind probably isn't your spouse or best friend. Is it Jack Nicholson in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest"? When you think of mental illness, do you see a leather couch, with the head reclined at about a 30-degree angle, and a European-accented psychoanalyst?

Take another moment or two. Look at the headshot accompanying this article. See that photo of the author? That is a picture of mental illness.



I have had depression for most of my adult life, but I didn't really know it, acknowledge it, or own it until I had a crisis in my 50s. Over the years, I had what I thought of as the "seasonal blues." I would approach the end of a given year and everything around me looked bleak, even though we were still in sunny Southern California. My confidence ebbed. My social skills deteriorated. My belief system faltered. My self-worth was at zero.

I have always thought of myself as a quiet guy. During these "seasonal blues," I didn't want to be in the limelight, even though my job as a civil trial lawyer put me there. There have been times in the past when things were particularly stressful that I even considered suicide.

After a particularly bad episode in 2013, I began to receive treatment with the help of a fantastic psychiatrist. He, coincidentally, is married to a lawyer. When I started to receive this treatment, suddenly the world looked very different to me—a much better different. I began to realize, and could hardly believe, that what I had been living all my adult life was not necessarily the norm.

I did not know how common depression is in the general population. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America website, major depressive disorder is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. for ages 15 to 44. Further, major depressive disorder affects more than 16.1 million American adults, or about 6.7 percent of the U.S. population age 18 and older in a given year. While major depressive disorder can develop at any age, the median age at onset is 32.5 years old.

According to David Burns, MD, author of "Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy," "depression has been called the world's number one public health problem. In fact, depression is so widespread it is considered the common cold of psychiatric disturbances." Yet, there are still so many negative connotations to admitting that you have depression which, yes, is a "mental illness." In the warrior mentality of the courtroom, it is nearly impossible to admit any "weakness."

But, guess what? Depression is an illness; it is not a weakness. "Depression is not a necessary part of healthy living," as Burns notes. Although, according to a well-known American Bar Association study, 28 percent of practicing lawyers experience symptoms of depression, the trial lawyer, or any other lawyer, does not have to accept that. There are ways to break the cycle.

Mental illness takes many forms. According to Burns and others, depression may be characterized by any of the following feelings or thoughts:

- Do you engage in all-or-nothing thinking? If your performance falls short of perfect, do you see yourself as a total failure?
- Do you overgeneralize? Do you see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat?
- Do you sometimes feel worthless and inadequate?
- Do you employ the wrong type of mental filter? Do you pick out a single negative detail, dwell on that detail, and lose your vision as to everything else?
- Do you disqualify the positive? Do you insist that positive experiences "don't count"?
- Do you read the same thing over and over and over and not understand a word of it?
- Do you jump to conclusions? Do you arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, without even bothering to check it out? Or do you anticipate that things will turn out badly, with that bad outcome an already established fact?
- Do you catastrophize? Do you exaggerate the importance of your goof-up?
- Do you use "should" statements? Do you try to motivate yourself by whipping and punishing yourself?
- Do you personalize? Do you see yourself as the cause of some negative external event, which, in fact, you were not primarily responsible for?

During my "seasonal blues," I temporarily felt some of those things. However, with a hard stop, a reset, then medication, help, and time, these things that might make it quite difficult to be a lawyer do, in fact, lessen.

When I have been mired in these forms of distorted thinking, everything else seemed to cascade down. Distorted thinking is common and difficult. I found concentrating difficult. I found getting started on projects difficult. I sometimes was sleep-deprived and would wake up exhausted rather than refreshed. I sometimes believed that I was a failure in most things I did.

If you or others you know have felt these things also, it wouldn't be all that surprising. As lawyers, our daily dose of stress, deadlines, exhaustion, taking on too many projects, lack of sleep, and too much work can exacerbate depression and mental illness.

That's why we all need to be awake to mental illness and for awareness to be a top priority. If you feel, or if someone you know tells you that they feel, any of these signs and symptoms, take the time to listen. My wife Susan (Esquire, retired), who knew very little about depression before mine unwound, embraced the huge learning curve she was forced to confront. She helped me. But better yet, she helped our eldest college-aged daughter. Our daughter never knew that depression was "a thing." After seeing certain behaviors one summer, Susan talked to our daughter about some of the signs and symptoms of depression. Our daughter was so relieved to realize there was a reason for the way she felt a great deal of the time. She was excited to learn, just as I learned, that she didn't have to feel that way, so long as she got and adhered to regular treatment.

It is fair to debate some concepts because I have debated these: I am reasonably successful; I had a wonderful and happy childhood; I have a great family, immediate and extended; I have awesome friends who are there for me when I need them; I have respectful colleagues at my San Diego firm (which, virtually to a person, is involved in some way in the American Inns of Court); I have everything I could possibly need. But I have depression. Depression is not something that only happens to people who have suffered abuse or have had extremely difficult lives. It can happen to anyone. The stories we tell ourselves, to our detriment, are quite possibly a sign of depression.

Take the time to learn about mental illness, particularly if you or someone you care about seems a little off or a little down. "The brain is a very flexible organism." I know this because my brain once took me to some very deep, dark places. However, now, with appropriate medication and counseling, I do actually feel on the inside what many of you might have believed I expressed on the outside.

Don't ever be "embarrassed" to bring up mental illness and depression. If you only reach out to one person based on your concerns for yourself or others, a life can literally be saved. Susan saved mine. Probably, Susan saved our daughter's.

Feel free to call or email me any time. I am happy to talk to you, and I will have an empathetic ear for you and your situation. If that would be too personal, then try the National Institute of Mental Health Information Resource Center. Don't ignore it as it won't go away on its own. It does get better, I promise.

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