



Getting Counsel From Someone Who's Been There

Lawyer-turned-therapist offers help to attorneys in crisis

By DOUGLAS S. MALAN

Karen Caffrey knows the feeling. You're in your early thirties and things are starting to click at your law firm. You're getting to understand how to practice law and you're good at it. But the time and effort required in your practice is immense, and the legal work really isn't fulfilling.

You're starting to question whether the legal profession is where you should be. You wonder if you can get out, and how. Meanwhile, colleagues and friends are getting laid off by the dozens.

Caffrey was at that point in the mid-1990s, minus the layoffs, after 10 years of practicing at a Hartford firm and then in-house with a large corporation. She discussed all of this with a therapist and soon realized that dispensing such helpful information was what she should be doing with her life. "It wasn't that I hated the law," Caffrey said, "but I didn't love it."

Fifteen years later, Caffrey has earned a master's degree in psychotherapy and counseling and runs an established West Hartford practice. About 20 percent of her clientele is in the legal profession. And with the legal industry shedding jobs and reeling financially like it never has before, Caffrey is preparing for more frightened attorneys coming to her for advice on what to do with their lives.

Since the economy headed south, she said, "I do notice that when I have younger lawyers come in, there is fear about job mobility."

Then there are the middle age solo practitioners—the group that disciplinary officials most often find committing egregious ethical violations—who are battling various crises such as depression, anxiety and chemical dependency.



Gary Lewis

Karen Caffrey left the practice of law in 1994 to become a psychotherapist and counselor who helps some lawyers figure out how to deal with the profession and helps others decide to get out of it.

Often, these lawyers are referred to Caffrey through the support group Lawyers Concerned For Lawyers.

Numerous studies have indicated that lawyers are at a heightened risk for both depression and suicide. Ambitious lawyers are often perfectionists who put extreme pressure on themselves to succeed.

"Most of my male clients are older solos," Caffrey said. "They're coming to me with personal concerns, relationship issues, anxiety and depression."

Many of Caffrey's attorney patients are harshly critical of themselves, and their law school education has trained them to view the world differently, she said. "Put a person like that in a high-pressure environment and it's going to exacerbate the problems," she noted.

Sometimes lawyers come to her worried that they have committed malpractice or doomed a case or deal through bad decisions.

What Is Fun?

Women lawyers come to Caffrey wondering if it is possible to maintain a high-powered practice while also enjoying a family life. There is no silver bullet answer, Caffrey said. Work-life balance and the glass ceiling remain very much a part of the female lawyer's experience, Caffrey noted, adding that "things aren't as far along as I thought they would be" when she left the practice of law in 1994.

"Then I get a younger set of relatively new lawyers who are questioning if practic-

ing law is what they really want to be doing,” Caffrey said.

These clients are in their late twenties and early thirties, and they have doubts about their career path, especially when they have little time to themselves outside of work.

As a young lawyer, “you’re being told that you’re not going to make it in this firm if you’re not doing 70 hours a week,” Caffrey said.

With a focus on getting ahead, many lawyers lose grasp of a balanced life. In the midst of one session, Caffrey asked a young female attorney what she did for fun.

“She didn’t know how to answer the question,” Caffrey said. “She had to think back to her teenage years to remember what she did for fun. Just the sheer number of hours you put into your job doesn’t leave time for that.

Then add to that the fact that you analyze everything in an adversarial system, and fun can get pushed to the side.”

And lawyers often refuse to acknowledge that they need help in dealing with their situations. Instead, they struggle alone until their problems become too much to handle, Caffrey said. She has not been surprised to hear about lawyers suffering mental and emotional stress as a result of a bad economy.

“Lawyers are trained to be so analytical and emotion is not supposed to be part of it,” she said. “I think a lot of lawyers don’t notice that what’s going on with them is often tied to emotions. It’s not where they go first” to find answers.

Caffrey spends time asking clients questions about why they went to law school and

if those reasons have manifested themselves in their daily practice. She also explores the possibility that the attorney is in the right career but the wrong job, or possibly in the wrong career altogether.

At the root of her advice, “I help people unpack their unconscious or semi-conscious beliefs that lead to some pain or dysfunction in their life,” Caffrey said, such as a figuring out why the lawyer-client feels compelled to put in so many hours.

“Everything isn’t a crisis,” Caffrey tells clients, “and if you’re living that way, that’s usually not something that comes from a present-day issue” but rather has a deeper cause. ■