

LJAP Offers Connection Through New Virtual Support Groups

By Molly Ranns

support group /*noun*/ A group of people with common experiences and concerns who provide emotional and moral support for one another.¹

There is little disagreement that this past year has been challenging — some might say downright unbearable. Loss, isolation, and fear have enveloped much of our thoughts. As we begin to breathe in the fresh air of spring, feel the warm sunshine on our faces, and crawl out from under the COVID-19 pandemic, we recognize that some of the more beneficial (albeit forced) changes of 2020 are here to stay. One of these changes, a vastly improved use of technology, is now being utilized by the Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program (LJAP) to provide a much-needed service to State Bar of Michigan members. This service comes in the form of virtual support groups, and while the groups run in eight-week series with different topics focusing on an aspect of lawyer well-being, members can join at any time.²

Research has long provided a consistent pattern of evidence that confirms the effectiveness of support groups.³ A 2013 study by the Australian GROW organization, for example, found that 85 percent of its support-group participants felt an improved sense of personal value, 77 percent identified an improved sense of belonging and

connection within the community, and 81 percent reported an improved network of friends and personal supports.⁴

By bringing together legal professionals who have had similar experiences, LJAP provides an opportunity for people to share their feelings, coping strategies, and first-hand information about their circumstances. It enables participants to be with others with a common purpose and feel understood.⁵ Benefits of support groups can include reduced feelings of loneliness, isolation, and judgment; reduced stress, anxiety, and depression; improved skills for coping with everyday challenges; increased motivation; and a stronger sense of empowerment, control, and hope.⁶

Navigating the practice of law is not easy — especially when coupled with the personal and professional challenges life brings. LJAP is thrilled to provide this unique opportunity for legal professionals to connect, support, and learn from one another while navigating these obstacles and working to enhance overall mental, emotional, and physical health. The mission of our virtual support groups, formed to address the demand for lawyer well-being, is creating an anonymous and confidential space for attorneys to come together and commiserate about the rigors of practicing law. The current group focuses on ways to build resilience within the legal profession. Each group is facilitated by an LJAP clinical

case manager and, while these individuals are licensed therapists, their role is initiating and facilitating discussion, not providing treatment.

We understand that attorneys experience substance-use concerns at higher rates than both the general population and other professions.⁷ Mental health distress among lawyers is also significant.⁸ This tells us that more resources are needed to support legal professionals. Lawyer assistance programs like LJAP are one avenue to provide these resources; by adding support groups, we can reach more members than ever before. We know that despite elevated rates of anxiety, stress, and depression, lawyers are reluctant to seek help, fearing that doing so will lead to stigma or judgment from their peers.⁹ Research demonstrates that participating in support groups leads to decreased feelings of judgment, so encouraging the confidentiality of the group is paramount.¹⁰ LJAP support groups are offered via a HIPAA-compliant telehealth platform. Not only does this enable lawyers statewide to attend regardless of location, but it stresses that necessity of privacy to ensure feelings of safety for all members. Anonymity is crucial for an atmosphere of trust and openness, and confidentiality protects members from unwanted identification while ensuring the equality of all group members.

Well-being has been defined in a report from the National Task Force on Lawyer

“Practicing Wellness” is a regular column of the *Michigan Bar Journal*, overseen by the State Bar of Michigan’s Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program. If you’d like to contribute a guest column, please email contactljap@michbar.org.

Lawyer Well-Being Virtual Support Group

The next eight-week LJAP virtual support group series will be held Tuesdays from 6 to 7 p.m. beginning May 18. To register or learn more contact LJAP at (800) 996-5522 or contact LJAP@michbar.org.

Well-Being as not simply the absence of impairment or illness, but rather a continuous process of thriving in each dimension of one's life.¹¹ The six dimensions — emotional health, occupational pursuits, intellectual endeavors, spirituality, physical health, and social connections — are all pieces of the well-being puzzle and encompass a positive state of overall health.¹² It is a multi-dimensional approach. As we understand that pursuits to maximizing overall wellness are not an indicator of illness and essential to competence, we can recognize that receiving support from others with the same goals is both non-stigmatizing and highly beneficial.

Contact LJAP at contactLJAP@michbar.org or (800) 996-5522 to register or inquire further about this opportunity. Despite the isolation of the past year, it has never been easier to connect virtually with fellow lawyers as growing technological capabilities allow you to access LJAP support groups from the comfort of your own home. We look forward to seeing you there! ■



Molly Ranns is director of the State Bar of Michigan Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program.

ENDNOTES

1. Definition of "support group," Merriam-Webster <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/support%20group>>. All websites cited in this article were accessed April 21, 2021.
2. *Lawyers & Judges Assistance Program Virtual Support Groups*, SBM <<https://www.michbar.org/generalinfo/ljap/supportgroups>>.
3. Worrall et al., *The effectiveness of support groups: a literature review*, 22 *Mental Health and Social Inclusion* 85 (2018), available at <<https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6502&context=smhpapers&sei-redir=1&referer=https%253A%252F%252Fwww.bing.com%252Fsearch%253Fq%253Dresearch%252Bshows%252Bsupport%252Bgroups%252Bwork%2526form%253DEDGTCT%2526q%253DPF%2526cvid%253D088b12388f404e4d86f179a39cdfc640%2526refig%253D734a5c7866ff417e9c>>.
4. *Id.*, p. 6.
5. *Support groups: Make connections, get help*, *Healthy Lifestyle*, Mayo Clinic (August 29, 2020) <<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/support-groups/art-20044655>> [https://perma.cc/U62B-TSED].
6. *Id.*
7. Krill et al., *The Prevalence of Substance Abuse and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys*, 10 *J Addict Med* 46 (2016), p. 52 <<https://judicialstudies.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-Prevalence-of-Substance-Use-and-Other-Mental-Health-Concerns-Among-American-Attorneys-Patrick-R.-Krill-Ryan-Johnson-and-Linda-Albert-2016.pdf>> [https://perma.cc/N3WJ-DTX3].
8. *Id.*
9. Buchanan & Coyle, *Creating a Movement to Improve Well-Being in the Legal Profession*, Nat'l Task on Lawyer Well-Being (2017) <<https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/images/abanews/ThePathToLawyerWellBeingReportRevFINAL.pdf>> [https://perma.cc/923P-EY8D].
10. *Id.*
11. *Id.*
12. *Id.*

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