

Success and its relation to the darkest corner of the soul

Twenty-four of Sydney's most eligible – attractive, intelligent, ambitious as hell – sit at the boardroom table, not a single word between us. Yesterday we were twenty-five.

Last night we joined with the summer interns from all the other law firms to celebrate being young and successful in this city of promises. A harbour cruise, all tight pants and Colgate smiles – on the guys and the girls - and the revelry was led by Julian. Julian, in a blue shirt that made those azure eyes ethereal. This morning, sunlight makes the Harbour below us the colour of those eyes. The threat of that deep unknown, last night's joy and the morning's sorrow, will haunt us all. Every time it rains we will imagine Julian, dressed for work in suit and tie, trudging towards the middle of the bridge in the pouring rain and half dark of early morning.

For someone as vivacious as Julian, jumping off the bridge seems so passé. A wunderkind, Julian scored 99 in his HSC, was Captain of an elite private school, on full academic scholarship, the pride of the RSL, an Honours law student and church leader. Despite his brilliant communication skills, however, he lacked a voice with which to ask for help.

As a girl, it was easier for me to communicate that it felt like my eyes weren't connected to my brain; that I would wake at 3 or 4 am thinking I was dead after a fall from a great height, that I leave parties early filled with an intense sadness, and that for most of my life the simple act of getting out of bed has been a triumph of matter over mind. There is nothing in law school that cannot be learnt in the three days before the exam, and damned if I was getting out of bed before then. So antidepressants were prescribed and for several years I was 'normal'. Now, I recognise the signs. The reclusive tendencies, the detachment, sudden loss of interest in socialising, the absence of heartbreak or any other sweeping emotion, and, without fail, walking through the twilight city crying uncontrollably because nothing is wrong, and I still can't get it together.

Looking around the boardroom table it is impossible not to question one another. I know you so well, but so did we know him. What pain do we hide from one another?

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Only days later, it is business as usual. A donation has been made to applicable charities, wristbands were distributed in a show of solidarity, and now we must get on! We secretly swallow our pills with our sandwiches, isolated, alone, and identical to the unique individual in the next office.

We are fortunate to be in a profession that is increasingly aware of the importance of looking after delicate souls. We are the ones who keep the bastards honest, we give the most, care all the time, and agonise about getting things right. We are also perfectionists, driven, ambitious and competitive, and we are in the majority in the legal profession. Depression is an impediment to achieving the things we desire, but as the profession slowly realises that from the bottom up we, collectively, have a substance-abuse problem, tolerance increases and the search is on for support mechanisms that work. The focus has to be on the babies, because we are the ones collecting bad habits, inappropriate ways of dealing with situations, and vices – be they booze, pills, sex or a combination of the three.

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Hardened graduates now, we again gather with the boardroom table between us. Dead eyes masked by heavy-rimmed glasses and long lashes. We are manicured, coiffed, bespoke, uniform. Remunerated like lawyers in a convict colony when compared to Europe and the US, our aspirations towards higher causes are drowned by the reality of working in a professional service industry. The money is better, but there is no joy in being a post-box service, however you are paid. The status is gone, and the pay and conditions are better almost anywhere else we look.

The New York Times this week reports that 20 percent of lawyers will suffer from clinical depression at some point in their careers, and that the annual attrition rate among junior lawyers in the US is 1 in 5, despite salaries of close to \$200K straight out of college. Take away the high salary and bonuses and you begin to understand the dissatisfaction among Australian lawyers.

But there is a fundamental difference between dissatisfaction and depression, although the two may co-exist. For those who are unhappy, lacking challenge or ready for a change, counselling, not medication must be the key. There is little gain in training young professionals to see that Zoloft is the key to career success, for dissatisfaction lurks behind that mask, and there is little hope of a compassionate profession if its foot-soldiers are unable to cry.

When I was no longer able to perform the act of putting on a suit, the firm gave me six weeks paid sick leave to deal with depression. By the Monday of week 7, I was anxious to get back. As a generation we are obsessed with always moving forward, but in maintaining our relentless pace we lose the cure. For being depressed is not like falling off a horse. By getting straight back 'on', you guarantee only that you will again fall 'off'. Recovery is all about time, and that time must extend to shorter days, longer breaks, and redefining the meaning of 'reasonable hours'. In the case of young professionals, learning to

manage partner and client expectations and a focus on activities that don't involve alcohol or networking must also become part of the program.

For those of us that Julian left behind, communication is the key. Julian didn't feel he could express the darkest corners of his soul. We must find ways. We need to help one another to find the words, and force one another to stop the infernal internal monologue and connect our-selves to reality. And when all else fails, we must cling to our **beyondblue** wristbands and know that, even in the dead of night, help is just a phone call away. If only you would pick up the phone.

[Name changed]