

## Peer Support: Offering Help and Asking for Help

By M. Jenny McMordie

When we consider assistance for lawyers, we often think about more extreme burn-out and addiction issues, and the need for immediate practice intervention or crisis counselling. Our profession is fortunate that this help is available for anyone who needs it.

But taking a step back to consider those in practice who are not experiencing an immediate crisis, it is important to remember that every one of us, junior or senior, in every area of law, needs support. We all have good days and bad days, times when a file may go sideways or another lawyer has taken a difficult or perplexing position, or when we are handling something new and need some perspective or advice. We also need support dealing with interpersonal and practice management issues. Every one of us needs friends within the profession who are available to answer a call, reach out, or just listen.

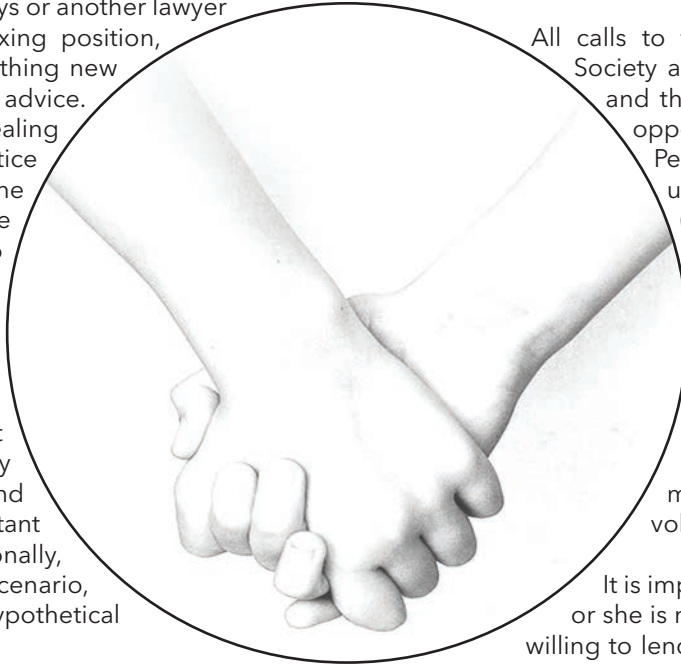
The advantages of making that connection with someone within the legal profession are great - you do not have to begin by explaining what law practice and legal issues entail, or how important confidentiality is to you personally, professionally and to any client scenario, even if discussed only in hypothetical terms.

Personally, I have greatly benefited from reaching out to colleagues on various file, strategy and practice management issues, and sometimes just to have a coffee and share a burden or describe some frustration. While I retain the responsibility to move ahead and resolve the challenges I am facing, my worries about them are lessened, just by involving a caring colleague. I have also been honoured when colleagues have called me to do the same. I am improved as a lawyer when I learn something new from someone wiser and more experienced than me, and I am also improved as a lawyer when someone asks me a question that calls me to consider my own practice and whether there is a better way.

While there has always been some ability informally to share concerns and get support from friends, some of us may not have what we need immediately available through existing contacts. The Alberta Lawyers' Assistance Society recognizes our need for support and has developed the Peer Support Program. Any of us, at any level of practice, and with any type of concern, can call to be connected with a lawyer through the Peer Support Program.

You can expect any Peer Support lawyer to understand law practice, stress, and the struggle to balance work, family and volunteer commitments, all which can be difficult in our

profession. Beyond the basics, however, we can request a Peer Support volunteer with specific characteristics, i.e., some who has understanding of addiction issues, small firm management, succession issues, large firm politics, general practice or specific area of practice, gender, seniority, etc. The goal is that each caller is connected with a Peer Support volunteer who can listen and is able to respond to the specific needs of the caller. Note that Peer Support volunteers are not trained counsellors or psychologists, but callers can also be connected with those services as needed.



All calls to the Alberta Lawyers' Assistance Society are always handled confidentially, and the caller seeking support has the opportunity to accept the proposed Peer Support volunteer or if unsuitable, to ask for another name. (For example, you might not wish your Peer Support lawyer to be someone at your same firm, or someone against whom you are opposite on an active file).

It has been a great pleasure to work with lawyers seeking Peer Support, and I have experienced many benefits as a Peer Support volunteer.

It is important that each lawyer knows he or she is not alone and that there are many willing to lend support in whatever way would be most useful. By reaching out, to offer help and to ask for it, each of us becomes a better lawyer and a stronger person. Support at this individual level also strengthens our profession and our legal community.

For Professional Counselling (24/7) call 1-877-498-6898. You do not need to be in crisis to call and Assist helps lawyers trying to help another.

For Peer Support call 403-537-5508 or toll free 1-877-737-5508. Rebecca McCarthy, Peer Support Program Coordinator is willing to listen and arrange a Peer Support match.

If you are interested in becoming a Peer Support volunteer, visit Assist's website for an online application at [www.albertalawyersassist.ca](http://www.albertalawyersassist.ca) or call Rebecca McCarthy.

Thank you for reaching out to each other and making each of us, and our profession, stronger, healthier and happier. 🌍



Jenny McMordie practises civil litigation (commercial, estate and personal injury) and is a proud partner at a two-lawyer firm, West End Legal Centre. Jenny is currently the CBA Alberta Branch Secretary.