

# ONLINE SUPPORT GROUP ORGANIZED FOR FLORIDA LAWYERS DIAGNOSE WITH BIPOLAR OR DEPRESSION ISSUES

📅 Feb 02, 2023    👤 By Patrick R. Fargason    ▶ Senior Editor    📁 Top Stories



The Bar's Standing Committee on Mental Health and Wellness of Florida Lawyers is partnering with Florida Lawyers Assistance to form a new confidential online support group for lawyers with bipolar or depression diagnoses.

The group, which holds its first online meeting on February 14, plans to meet every Tuesday from 12-1 p.m. moving forward. Committee Chair

Karl Klein said the online support group builds upon the foundation set by the Support Group for Working Mother Lawyers.

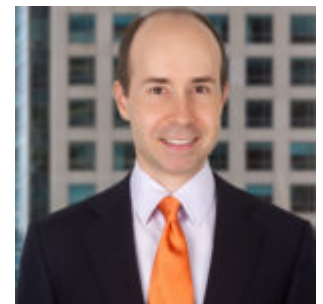
"Our committee started this journey with the working mothers' support group, which has run once a week for nearly two years and has been a really good resource for those who participate," Klein said.

Since the formation of the working mothers support group, Klein said that his committee has been exploring ways to add a second support group.

"I'm always talking to people in the mental health and wellness area," Klein said. "Recently, I was talking to an attorney from NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) who was looking to connect with other attorneys with the same diagnosis."

That attorney was Rachael Flanagan, an associate with Cohen|Milstein in Palm Beach Gardens, who currently serves on the Board of Directors for NAMI's Palm Beach Chapter.

Flanagan previously had access to support groups but said they didn't exactly fit her situation.



Klein

“I’m actively involved in NAMI, and they offer many support groups. I’ve attended several, but the one thing I learned is there weren’t any people in those groups who were in my peer group. Not a lot of working professionals,” Flanagan said.

Flanagan said she spoke with Klein and wanted to see a support group geared toward attorneys who still manage to practice law. She said that she recently opened up to her colleagues at work about her mental-health diagnosis and now wants to give back, in part, by sharing her diagnosis in an attempt to end the stigma.

“When I told my co-workers about my diagnosis many of them were shocked because they believed I was so well put together,” Flanagan said. “The stigma is still so deep, but that doesn’t mean you can’t achieve your goals. The only difference between others with mental illness and myself is the support system I have, combined with excellent medical care.”

Following Klein and Flanagan’s conversation, they reached out to **Florida Lawyers Assistance**, which provides confidential assistance and support to lawyers, judges, and law students who have been negatively affected in their careers or personal lives by alcohol, drugs, mental health issues, or cognitive decline.

“FLA works closely with the Bar and our committee,” Klein said. “It was just a natural partner for us.”

The pair reached out to FLA Executive Director Dan McDermott who was eager to help set up the support group.

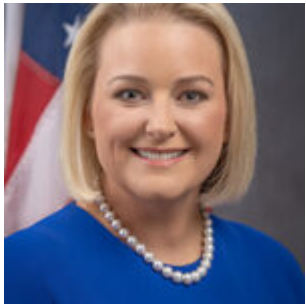
“Dan jumped on board with us very quickly,” Klein said. “We had our first phone call about setting the support group up just a few weeks ago.”

McDermott said the support group was something FLA could easily make happen on its end.

“The support group made a lot of sense. FLA does around 35 support groups a week routinely and regularly, so we didn’t have to reinvent the wheel to put this together,” McDermott said.

McDermott is optimistic that creating a platform for lawyers to come together and begin supporting each other will prove beneficial. He stresses that the group will always be mindful of a lawyer’s confidentiality.

“We provide a comfortable level of confidentiality for those who participate in groups like this,” McDermott said. “Lawyers need that kind of opportunity to work on themselves and heal themselves. Getting the word out is a legitimate exercise in self-care and beneficial to the lawyer.”



**Rep. Hillary Cassel**

First-term Rep. Hillary Cassel, D-Dania Beach, is excited to partner on this issue so lawyers can see they're not alone. Cassel is president of FLA and a former member of the Mental Health and Wellness of Florida Lawyers Committee.

“I think the legal community is very high stakes and stressful. We are asked to solve people's problems while putting ourselves on the back burner. We also aren't taught to take care of ourselves.

That can result in self-destructive behavior. Lawyers need to understand they are not alone,” Cassel said.

Cassel, diagnosed with a mental illness in high school, said she had no examples of a positive person who was living with a mental illness.

“I had to create that person in myself,” Cassel said. “I made a commitment to being healthy and wanting to be a lawyer. Therapy helped me to set up those boundaries.”

Cassel believes that this new support group is extremely important and something she is excited to partner on.

“Nobody knows what we do as lawyers, and we are often criticized, which makes us feel so alone. Whether it be the stress of a big meeting with a partner or solving a big problem, no one understands that like your colleagues and peers,” Cassel said.

For meeting information and contact persons, contact FLA at 954-566-9040 or 800-282-8981.