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## LAW PRACTICE WELLNESS

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### **When It Comes To Mental Health, Don't Mind Your Own Business.**

By Bcuban In Law Practice Wellness, Lawyers



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It breaks my heart each time I learn that we have lost another colleague. I may see it on Facebook, Twitter, or a news article. It is rare that suicide is specifically mentioned, but there may be a request in lieu of flowers for a donation to a mental health organization or there may be commentary about the person's struggle with mental health issues.

We can't bring ourselves to say the word. We make the donation. We grieve. Maybe tweet out or Facebook post the number to a suicide crisis line. We talk about reaching out. Then we lose another. And another.

In 2005, I stood on the precipice of becoming a tragic statistic as a result of my mental health struggles. That summer, after decades of depression, alcohol, and cocaine addiction, I lost all hope. I looked in the mirror and saw a monster, ugly inside and out. A circus freak who deserved to be locked away in a pitch black dungeon, shackled to the walls so my "sickness" did not infect anyone else.

In those apothic moments, it suddenly made perfect sense to me. I would do my family a favor by relieving them of my burden. Self-cull the Cuban herd of the lone black sheep. I did not see a selfish act. I had no concept of "selfish." Living in the dense fog of suicidal ideation, it was an act of love. A thought process that may seem unfathomable to anyone who has not dwelled in that type of darkness, with seemingly no way to climb out. Days spent in bed, crying and hoping for

an end to the pain of loneliness and isolation with no way to articulate it to those who care.

It was a close call. I was lucky to have family and a friend who did not mind their own business. My brothers showed up at my home. They dragged me kicking and screaming to a local psychiatric hospital for what would be my first of two trips over the next two years.

As they pulled me out of bed and forced me to get dressed, evidence of the depth of my problems were strewn about the room. Empty and half-full bottles of booze on the floor. Cocaine lines on the nightstand. Xanax tablets strewn over the imported marble top of my dresser. In addition to the pills, I was chugging whiskey as a sleep aid to come down from the cocaine high—a difficult if not impossible way to engage in the competent practice of law. As we walked out the door, I heard my younger brother, Jeff, mention addiction and drinking issues. My older, Mark, focused on depression. They were both right.

The drive to the hospital consisted of me screaming at my brothers to take me back home and leave me alone. I wanted the people who loved me most in the world out of my life. They were trying to save me.

As we walked through the doors of the psychiatric facility, it dawned on me that there was going to be an attempt to have me committed. I was not going to let that happen. I put my law degree to use. I made it clear, sitting with the attending psychiatric physician, that I was not a danger to myself or others. I convinced him that I had no intention of harming myself. To the chagrin of my brothers, they could not keep me there. When we returned to my house, they took my cars keys and demanded that I not leave for two weeks so I could sober up and get my “head on straight.” I recall thinking that was fine because my cocaine dealer made house calls. My family was no different than any other. They struggled to understand my problems and were learning about addiction and major depression in the moment, while also trying to save my life.

Tough lessons under any circumstances.

It would take one more trip to that hospital after a two-day drug-and-alcohol-induced blackout before I would begin my long-term recovery journey. I often reflect back on those brutal moments and wonder why I am still here. There was clearly a timing factor. People did not mind their own business at the right moment for intervention to occur before I completed the act of suicide.

Tragically, that is not always the case. Whether its depression, addiction, or other mental health variables, we can't be there every moment and those tragic and life-changing/ending thoughts can come quickly and without warning.

The good news is that we all have the ability to play a significant role in changing the course of a life by simply doing what my friend and brothers did. By stepping outside of our comfort zone. By not minding our own business. We can look within ourselves and pledge to pay attention. To lend an ear. Here is a simple method I use to engage when I suspect someone is struggling even if I have no idea what the issue may be.

Me: “(First Name), you looked stressed today, everything OK?

Anything I can do to help?”

Possible response: “Appreciate it, I'm fine, thanks for asking.”

*Don't walk away! Repeat the message.*

What you have done is provide a message that can prompt someone into thinking about getting help even if he or she is not ready at that moment, and with the quick repeat message, you have reinforced it and provided a window for the person to change his or her mind. In those few seconds, people do change their minds. The tap on the shoulder comes as you walk away. Or maybe you get a call or text later in the day.

Possible response: "Now that you mention it, can we talk?"

Regardless of the response, you have now become a vital cog in positive mental health messaging. No accusations. No judgment. Just empathy and support.

The person may not be ready to talk about it or not want to talk about it with you. They may reach out to someone they have a comfort level with. It doesn't matter. The messaging is as important as the response. The knowledge that people do care is implanted and reinforced. I had a lawyer tell me that he was not ready when I stepped out of my comfort zone, but he never forgot that I cared and after a cumulation of people

not minding their own business, he sought help for both his depression and problem drinking.

Each time we don't mind our own business, it could be that one moment that changes the course of someone's life. It also could be one of a series of touchpoints that eventually gets that person to seek help.

Not minding your own business will not save everyone. As long as there is human suffering, there will be tragedy. We cannot be there every moment of the day when someone is struggling, and I know from experience that the thoughts and desire to act can come on fast without warning to anyone else. Not minding your own business, however, may be the one moment that you need to save just one person by interrupting a terrible, dark process. Take that chance. Be uncomfortable. Reach out. Interrupt.

Pledge to ask someone how he or she is doing and let him or her know you are there for an ear. When you see how easy it is, think about doing it again and again. It costs nothing but some time. Those few seconds can change the course of a life. The benefits can last a lifetime.