

The Lawyer's Depression Project

- Depression, Law Practice Wellness, Law School, Lawyers



I recently became aware of an incredible mental health resource that has been flying under the radar. It is the Lawyers Depression Project (LDP). It is a grassroots effort to address depression and other mental health issues in the legal profession. The project is the brainchild of Joseph Milowic III, a partner at the law firm of Quinn Emanuel.

The LDP consists of attorneys, law students, law school graduates pending bar exam results and/or admission, and others in the legal field who were diagnosed at one point or another in their lives, with major depression, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, general anxiety disorder, or another mental illness.

It is also for those who are suffering but not formally diagnosed or who simply feel that something "isn't right" but have not sought formal mental health help.

Joseph Milowic says this about this group:

We want you to know that if you are suffering, you are not alone, and there is a great deal of benefit in connecting with others who are dealing with similar issues. We host a confidential forum at www.knowtime.com and weekly online peer-to-peer support group meetings, offering members the option of anonymity. Meetings involve candid

explorations of health and mental health experiences, impacts on legal practice, and tools for effective management and work-life balance.

Here are some examples of meeting topics and member questions:

- *I'm wondering how many other attorneys have told their work they struggle with depression/anxiety and what their experience has been?*
- *I'd like to ask the group whether knowing what caused/led up to their depression helps or hurts their recovery? If they don't know, how much is it hurting/helping?*
- *What are your most important self-care practices? Why it is important to prioritize yourself?*
- *How has your experience with depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues added value to your life or your work?*
- *Media and social medias impact on our mental health, whether you participate and/or limit your intake.*
- *Isolation, loneliness and/or feelings of disconnectedness; how we cope, the challenges and benefits of socializing/connecting, and accessing feelings of connectedness.*

In only four months, the LDP has more than 100 members. All of their services and technology are provided **at no cost to members** (they have a web forum, chat room, and video conferencing technology for use by members). Here are some of their stories:

- **Joe:** My name is Joe Milowic. I am a partner at Quinn Emanuel. And I suffer from depression. I was diagnosed with major depression over a decade ago. For a long time, I did not feel comfortable admitting this to my colleagues for fear of being perceived as incapable or unproductive. This was especially so as a young associate because I was worried people would be less likely to entrust me with important matters if they knew that I sometimes go through periods where I lose motivation and focus. My doctor warned that depression often comes back later in life and can be even worse the next time. Over the years, I battled it off and on, in what I would describe as cycles of high productivity and occasional ruts that I just need to work through. During the ruts, I would lose motivation and need to remind myself that it is only temporary — it is an illness and that life is not in fact pointless. I came to realize that depression is an illness like any other illness and it deserves to be recognized and treated as such without fear of stigmatization. I realized too why depression is so dangerous — when your mind is ill, you can actually believe there is no point to anything, including living. And unfortunately, sometimes, when you don't realize you're sick the results can be tragic, particularly for those we leave behind. These realizations were a turning point for me, and I decided that speaking out from my position as a partner at Quinn Emanuel would enable me to be more impactful in speaking out about mental illness. And the fact is we should be talking about this, because you can succeed in

Biglaw, and at a top law firm, even if you suffer from depression. I'm committed to these matters in hopes that someone who is suffering from depression, like I was, will read about my experience and get help

- **Julia:** I was diagnosed with OCD after my first year of law school. Although I had struggled with the symptoms for many years before that, it took a summer externship fraught with anxious thoughts and compulsive checking of things ranging from my research cites to the door of the judge's chambers to make sure it had in fact locked behind me, to realize that I needed help. Now 15 years later, I know how to manage my compulsive checking behaviors. Yet I also want to be more transparent about the footprint of the other side of the OCD equation — obsessive thoughts and rumination — and what that means in my professional and personal life. LDP has provided a supportive and inclusive environment for me to share my insights about OCD. The calls also serve as a weekly affirmation that it is okay to be committed to one's mental and physical well-being. I feel very lucky to be part of the LDP team.
- **Reid:** My name is Reid Murtaugh. I am an attorney in Lafayette, Indiana. I grew up in a world where I felt I had to keep my diagnosis private. I kept it private through law school and the first seven years of my law career. In January 2017, I disclosed my bipolar II diagnosis in an article published in the Indiana Lawyer newspaper. My disclosure allowed me to reach out and connect. A colleague shared Joe's article with me. I shared my story with Joe and he invited me to participate. LDP is the peer community that I hoped to discover when I started this journey.
- **David:** David Evan Markus, Esq., serves as judicial referee in the civil parts of New York Supreme Court, Ninth Judicial District, and has served in multiple senior legal and policy roles throughout New York State government, including under New York Chief Judges Jonathan Lippman and Judith S. Kaye, and the New York State Senate. Also an ordained rabbi, Markus serves as pulpit clergy at [Temple Beth El of City Island](#) (New York City, NY), as North America's only pulpit rabbi also to serve full-time in government. Markus brings to his LDP facilitation his additional certification as a multi-faith spiritual counselor. He serves as rabbinic faculty at the [Academy for Jewish Religion](#) in New York, faculty in spiritual direction for [ALEPH](#) (the seminary of Jewish Renewal), and founding builder for [Bayit: Your Jewish Home](#). Markus previously has taught political science and judicial administration for Fordham University, and administrative law for Pace University's graduate program in public administration. Markus earned his rabbinical ordination and spiritual director ordination from ALEPH, his Juris Doctor magna cum laude from Harvard Law School, his Masters in Public Policy from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and his Bachelor of Arts summa cum laude from Williams College. He lives in New York.
- **Lisa:** My name is Lisa Smith and I am the Deputy Executive Director and Director of Client Relations at Patterson Belknap in New York City. I'm a former practicing lawyer and was diagnosed with major depressive disorder when I checked myself into detox for substance use disorder in 2004. I learned that my alcohol and cocaine abuse was directly related to my previously undiagnosed depression. I had been self-medicating with alcohol and drugs, which led to a horrible downward spiral that lasted more than 10 years before I got help. Since I started appropriately treating my depression with medication and therapy, I have

been able to stop self-medicating and I've been sober for almost 15 years. I was terrified of anyone in my firm learning of my substance use, so I had resisted seeking the help I needed. I'm committed to smashing the stigma around these issues so that we can all understand the resources available to us and feel comfortable reaching out for help. We all deserve to be healthy and happy. I'm thrilled that lawyers now have this incredible community of support — no one needs to work through these issues alone. I chronicled my journey in my book, *Girl Walks Out of a Bar*, and co-host the podcast, *Recovery Rocks*.

- **Meredith:** My name is Meredith Siller Rimalower. During my time as a Biglaw associate, I observed how the legal profession can attract, exacerbate, and reward certain behaviors that are actually symptoms of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. So great is this need that it inspired me to make a career change, and I am currently in the process of becoming a licensed psychotherapist hoping to work directly with the legal industry. With the ABA's recent findings on the prevalence of mental health disorders in the legal industry, I firmly believe that fighting the stigma and providing mental health assistance to legal professionals is no longer optional. LDP is a huge step forward in the direction of fighting the stigma and providing peer support. Through meetings and online forums, LDP is an easily accessible, pressure-free environment where lawyers can share and truly be heard, without judgment, among thoughtful, intelligent, and compassionate members.

For more information about the LDP, please contact josephmilowic@quinnemanuel.com or joe@knowtime.com.