

# Why I Need Lawyers Helping Lawyers

by the Honorable William C. Mims



“If we live for others, we will gradually discover that no one expects us to be ‘as gods.’ We will see that we are human, like everyone else, that we all have weaknesses and deficiencies, and that these limitations of ours play a most important part in all our lives. It is because of them that we need others and others need us. We are not all weak in the same spots, and so we supplement and complete one another, each one making up in himself for the lack in another.”

—Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*

I have something deeply personal to admit. I need Lawyers Helping Lawyers.

I need Lawyers Helping Lawyers because I do not know that at a time of personal stress I won't abuse alcohol. I do not know that if in chronic physical pain I won't abuse painkillers. I do not know that the anxious and depressive aspects of my personality won't reach a tipping point. I do not know that in the twilight of my career my mental faculties won't fail me.

Of equal importance, I do not know that a dear colleague or friend won't be in such circumstances and turn to me for help. My faith teaches that I am to aspire to love my neighbor, which includes colleagues and friends, as I love myself.

I am every lawyer, every legal assistant, every judge. I cannot do life on my own. I am not in control. That is why I need Lawyers Helping Lawyers. That is why everyone in our legal profession needs Lawyers Helping Lawyers.

Why did we join the legal profession? For many, the answer is because we want to help peo-

ple. Sometimes those we need to help first are ourselves. Do you recall the instruction when you are on an airplane, that in an emergency you must put on your oxygen mask first? That principle applies in many circumstances.

I was admitted to the Bar in 1985, the year Lawyers Helping Lawyers was founded. At that time, its mission was limited to assisting lawyers wrestling with substance abuse. In the intervening thirty years, mental health professionals have come to a greater realization that substance abuse often is just the presenting issue. Long-term healing occurs as underlying “wellness” issues affecting mental health are resolved.

Fortunately, Lawyers Helping Lawyers has evolved since 1985, with a mental health component being added to its mission in 2002. This mental health focus is critical and timely. Members of our profession are particularly prone to anxiety and depression. Tragically, suicide is on the rise as well.

There is a downward cycle among some in our results-oriented, stressful profession that most of us probably have witnessed, though we may not have recognized it at the time. High expectations, constant stress, and burdensome workloads result in heightened anxiety, feelings of depression, and a generally unbalanced life. As this continues, alcoholism, substance abuse, and mental health crises develop.

The tragic results of these behaviors may include professional ruin, broken families, and at the end of the road, suicide. CNN recently examined some of these factors in a series of stories, “Why Are Lawyers Killing Themselves?”

Lawyers Helping Lawyers is a valuable resource to break this cycle, particularly early in the downward spiral. Lawyers Helping Lawyers also has a positive, preventative function, by promoting wellness as a professional value before the downward spiral begins.

Years ago, I would have described “wellness” as a balanced life that includes physical, mental, and spiritual health. I now realize that wellness means even more than those three dimensions. Mental health professionals now identify six or more dimensions of wellness — of a balanced life — that are briefly summarized below:

- Social Wellness includes our ability to establish and maintain positive relationships with family, friends, and co-workers.
- Emotional Wellness is the ability to understand ourselves and cope with life’s challenges, includ-

ing acknowledging feelings of anger, fear, sadness, or stress.

- Spiritual Wellness is the ability to establish peace and harmony in our lives, including developing congruency between our values and our actions. For me and many others, spiritual wellness is inextricably linked to faith in a caring God.
- Occupational Wellness is the ability to receive personal fulfillment in our careers by making a positive impact on the organizations we work in and to our communities.
- Intellectual Wellness is the ability to learn new concepts, improve skills, and seek challenges in pursuit of lifelong learning.
- Physical Wellness is the ability to maintain a healthy quality of life through positive habits such as a balanced diet, regular exercise, sufficient sleep, and routine check-ups, while avoiding destructive behaviors such as drug abuse, excessive alcohol consumption, and the like.

So why do we collectively need Lawyers Helping Lawyers? Because thirty years of experience has shown that it is integral to promoting wellness within our demanding and stressful profession. The law indeed can be a jealous mistress, but sacrificing personal wellness is not required.

**Lawyers Helping Lawyers also has a positive, preventative function, by promoting wellness as a professional value before the downward spiral begins.**

Historically, Lawyers Helping Lawyers has helped to break the downward spiral that may lead to personal and professional tragedy. As we anticipate the next thirty years, Lawyers Helping Lawyers also will be a beacon illuminating the upward path to personal wellness and professional satisfaction.



William C. Mims is a justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia.