

A message from Hon. Michael J. Miller

I have recently recovered from two years of clinical depression. Having endured that frightful experience, I have decided to "go public" in an effort to combat the stigma associated with mental illness. I intend to speak out about the inequalities in the treatment of and attitude toward mental as opposed to physical ailments. I want to help inform our legal community that depression is almost four times more likely to occur among attorneys and judges than any other profession. Finally, I am committed to bring the message to those who are suffering, that they are not alone, there is hope, and help is available.

Depression, or for that matter any type of mental disorder, is rarely talked about by survivors because of the public attitude toward it.

Take, for example, the case of Thomas Eagleton. In 1972, he was selected to be George McGovern's vice presidential running mate on the Democratic ticket. Eagleton had a distinguished career in public service culminating in his election as United States Senator from Missouri.

After he was chosen as the nominee for vice president, the media did deep background research on him. It was discovered and revealed to the public that many years before his election to the Senate, he suffered from and was treated for clinical depression. Polls were taken and the results showed that by an overwhelming majority, Americans would not trust a person with a prior record of any mental health issue, to be a "heartbeat away from the presidency." Eagleton was forced to resign from the ticket. I believe that if the same issue arose today the end result would be similar.

Compare this with our current Vice President, Mr. Cheney, who since he was 35 has had major heart problems. This was a well known fact, yet this issue was never raised by the media or commented upon during Cheney's two successful campaigns for national office. His heart problem was simply not a concern to the public.

Also notable is the way health insurance companies discriminate between mental and physical illnesses. Most policies allow for only a certain number of visits to mental health professionals per year. My own insurance coverage was terminated after I reached the allowable number of visits. Fortunately, I had the ability to privately pay for visits for the remainder of that year. What happens to those suffering souls who cannot afford to do so?

Many young men and women in the legal profession simply refuse to get help. They are afraid of having a "paper trail" linking them to a mental illness because it could ruin their careers.

Suffice it to say this negative attitude toward mental as opposed to physical illnesses is unfair and unjustified. The only way to combat it is to speak publicly and candidly about depression and other mental disorders.

Given these circumstances, I am most pleased that our Monroe County Bar Association and particularly the Lawyers Helping Lawyers Committee has recognized the problem and is taking positive steps toward making lawyers and judges knowledgeable about depression and aware of the resources available to those who are in need of them and who have up to now suffered alone. In line with this new approach our Bar Association has reprinted this most important article that follows.

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