

# Addressing the Lawyer Suicide Crisis: A Guide for Bar Leaders

By Nick Hansen

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It's something that still happens far too often: a lawyer, a judge, a law student dies by suicide. You may be privately grieving, but as a leader of the bar, should you publicly do anything?

The reality is that suicide is an epidemic in the legal profession. Research published earlier this year, titled "[Stressed, Lonely, and Overcommitted: Predictors of Lawyer Suicide Risk](#)" put into focus the dire reality of the problem. Surveying 2,000 lawyers within the D.C. Bar and California Lawyers Association, researchers found that lawyers are twice as likely to experience suicidal ideation than the public. Lawyers with high stress were 22 times more likely to contemplate suicide, and a considerable proportion of lawyers who contemplated suicide said that working in the legal profession was detrimental to their mental health.

Bar leaders can play a pivotal role in reducing stigma, raising awareness of mental health resources, and setting an example for the legal community.

Whether your legal community has experienced the death of a member by suicide, or you want to start a conversation within your bar, here are a few tips:

## **Do: Reach out to the family and offer condolences.**

Reaching out to the family can help prevent any misunderstandings. Respect the wishes of families who do not wish to disclose a cause of death or share

more information about the situation of the deceased. However, that may not be the case in every situation. “[The family] may be motivated to find meaning in the experience and the opportunity to potentially prevent other suicides in the future. In that event, they may be willing to allow disclosure of the cause of death and discussion around the topic of suicide prevention,” said Bree Buchanan, former chair of the ABA Commission of Lawyers Assistance Programs, and current senior advisor at Krill Strategies. The article, [“Big Law Killed My Husband,”](#) written by the wife of an attorney who died by suicide, went viral in 2018 and raised awareness of this issue in the legal community. The author, Joanna Litt, wrote that she wanted her message to resonate with others who might be in the same situation, “I’ll live the rest of my life trying to fill his shoes and help anyone from having to go through this horrendous, needless experience.”

## **Do: Talk About It**

As a bar leader, you can play a role in setting the agenda on what is discussed in the community. “Creating space to have real, non-judgmental conversations around suicide helps destigmatize these situations and shows us how to recognize distress in others,” says Laura Pratt, the 2023-24 president of the Texas Young Lawyers Association. Read her column [“How to Save a Life”](#) in the Texas Bar Journal. Even if you don’t know what to say, your message can be as simple as directing people towards your state’s [Lawyer Assistance Program](#).

## **Don’t: Go into Details**

It’s not the role of a bar leader to go into details of a suicidal incident. “Talk about the individual and the loss that was experienced, not the means or location. The details, such as method of death, should not be released as they are private to the individual’s loved ones. They can also re-traumatize others who have lost a loved one or survived a suicide attempt,” says Joan Bibelhausen, executive director of Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers in Minnesota. If you have personal or religious objections to suicide, as a bar leader don’t bring them into public conversation with the greater legal community.

## Do: Acknowledge the Impact These Events Have on the Community.

Taking a “let’s get back to work” approach after a death can cause more harm than good. People will all feel differently, and it’s important for bar leaders to acknowledge those feelings. Bibelhausen says that you don’t need to have all the answers, and that this is a good moment to remind people to get help if they are struggling. Bar leaders can also remind the community to operate with grace and civility, and not to use these events as opportunities to score points against firms who are in mourning. “People are looking to bar leaders to see how they react. So, it’s important to model wellbeing behavior and to remind people this is a public health issue, and to provide links to resources for recognizing warning signs and getting help,” says Bibelhausen.

## Do: Use Proper Terminology

If you do decide to address suicide as a topic in a message, use proper updated terminology. Suicide prevention experts recommend using language that does not criminalize the individual.

<b>USE THIS</b>	<b>INSTEAD OF THIS</b>
End(ed) one's life by suicide	Committed suicide
Die(d) by suicide, death by suicide	Successful/failed Suicide
Suicide attempt, attempted suicide	Successful/failed attempt
Person who has died by suicide	Suicide victim

People thinking about suicide

Suicidal, contemplators

People who have experienced a suicide attempt

Suicide attempters

Person bereaved by suicide

Survivor of suicide loss

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## Do Share Resources & Encourage People to Continue the Conversation

Bar leaders play a critical role in destigmatizing getting help by making it part of a profession-wide conversation. “Because suicide is such a significant problem in the legal profession, bar leaders should regularly encourage their membership to seek help sooner rather than later for behavioral health issues,” says Buchanan. She also encourages suicide awareness, discussion on mental health, and other wellbeing issues to be regular topics in bar journals, CLE seminars, and at the bar convention.

### Resources to share with members:

- Everyone should also be aware of the nationwide [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#). If you are having thoughts of suicide, you can text or call 988 and you will be connected with a trained crisis counselor.
- Share the contact info of your state’s [Lawyer Assistance Program](#) (LAP) and remind people that all communication with the LAP is confidential. Your LAP can also be a resource to you as you navigate a difficult and tragic situation.

- Check out the Institute for [Well-Being in the Law](#) for more resources on lawyer well-being
- Read more about recognizing the [warning signs of suicide](#). (pdf)

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