



►► WE OFTEN FAIL TO EMBRACE THAT THE DIFFICULTIES WE FACE OR ARE STILL FACING CAN HAVE HIDDEN BENEFITS, CREATE POSITIVE CHANGES, AND BUILD RESILIENCE.



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Please reach out to LAP if you or someone you know is experiencing mental health or substance use problems. Give us a call at 312-726-6607 or email gethelp@illinoislap.org.

Pandemic Fatigue

Why am I so tired and what can I do about it?

VIKTOR FRANKL WROTE, "LIFE IS never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose." The COVID-19 pandemic has fueled a variety of woes in our society, in our personal lives, and in our work lives. COVID-related changes have come rapidly, with little warning, and many individuals have had a difficult time navigating these uncertain times. Data from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) now indicate that one in five Americans are suffering from a mental health illness, with anxiety disorders ranking the highest with more than 42.5 million Americans impacted. Even worse, one in four Americans will suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder in any given year, and almost half of all Americans will experience an episode of mental illness in their lives. Mental health crises account for 60 million visits to primary care physicians and 6 million emergency room visits annually, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Suicide remains the 10th leading cause of death in this country and is the second leading cause of death for people under the age of 44, claiming more than 40,000 people annually.

Sadly, the statistics related to health and wellbeing in the legal profession, in normal times, show the very work we do is a huge contributing factor to mental health challenges and substance use experienced by legal professionals. In fact, stigma and fear are two of the biggest reasons why judges and lawyers do not seek help for their struggles, despite knowing they need help. Statistics related to the general population seeking mental health treatment are also grim: Data from Mental Health First Aid shows 41 percent of those with mental health issues are untreated. In early 2020, at the start of the pandemic, depression rates tripled in the U.S. from 8.5 percent to

27.8 percent, according to Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH). Additionally, data sourced from the BUSPH showed that this elevated rate of depression continued into 2021, affecting 32.8 percent—nearly one in three American adults. According to the Lancet Regional Health-Americas journal, the predictors for depressive symptoms during the pandemic were: low household income, not being married, and experiencing multiple pandemic related stressors.

COVID-19 malaise

For those of you struggling and experiencing what The New York Times has coined "Covid malaise," or COVID-19 "languishing," you are not alone. The senior author of the BUSPH study stated: "Typically, we expect depression to peak following a traumatic event and then lower over time. Instead, we found that 12 months into the pandemic, levels of depression remained high," which is different from other traumatic events such as past hurricanes and the Ebola outbreak. Not only have depression rates increased during the pandemic, but evidence also has shown that individuals in lower socioeconomic classes have been affected most severely.

In the legal profession, court systems have been disrupted, office spaces remain empty or underutilized, restaurants and businesses that we relied on have closed, school systems have been disrupted, public transportation is less reliable and available, inflation is increasing, labor shortages are the norm, and supply chain problems are rampant. Social isolation, over the short and long term, have led to an increase in substance-use problems, with the rate of overdose deaths increasing by 30 percent in a one-year period, the highest rate seen in recent decades.

In my work with legal professionals, I

hear the many ways in which they are experiencing malaise and a sense of stagnation, but also see that they are sometimes unable to translate these feelings into words. Many are considering leaving the profession but have no idea what else they would like to do. Why is this happening and what can we do about the emotional impact that the pandemic has wreaked on us as individuals and as a society?

When one door closes ...

Helen Keller once said, “When one door of happiness closes, another opens, but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one that has been opened for us.” When we focus on the past, and the desire to go backward in time, we waste considerable amounts of time and effort. It can also increase our depressive thinking. We often fail to embrace that the difficulties we face or are still facing can have hidden benefits, create positive changes, and build resilience.

Feeling lost, feeling malaise, or languishing may actually contribute to our growth and change. It’s our mindset toward these symptoms that determines the direction in which we go. Embracing new and different opportunities can lead to transformation and positive change. Some people will reevaluate and


determine that staying where they are is in their best interest, while others will decide that significant change is necessary. Encouraging people to be thoughtful about the process, to examine their lives carefully, to determine if the status quo is good enough, or if change and transformation are required, is the key to increased health and well-being.

Try to keep a little grace

Be kind to yourself and others during these challenging times. We are all unique and each of us requires different levels of support. Many will navigate these difficult waters alone with little assistance needed. But many will also seek help—through their medical doctor, a psychiatrist, a mental health provider, and/or a substance-use specialist. This is not a sign of weakness but of strength. Assessing and being honest about your own individual needs is critical. Review the past two years to determine if you are functioning at the same or higher level than before, or if these grueling two years have left you with less energy, more maladaptive coping mechanisms, and greater levels of difficulties in your life. If this is the case, put yourself first without fear of judgement and get the help you need. This will lead to greater

levels of happiness and accomplishment and an improved satisfaction with life. Uncertainty teaches us how to become more resilient, a necessary quality to navigate life’s obstacles.

Transformation requires being honest with yourself. Some may even say it is our superpower to reflect on our life and change what is not working. Change is difficult, but pain and suffering can encourage us to move to the next level of action. Sometimes, we stay where we are because we are afraid, or because we are used to how we feel. We then pay little attention to aspects of our lives that we have determined to be “normal or comfortable,” but are not to observers.

Instead, think of yourself as a person who wants to forge a new path, a new viewpoint, or a more satisfying existence. And then bit by bit, step by step, move outside of your comfort zone and embrace the challenges and changes as they come your way. If you need help beginning this process, or support through this process, reach out to the Illinois Lawyers’ Assistance Program (LAP) so that together we can help you become more of what you want, eliminate what is undermining your success, and create a fulfilling life and career that is uniquely yours. 

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