

He's Come *Undone*

A lawyer descends into depression BUT,
step by step, climbs out of the abyss

KEITH ANDERSON

“Life is overrated.” I made that flippant comment early one morning in 1988 while travelling to Cape Smokey in Cape Breton to learn how to ski. It was a strange remark because my life was going very well, but it would become a standard response at my law firm whenever someone had a bad moment or a file went astray. Years later, that's how I came to view my own life. Bad moments led to bad days, which led to even worse months and the worst of years.

March 2003 was the tipping point. On the 7th of the month, I was diagnosed with depression. On the 11th, I was suspended from the practice of law by the Nova Scotia Barristers' Society. On the 12th, I suffered a mental breakdown. Not my best week. Life was, indeed, overrated.

At age 42, I was senior and managing partner of a thriving law firm in Sydney, N.S., with two other lawyers and a support staff of 10. After an initial complaint from the Barristers' Society, I followed my own legal advice and retained a lawyer, Guy LaFosse, QC. LaFosse looked at the complaint and my history. I had had just three complaints in 18 years of practice — all dismissed at the first stage — and LaFosse recognized that the type of incidents giving rise to the current complaint just don't occur without a serious reason. “What went wrong in your life? What happened?” he asked. I had no response; my mind was starting to come undone.



I can look back now with a clear and healthy mind and recognize that for years I had had the symptoms of depression, but depression moves in slowly and imperceptibly so you don't notice it.

Insomnia was always present. I would let myself sleep only a couple of hours a night from Sunday to Thursday and then collapse on the weekend. The reason for my not wanting to sleep illustrates how depression can twist one's thinking. I was so unhappy with my life that I would stay up into the wee small hours because I thought it would put off the start of the next day. I did not want to have to face another ugly morning. When I did sleep, I would awaken with my mind racing through dozens of thoughts at once.

Tears became common, for no



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apparent reason. I would cry on the drive to work, then collect myself in the parking lot and walk into the office as if all was well. Pretending to be happy was exhausting. After working all day, I would cry the entire ride home, with another sleepless night ahead.

I cut myself off from friends and colleagues. Solo lunches became the norm. I would buy a bagel and a bottle of water and drive around the city on a 20-minute lunch hour. If I had insufficient energy to drive, I would hide in a full parking lot, hoping no one I knew saw me. I just wanted, needed, to conceal myself for those few moments.

I was unfulfilled in all aspects of my life. I enjoyed nothing. I used to love the practice of law — the busier, the more pressure, the better. Now I

felt drained by the work because it was no longer fun.

My last personal relationship with a woman was cut short as my mind unravelled. I couldn't commit even to having dinner with her, let alone taking a trip together. I felt I did not deserve to be happy or to be with her. The low self-esteem of my deep depression saw to that.

As my life continued to sink into blackness, I withdrew further from the world. This is when the complaint brought forward by the Barristers' Society surfaced.

Seeking to ease my pain, I bought an isolated house, acting more or less as my own real estate lawyer. There were no neighbours, and the driveway was more than a kilometre long. If I could just get this house, my thinking went, I could hide from

the world and my bad days would be gone. I would be able to breathe. I told very few people about the purchase. My mind was wrapped in such a dark fog that getting this property seemed my only means of survival. I needed that house.

As a result, I made improper decisions in the financing of the purchase. In my defence, no other client was involved. I used funds from the sale of another house instead of paying off its mortgage.

I fully acknowledged that my decisions were unethical, even in the midst of these surreal events. But all parties involved came to recognize that my wrong decisions were governed, if not dictated, by my disrupted thought processes.

I soon realized that the isolated house was no solution to my lack of



a life, so I looked for another option. The house was on a lake. I had a canoe, and many nights I thought about going for a paddle and not returning. I did not attempt to carry out with this plan because of the hurt it would cause my family.

At the conclusion of the hearing that made my suspension final, the chair of the Bar Committee said, "Keith, go home and get well." The committee acknowledged my psychological circumstances, and the executive director of the Barristers' Society shook my hand and wished me well.

By the time the hearing was over, it was spring and I was in really bad shape: no self-confidence, no sense of self-worth, no energy, no interest in most things — all classic symptoms of depression, as I came to recognize. Depression had left my mind in fragments. Anxiety attacks became a daily occurrence.

I was fortunate to have strong family support: my mother, sister, brother-in-law, niece and nephew. Thanks to their concern and understanding, I felt well protected. My niece gave up her bedroom for me. They took turns sitting at my bedside when I confined myself to a bedroom for three months. This self-confinement, to some extent, would last for several years.

But even in the midst of such anguish, I knew I wanted to get healthy. With my family's help, I was gradually able to leave the house, go for a drive and do normal things again. But it was a long process. To venture into the living room was a big step. To leave the house was a major accomplishment.

Eventually I started going out to eat. I would go to a certain restaurant, get takeout food and eat in my car in the back parking area. After a time, I was able to eat in the front parking lot. Then one day, I was able to eat inside the restaurant. This process took six months.

Citalopram — a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor prescribed for serious depression— worked well, slowing the pace of my racing mind. There was no more waking up to grapple with dozens of thoughts at once. While taking the drug, I slept

and ate a lot — which, given my previous patterns, were actually good side effects.

The Barristers' Society provided me with a list of psychologists and agreed to cover the costs of the first 10 visits. With my family's encouragement, I made an appointment with a female therapist. I had never been to therapy before, so I had no idea what to expect. It's amazing what people will tell a stranger. The floodgates opened and out flowed my life, the good and the bad. She helped me unwrap the many layers of depression. I learned what depression was, how it had affected my mind. We discussed how my life had gone astray, how certain events had taken their toll, how over the years my confidence and sense of self-worth had been eroded.

I attended therapy once a week for two years, then once a month for a year. The sessions became the highlight of my week. With my psychologist's help, I weaned myself off medication.

Together, we determined that the trigger for my depression was my father's premature death in February 1992. He died at age 59. Ours has always been a close-knit family, and since Dad was a real estate agent and the bulk of my practice was in real estate, we talked business every day.

Certain friends provided great support. They not only made the token offer to help, they actually did so, whether it was assisting me in selling the house, storing my belongings or taking me for a drive around the city. One couple who had experienced their own life challenges

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took me to a few movies and got me to attend Pilates classes for a while.

There were bumps along the way, though. Some people didn't reach out at all — quite the opposite, in fact. I have not heard my law partner's voice in more than six years. Others outright snubbed me, including a person who used to greet me with a hug. One former "friend" who came back into my life and took advantage of my vulnerable state set my recovery back by more than a year. I now dismiss such people from my life.

Getting healthy required help from my family and friends, my doctor and my psychologist. It involved a series of small steps, which at the time were almost impossibly huge. Most of all, it took wanting to get well.

My savings allowed me to cover the cost of weekly therapy and the cost of my medication after my law firm cut off my medical coverage. And for a few years, I was able to handle my normal living expenses.

Now, however, I have very limited resources — no house, no vehicle. Life is good, though. To focus on what I don't have is not fair to what I do have: good health, a loving family and a mind as strong as it was 25 years ago. I can read a book. I can now enjoy a movie. I sleep well

— I haven't watched *David Letterman* in months. I can truly laugh. I know these things may sound trivial, but just consider what it's like not to be able to do these activities for years.

This is a happy story. Now don't get me wrong. I was devastated by my depression, by being suspended. However, I knew even as I crumbled in bed, that these events might provide the opportunity for a second chance at a real life. Being diagnosed with depression was, in a sense, a relief to me. I knew that my life was not worthless and that I had a mental illness. I just had to work to regain my health. In addition, being suspended removed me from an unhealthy work environment. I could focus on just my health; the pressures and troubles of practice were removed. My life was saved.

Now, years later, I have learned how to be happy again. I have an exciting life now. Over the past year, I have been fortunate in having had opportunities to write and speak about my depression, its devastating impact on my life and my recovery. I have a few speaking events scheduled.

I even had an article appear in the Nova Scotia Barristers' Society's monthly magazine, *The Society Record*,

in January 2009. I received quite a few emails from lawyers — some I knew, some I didn't — all very supportive.

But the best email of all was from Alan Stern, QC, the lawyer for the Barristers' Society who acted against me at the time of my suspension. He wrote: "Thank you for having the courage and taking the time to tell others about what happened to you. One of the facts relating to your real estate practice that stood out to me at the time was how well all of your files were organized. My obvious conclusion was that you were a highly competent real estate practitioner. Over the years, I have provided advice to individuals on reinstatement...and should you need any such advice, I would be pleased to talk to you (at no charge, of course)."

In time, I will reapply to the Barristers' Society and I hope to be reinstated. But I do not want to set up practice as before with an office, a staff and overhead. I want to continue with my mental health advocacy, which may be my next career. I find it interesting and even fun, a word I haven't used in many years. Life is good and it continues to improve each day. Living is wonderful, and life is definitely not overrated. 💡