



LAW AND DISORDER

BY SABAH BHAT

In a career where high stress, quick deadlines, angry opposing parties, frustrated (or frustrating) clients, emotionally fraught circumstances, and working with people reliving some of the worst days of their lives are everyday activities, it is always a complete surprise to me how resistant many attorneys are to seeking mental health care. While “self-care” is becoming ubiquitous almost to the point of cliché, going to therapy or taking medications hasn’t kept pace. On the heels of a globally traumatizing, years long pandemic that impacted every facet of our lives, and the national and international political tumult of the last decade,


talking about these issues is more important than ever. Up until about 2014, I thought therapy and medications were great for OTHER people. I was afraid of others finding out, afraid of side effects, afraid of judgment, and convinced that others had it worse, and that kind of thing is for them not me. Ultimately, hearing others speak openly about their own mental health challenges normalized that it is OK to struggle, and OK to seek help. And so, I want to share the three big moments that laid the groundwork to allow me ask for help when I needed it.

My first real positive exposure to therapy occurred while in the military. My colleagues

with the most successful relationships went to couples counseling with their partners. They talked about it as a regularly check-up, not as a last resort. And with last-minute deployments, long work hours, frequent moves, and the potential for being stationed away from their families, it made sense that some outside input might be helpful to keep things on track. For me personally, seeing my colleagues and supervisors treat counseling so normally really changed the way I thought about therapy generally.

The fear of judgment, or that their career would be negatively impacted, seems to be pervasive among attorneys, as well as military members. There is the idea that seeking mental health care, or receiving a diagnosis, would be the end of one’s career. After I had separated, I heard a military colleague that I liked and respected openly sharing his experience with ADHD and depression on a podcast (I recognize this is violently Millennial, but it worked!). We had a long conversation about it, and it was eye-opening: both that he struggled with these issues, but also that he felt comfortable sharing. It shifted my perspective on who needs mental health medication and why.

The last thing I wanted to share was my own lightning bolt moment. I found myself sobbing in my car while driving home from a volunteer event with friends without knowing why. I’d had a great time! I had made some new friends! Everything was fine! Why was I crying? I made a doctor’s appointment the next day. Feeling so out of control of my own feelings was frightening, but the realization that I had options to address it was valuable. And because of that choice, I was so much better equipped to handle the incredible uncertainty, fear, and isolation of the pandemic. Not to mention, for the first time in as long as I can recall, the constant knot of stress in the pit of my stomach has uncoiled, which makes me so much more effective in my daily life.



...the arc of the
moral universe
is long, but
it bends toward justice.

– Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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It can be too easy to wait until there is a real emergency to seek help, because things are “not that bad.” As attorneys, we are in positions of public trust, and so when things do hit a crisis point, there is a huge risk that others could be negatively impacted too. For that reason, as a profession it is so important that we talk about these issues and normalize seeking help, and not just as a last resort. And while medication may not be for everyone (therapy is though, it’s pretty great), being open to the possibility makes the path much easier. And if sharing my experience encourages someone to reach out, then it’s worth it. If you need assistance and don’t know where to start, many employers and insurances have Employee Assistance Programs, which are free and confidential. The Ohio Lawyers Assistance Program also provides resources and confidential services for Ohio attorneys. And you can dial the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988.

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