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Feature

A Lawyer's Tale: Recovering from Depression

By Keith Anderson

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In this personal account, Keith Anderson describes his struggles with depression and how he has, again, found meaning and happiness in his life.

"Life is over rated." I made that comment one early morning in 1988 as I traveled to Cape Smokey, Nova Scotia, to learn how to ski. Over the years, it became a phrase, a joke, we would use at my law firm in Sydney, Nova Scotia, when something went wrong or a file went astray. Little did I know that in time, I would actually come to believe it.

March 2003 was the turning point. March 7, I was diagnosed with depression. March 11, I was suspended by the Nova Scotia Barristers' Society from the practice of law. March 11 - 12, I had a mental breakdown. My mind was in fragments. I had lost both my health and career. Not my best week.

As lawyers, we are the ones who fix other people's problems. . . We don't ask for help, people ask us.

When I was first advised of the complaint filed against me, I retained a lawyer to represent me. I had received three complaints in 18 years of practice, all of which were dismissed at the first stage of the procedure. The crux of this complaint involved my actions when purchasing a new house. After my lawyer reviewed my history, he asked, "What went wrong in your life? This just does not happen." I had no response. Two days later, my doctor of 25 years diagnosed me with depression and prescribed an antidepressant.

I was called before a Discipline Hearing Committee, at which time I took responsibility for my decisions that led me to act wrongly, improperly and unethically. It all seemed quite surreal, as my mind was beginning to unravel. I was suspended pending final resolution. The Society provided me with a list of psychologists.

I would spend the next three months confined to bed. This self confinement would, to some extent, last a few years.

The final resolution of the complaint took place on June 23, 2003. An agreement had been reached that was subject to approval by a Bar Committee. At that time I could better explain what happened, my mind was clearer and I understood depression better. I recognized that my decision-making was governed by the wrong parameters and depression dictated how I thought. In my struggle to survive, I had made unethical decisions.

The Bar Committee accepted the impact of my depression as well. At the conclusion of the final hearing, the Chair said, "Keith, go home and get well." The Executive Director also shook my hand and wished me well.

Over the next few months, and years, with family support, I would learn how depression wrapped around my

mind and had such a devastating impact. With a clear mind now, I can look back and recognize the symptoms. I relate some of them in this article.

I had withdrawn from my friends, cutting off communications with important friends from university days. In school, in London, England, where I had completed a Masters degree in law, we had all been foreign students and were close with that common bond. After graduating, we kept in touch, even before e-mail. We shared holidays, concerts and weddings. But as my depression moved in, I shut down those relationships.

Insomnia took hold. During the week, I slept two or three hours a night. By the weekend, I was so tired from life, I would collapse and sleep. This routine went on for years. I hated my life so much that I stayed awake to delay the next morning's arrival. Illogical thinking certainly, but depression can be powerful.

Tears occurred daily as I drove to the office. I would collect myself in the parking lot, walk in and work a full day. Pretending to be fine was exhausting, prompting more tears as I returned home.

Solo lunches had become common. I would buy a bagel and a bottle of water and drive around the city on a 20 minute lunch hour.

My last personal relationship was shortchanged. As my self-confidence and self worth eroded, I couldn't commit to a trip or even dinner the next night. I thought I did not deserve to be happy and slowly cut off contact.

One option I regularly considered, to resolve this angst, was a late night canoe trip on the lake in front of my house, never to return.

Why did I miss these signs of depression?

Life in my 20s was wonderful. I did well in school, then at work. I was optimistic. Life was easy. When my 30s rolled around, personal challenges surfaced. My father died at age 59. I come from a very close family. I have learned that his death was the trigger for my depression, compounded by the pressures of a busy law practice where I received scant help in managing the firm.

One aspect of being a lawyer is that our files are confidential, and thus we can't discuss our difficult days with our families or friends. We keep that within our own minds, and thus we do not, cannot, get the mental release of merely sharing our day.

It is a badge of honor if we can put in a 60-70 hour work week. The more exhausted we are, the better the week. When one looks at this lifestyle objectively, it is obviously not healthy.

As well, I learned that with some people, including me, depression can slowly move into one's mind and its very nature does not permit one to recognize its smooth invasion. The first indication of depression is when one hits the wall and life comes undone.

I thought I had a horrible life and I simply had to get through each ugly day as best I could.

I want to make it clear though, this is actually a happy story. Getting suspended was a good thing. It was certainly devastating, but it had a positive aspect. It removed me from an unhealthy work environment. Those pressures were gone. Being diagnosed with depression was a relief, in one sense. My life was not worthless. I had a mental illness. If I could get healthy, I thought I could have a second chance at a real life. Getting well took the solid support and understanding of my family, certain friends, and three years of therapy. I also wanted to get healthy.

However, there certainly were bumps along the way. I have not heard my law partner's voice since before my suspension. I was snubbed by a woman in a grocery store who used to greet me with a hug. A former girlfriend, came back into my life for a year, only to take advantage by using me for my money (I still had some back then!) and the use of my vehicles, only to move on when she was done. I made the difficult but healthy decision to dismiss these people, and others, from my life.

After living off my savings for a few years, I now have limited resources—no house, no vehicles and little money. Life is great though. To focus on what I don't have is not fair to what I do have: good health, a loving family, and a mind as strong as it was 25 years ago.

I can laugh. I can read a book and truly enjoy it. I sleep well. I am no longer a regular *David Letterman* viewer. Simple things, but just imagine not being able to do these for years. I have learned how to be happy again.

Over the past six years, I have had plenty of time to consider what is important in life and how to achieve it. It requires focus and respect. By focus, I mean: *Is your life fulfilling? Do you enjoy the same activities as years ago? Do you look forward to holidays? Do you still enjoy practicing law?* Look at life with a sharp eye. By respect, I mean: *Do you still have self-respect? Are you proud of yourself? Are you proud of how you live your life? Are you self-confident at work and in your personal life?* Live your life with dignity.

If the answer to any of these is no, then seek help. Talk to someone, anyone. Some people do actually want to help. Just be careful of false comfort.

I am aware of at least one website devoted specifically to attorneys with depression, called Lawyers with Depression, created by lawyer Dan Lukasik <http://www.lawyerswithdepression.com/>. I have personally found this to be a valuable resource.

I may one day look to be reinstated, but I want to continue with my mental health advocacy work, which is another way to help people. It's "fun," a word I haven't used or felt in many years.

My life is not overrated, it is wonderful once again.

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