

"I'm Feeling a Little Anxious"¹

By Tish Vincent

We lined up in the law school library after donning our caps and gowns. There were 325 of us. It was a long line! We cut quite the figure in our long, black, flowing robes; black and purple stoles; velvet caps; and purple tassels.

During a delay in our procession across Bogue Street to the graduation ceremony, conversations started in the line. The fragments I could hear had a common theme: anxiety about passing the bar exam. We had all earned our juris doctor degrees, yet we were keenly aware we could not call ourselves lawyers unless we passed the exam. Our families were already seated at the Wharton Center waiting to witness and celebrate our accomplishments. We were anxious.

Anxiety can be a cruel emotion. It eats away at self-confidence and our sense of well-being like rust eats away at steel. Other people attempt to reassure us, help us, and put us at ease, but that does not work. Often, things that cause anxiety never come to pass. Sometimes they do. If they do, the actual experience of a setback or disappointment is often less painful than the anxious anticipation of the event.

Anxiety disorder

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* lists the criteria that must be met to warrant a diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorder:

- A. Excessive anxiety and worry, occurring more days than not for at least six months, about a number of events or activities.
- B. The individual finds it difficult to control the worry.

C. The anxiety and worry are associated with three (or more) of the following six symptoms...

- i. Restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge.
- ii. Being easily fatigued.
- iii. Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank.
- iv. Irritability.
- v. Muscle tension.
- vi. Sleep disturbance (difficulty falling or staying asleep, or restless unsatisfying sleep).

D. The anxiety, worry, or physical symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupation, or other important areas of functioning...²

These are the actual criteria for the specific diagnosis; the symptoms can be present to a greater or lesser degree. Some individuals are born with an anxious nature, while others develop anxiety as a response to stress in their lives. Whatever the cause, anxiety is uncomfortable.

Healthy anxiety

Anxiety serves a purpose in that it raises our awareness of a coming challenge, preparing us to meet that challenge. A law school graduate's anxiety about the bar exam may trigger him or her to sign up for

a prep course, develop a daily study schedule, prepare outlines, and stay focused.

Anxiety about being successful at work may encourage new lawyers to study their practice areas, speak to more experienced lawyers, and seek the assistance of masters when necessary. Anxiety and confidence seem to exist on a continuum when we are new to an experience. Our anxiety opens us up to learning, helps us understand our unique challenges, and keeps us humble. Confidence flowers as we establish a strong base of knowledge, experience the opportunity to apply the knowledge, and recognize the satisfaction of success. With too much confidence, we can become dogmatic and brittle. Our confidence needs to be tempered with humility, and some anxiety about our performance can encourage humility.

Interventions

What helps when anxiety becomes a problem? A recent opinion piece in *The New York Times* recounted one individual's struggles with anxiety and described his solutions. J. L. Cowles struggled with a sleep disturbance due to anxiety, which led him to speak to his primary care physician.³ He describes relief from his symptoms through meditation, therapy, participation in his religious tradition, and a very low dose of a prescription medication.

Something about practicing law is linked to higher levels of anxiety. It is wise to recognize this and note if anxiety is a problem for you.

Our anxiety opens us up to learning, helps us understand our unique challenges, and keeps us humble.

Mindfulness can be learned. The Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA offers free, easily accessible audio meditation exercises.⁴ Research has proven that meditation slows brain waves, leading to reduced anxiety. Meditation's effect on the brain is similar to that of an anti-anxiolytic medication.

If anxiety troubles you, a good place to start is to talk with your primary care physician. Ask your physician for a referral to a therapist with expertise in working with anxiety disorders. You're not alone—according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, anxiety disorders affect 20 percent of the population.⁵

Conclusion

During the first semester of law school, anxiety rates in law students increase dra-

matically. This heightened anxiety remains once students have graduated and are admitted to the bar. Something about practicing law is linked to higher levels of anxiety. It is wise to recognize this and note if anxiety is a problem for you. If it is, do not hesitate to reach out to your friends, family, or physician for help.

Another resource is the Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program at the State Bar of Michigan. Although we do not conduct therapy, we offer telephone consultations and can refer you to a trusted mental health-care provider in your area. Visit <http://www.michbar.org/generalinfo/ljap/home> for more information or call our helpline at (800) 996-5522. ■



Tish Vincent, MSW, JD, LMSW, ACSW, CAADC is a licensed clinical social worker with expertise in the treatment of substance use and mental health disorders. She is also a licensed attorney with experience in health law and alternative dispute resolution. Vincent is the program administrator for the State Bar of Michigan Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program.

ENDNOTES

1. *Beetlejuice* (The Geffen Film Company, 1988).
2. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (5th ed) (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), p 222.
3. Cowles, *Defeating My Anxiety*, The New York Times (November 10, 2015) <<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/11/10/defeating-my-anxiety>>. All websites cited in this article were accessed January 14, 2015.
4. UCLA Mindful Meditation Awareness Center, *Free Guided Meditations* <<http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22>>.
5. National Alliance on Mental Illness, *Anxiety Disorders FACT SHEET: What are anxiety disorders?* (April 2012) <http://www2.nami.org/factsheets/anxietydisorders_factsheet.pdf>.

SBM

OUT OF SYNC?

Career

Self-Care

Recreation

Relationships

Community

Sometimes
it's hard
to keep all
the balls in the air.

LJAP can help (800) 996-5522

STATE BAR OF MICHIGAN
LAWYERS AND JUDGES ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (800) 996-5522

Build on your strengths and support your successes.

State Bar of Michigan
Lawyers & Judges
ASSISTANCE
PROGRAM

(800) 996-5522