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PERSPECTIVE

GUEST COLUMN

A personal story of depression and the long road towards recovery

By Ryan Griffith

A recent ABA Journal article reports that 19% of lawyers contemplated suicide. (Debra Cassen Weiss, About one-fifth of lawyers and staffers considered suicide at some point in their life, ABA Journal, May 20.) I not only contemplated suicide but attempted it. This caused me to be placed on an involuntary psychiatric hold, also known as a 5150 in California. I never expected to end up in a psychiatric hospital, but it may have been the best thing that happened to me.

The reason I never expected to end up in a psychiatric hospital is that I was a college basketball player, I finished in the top 10% of my law school class, was named the Solano County Bar Association Young Lawyer of the Year and was doing well in my career. On the personal front, I was happily married, had a lot of friends, and on paper, no reason for me to be depressed existed. However, mental health issues do not require reasons to surface.

Of course, mental health does not only impact lawyers and I do not pretend to know anyone else's personal story. However, I hope my personal story can help anyone dealing with depression issues. I presume this story will be particularly applicable to lawyers that find themselves in my position.

As stated, my profile did not fit the societal view of someone that would find themselves in a psychiatric hospital. However, there were other practicing lawyers in

the hospital with me. I was involuntarily held, and I did not question the hold status of the other lawyers. I share this fact because it shows how common it is for high-functioning people to need psychiatric help.

With that introduction, I will begin my story. I started my legal career at a mid-size city attorney's office in the Bay Area, which I greatly enjoyed. Then I worked for some private firms to grow professionally. This is a typical career move for a lawyer in their early thirties figuring out their path. I then switched to a new firm in Oakland that was great. The people were kind, I was enjoying the work, and everything was going as planned. In my personal life, I had just celebrated my first wedding anniversary and both professionally and personally I was happy.

Then, one day, without warning or reason I could not concentrate. The workday passed with me doing nothing but staring at my computer screen. My anxiety rose because I fell behind, which caused my confidence to dwindle. I returned to work the next day hoping to recover, but another day of me looking at the screen all day too petrified to do anything passed. I then started having catastrophic thoughts. For example, if I did not finish my work, the law firm would go bankrupt and everyone would get disbarred, all because of me. This was nonsensical, but I was losing touch with reality. Sadly, one of the biggest problems with mental health, in my experience, is that you are convinced you are right, and nobody understands what is "really" happening. This is

the farthest thing from the truth, but when you are in it, logic is nowhere to be found.

This cycle of me coming to work and doing nothing repeated for several weeks. My anxiety grew and grew, and I could not sleep, which only worsened my delusions. Since I could not sleep, I started showing up to work at 5 a.m. and leaving around 7 or 8 p.m. The firm, which was at no fault for any of this, thought I was working hard and left me alone. I had been doing well for my first few months and there was no reason to suspect anything was wrong. Of course, while I was at the office for fourteen-fifteen hours per day, I was not actually doing anything. Instead, I was staring at the screen and silently panicking. My work piled up, I would respond to emails, and ask opposing counsel for extensions, which were granted, because I had good relationships with everyone. However, asking for extensions does not cause work to disappear, but instead causes it to multiply.

This charade at work eventually ended when my firm saw that I had billed zero hours for the entire month, while being in office fifteen hours a day. My confidence had been sapped, my anxiety was through the roof, and I could barely form sentences as I had not slept more than a few hours in weeks. The firm tried to talk to me to try and boost my confidence, but I was a shell of myself.

I truly do not remember if I quit the firm, because I felt incompetent to practice law, or they respectfully asked me to leave. The truth is my memories for two

years, from 2016-2018, are foggy and even more frightening, sometimes non-existent. One way or the other, I stopped working. I do believe the firm acted respectfully, but it truly had no idea what to do, and neither did I. Mental health is not something that is discussed enough, let alone understood.

It's important I think to point out that my situation did not involve substance abuse. I was not drinking, on any medication, or using drugs of any sort. I do not say this to diminish those issues, but often people want there to be a concrete reason for mental health issues. However, I still do not know what the reason for this two-year saga starting or ending was. This is a terrifying prospect because what is stopping it from happening again?

I will now explain the two-year saga, which begins with me leaving the firm that day. I packed up my office and went home. I felt nothing

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negative or positive about leaving the job, other than there was nowhere I was supposed to be. I simply felt numb about everything, but I felt like I was a danger to everyone around me. Therefore, everything I touched or was around, was made worse by my presence. Based on this logic, I figured it was best for everyone if I was not in the world. I do not need to go into the specifics, but I am very thankful I was unsuccessful. It is merely out of luck that I was not, and I am so thankful to be alive now. This story could easily not be written had things gone as I planned.

It was this suicide attempt and several subsequent attempts that eventually resulted in my involuntary psychiatric hospitalization. I recall being hospitalized and then being convinced any chance of redemption or recovery evaporated, because nobody could ever take me seriously. If you had been on a psych hold, who would ever want you to do anything for them? I was low enough to want to end it all before being hospitalized, but the hospitalization made me feel even lower. I was hospitalized for three days and then discharged home. My wife was gainfully employed, and I was lucky enough to have a supportive family, both emotionally and financially, and many friends. Sadly, many people in the hospital did not have such fortunate circumstances, but that is another issue. Upon my discharge there was nothing for me to do and my hospitalization was something that I wanted kept secret.

The hospital then followed-up and recommended I attend a partial hospitalization program where

essentially, I colored, talked, and did very basic things from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. weekdays. These tasks were stressful and difficult for me to engage in. However, these were tasks that would have been extremely easy for me to engage in previously, but I had difficulty doing anything. My demeanor remained calm and polite with anyone I met. However, with friends I would not say more than one or two sentences and refused to tell anyone what was happening.

My hospitalization class of coloring and basic tasks went on for months, which may or may not have helped, I do not know. I should point out I made suicide attempts during this time, and progress, if there was any, was slow. This caused me to be more and more medicated, which eventually numbed me to the point of not wanting to hurt myself, but essentially made me catatonic.

This went on for nearly a year with no sign of returning to who I was. Therefore, ECT or electroshock therapy was recommended. This was a multi-week treatment where you are put under anesthesia and have your brain shocked. This surgery wipes your memory, but it is supposed to help with massive depression. To show you where my mind was, I thought there was a good chance that I might die from the multiple surgeries involving anesthesia, or it would work. Therefore, I figured I had nothing to lose and everything to gain and signed up.

The ECT went on for six weeks and eighteen treatments, but I am not sure if it helped. I then decided to see another psychiatrist who

was shocked to see how medicated I was. This psychiatrist provided me with reduced dosages and less medication. Slowly things improved. The progress was far from immediate, but a friend let me work part-time for her firm. There I wrote basic letters, which boosted my confidence. I also started enjoying being around friends and having fun, which I had not done in years.

The previous two-years, time not spent in psychiatric treatment consisted of me lying in bed. I would not even watch TV, instead I would just stare at the ceiling for hours. As I started regaining my confidence, I slowly started sharing my experience with friends, who had no idea what was happening. I remember being terrified to share my story, but I was amazed at the support I received.

I thought many people would judge me, but almost everyone told me about their own mental health struggles or someone close to them that dealt with suicide or mental health breakdowns. The more I opened, the better I felt, until eventually I posted my experience publicly on Facebook. This alerted all friends, colleagues, and acquaintances to my change in behavior over the last two years. Again, the support I received was overwhelmingly positive, and knowing that people knew what happened to me was a big part of my personal recovery.

Eventually, I came back into my expertise, which is a niche remedy known as Health and Safety Receivership. This is a way for cities/counties to fix nuisance properties. I helped a friend grow

his business, which I am still doing and thoroughly enjoying. Since my hospitalization I have published four law review articles, spoken at numerous conferences, and even been hired as a law professor at Golden Gate Law School in San Francisco where I teach Remedies, based on my experience with receiverships and other unique legal remedies. I have also had the great privilege of becoming a father to a beautiful girl and my wife remained supportive throughout this entire ordeal.

I recall thinking my life was over and the world was better off without me, but a few years later I feel better than ever. The scary part is not knowing what caused it, or really knowing how I got out of it. The main take away I gained from this experience is that being vulnerable and open about mental health was one of the best medicines for combating it. Unfortunately, being open and vulnerable about mental health is one of the most difficult things to do, especially in the legal profession, which is often so focused on portraying an image of strength and invulnerability.

In closing, opening up and becoming vulnerable has undoubtedly benefited my mental health, but I also believe it has made me more able to relate to colleagues. It is amazing the amount of people that have gone through something similar to my experience or know someone that has. Sadly, it is not discussed, but my hope is that this article will be one small piece in opening the dialogue of mental health to make this world a slightly better place.