

# Where black dogs thrive

HIGH-ACHIEVING PERSONALITY TYPES AND INSTITUTIONALISED PRACTICES CAN BE A DANGEROUS COMBINATION.

Imagine not knowing how to find your local bank, which you have visited over many years, and literally having to count down the numbers on the street to find it. In another scenario, imagine suddenly being unable to remember how to turn off your alarm or retrieve messages from your answer service.

Two senior lawyers suffering depression experienced these examples of disorientation and cognitive shut down. Depression can be debilitating and can take years to recognise. One lawyer didn't consider the chest pain and breathing difficulty he had mistaken for a heart attack were actually symptoms of his anxiety. "It is insidious and creeps up on you," he said. He was hospitalised when another anxiety attack manifested as a paralysing numbness that crept up his body and caused his tongue to become so swollen he couldn't speak.

Other experiences of depression recounted by the lawyers consulted for this article include feeling extremely flat, bored and disengaged from family and work; engaging in extreme activities; and drinking lots, sometimes for days.

The support of friends, family and colleagues is critical in the recovery from depression, as is the importance of making lifestyle changes, such as spending more time with family and friends. Some find psychiatrists and counsellors helpful. Anti-depressant medications are sometimes prescribed in the initial stages of recovery but then a surprising number of lawyers continue taking anti-depressants as a way to manage their stress.

The high rate of depression in the legal profession is attributed to factors such as high-achieving personality types, work pressures, and long hours. However, these are traits and work demands similarly shared by doctors, architects and any number of other professionals. Lawyers at different ends of the career spectrum shared their insights about how institutionalised practices and professional behaviours unique to law might impact the mental wellbeing of the profession.

**Little opportunity for lateral development.** Partnership is still perceived as the holy-grail and there is constant pressure to progress in the firm from junior to senior, to associate to partner – an investment of many years. The perception seems to be that, if you don't reach or seek partnership, there are scant opportunities to practice law in any other way.

**We don't look after each other as well as we could.** Newly admitted lawyers compete against each other for jobs and advancements. A more experienced lawyer commented that "even within firms, there is a sense that you're on your own and if you're

**Lawyers do not often look for the good in people or situations.** Trained to be highly analytical, anticipate worst case scenarios and always look for weaknesses in an argument can over time make an individual very cynical.

**Bad lawyer jokes** are dispiriting for lawyers who put everything into their work on behalf of their clients and employer. Perpetuated by practitioners and law lecturers, they reinforce the negative stereotypes held by some parts of the community.

Legal firms and professional bodies have had years to make structural and cultural

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going to survive, you will do so on your own two feet." Though some firms have employee assistance programs, these and mentoring opportunities are the exception.

**There is not a lot of room for error.** It is not always possible to be definitive about issues facing clients, but there is a real or self-imposed expectation that you always have the right answers and are seen as intelligent.

changes that could reduce the notoriously high rate of depression among their employees and members. Attempts by the large firms and representative bodies to address the issue of depression just by producing DVDs or providing intranet pages on the subject seems akin to waving a limp lettuce leaf against the wind. (See "Help is on the way" p6). ●

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