

Divorce and Suicide

Today I learned one of my former family law clients killed himself. He had a 3 year old son. The reason I thought I would share this is because I have had a lot of “high-conflict” clients

over the years, clients who I have had serious concerns for their mental health. Angry clients, clients who were aggressive, who hated their ex-spouse and told me about it on a daily basis. This client was not one of those. His case was fairly standard, a few periods of conflict, notably during temporary relief motions, some nasty letters and then we finally settled the case about 16 months after it started. A very forgettable case a divorce lawyer’s perspective.

I’ve had clients kill themselves before, I think most criminal and family lawyers have had it happen, but not a client who appeared so level headed and normal. This made me do a little research (that is what lawyers are supposed to be good at after all!) and I found some pretty surprising and shocking statistics:

- The National Institute for Healthcare Research in Rockville, MD found that divorced people are **three times** as likely to commit suicide.
- Divorce ranks as the **number one factor** linked with suicide rates in major U.S. cities, ranking above all other physical, financial, and psychological factors.
- The World Health Organization found that divorce was the **only consistent factor** in factors for suicide in 13 European countries.
- Divorced men are **4X more likely** to commit suicide than divorced women according to a University of Colorado study.

Those are pretty sobering facts and facts that I suspect most divorce lawyers in Minnesota don’t know about them. One of the problems from the legal practitioners’ perspective is that we don’t really get to know our clients. This is done for a variety of reason, to remain objective, to not get enmeshed, to keep costs down, etc. so we only see our clients for brief snapshots, at court, our office, telephone calls but I suspect it’s pretty easy to hide this level of depression when you meet someone only a few times and talk to them briefly.

The other problem we have is that we, as lawyers, are woefully ill prepared to do any sort of mental health analysis let alone counseling. While we are “counselors at law” there are no classes that we take in law school to identify mental stress or mental illness in a client, the best we can do is read our journal articles, maybe remember a few notes from Psych 101 from our undergrad days and hope for the best.

If you are going through a divorce or if you are family or friends of someone going through a divorce, don’t underestimate the stress of a marriage being dissolved. The day in and day out stress wears even the strongest person down and if you see them having troubles urge them to get help. I know I’ll spend additional time asking how my clients are doing and give them the name of a few good counselors to talk to.

Thank you for reading. Chris R. I hope you found the peace you apparently couldn't find on earth.

P.S. Need help for suicide prevention? <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

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