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Lean on Me

After battling his own suicidal thoughts, Michael Rexford helps others in crisis.

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LOS ANGELES — Media and entertainment attorney Michael Rexford doesn't shy away from difficult questions.

"Are you thinking about killing yourself?" he asks calmly. And after a brief pause, in which the silence feels almost deafening, Rexford follows up with, "Have you ever asked anyone that?"

For those suffering from mental illness, that 10-syllable question has life-altering potential, something Rexford understands on a deeply personal level.

At 24, after taking what should have been a harmless medication, his liver was sent "into the stratosphere." For months, Rexford's commute to what was then a new job at a West Hollywood-based music company included a pit stop to draw blood at Cedars Sinai hospital.

"When your liver overreacts, it creates an itching sensation all over your body that comes from the inside," Rexford explained. Comparing the sensation to being repeatedly poked with needles, he said, "I'd brush my teeth for 45 minutes because my gums itched."

Explaining that the bilirubin content in a healthy person's blood should be low, Rexford said, the figure might come in "at number one" for most people.

"If it were two, they'd call you back in," he continued. "If it were three, they'd call you and say, 'Something's wrong with your liver.'"

When Rexford's bilirubin content soared into the 30s, he asked his doctor, "How bad can this get?" The physician's answer, Rexford said, ended up as the opening line to his law school admission essays.

"He said, 'You could drop dead at any moment,'" Rexford recalled. Having reached his breaking point, Rexford remembers passing a ravine on his drive to work one day.

"I thought, 'Here's my chance,'" Rexford said. "If I'm essentially waiting to drop dead, maybe I'll just yank the steering wheel ... and have some measure of control."

Before acting on the impulse, however, Rexford's car carried him past the ravine, and when he got to the office, he called his doctor,



Sam Diephuis / Special to the Daily Journal

who suggested he put his name on the liver transplant waiting list.

Rexford ultimately avoided a transplant; his system cleared out the medication, and he got healthy.

Acknowledging that not everyone is so lucky, Rexford said he has since made it his mission to spread suicide awareness.

Rexford called the telephone operator in 1997, inquiring about a suicide hotline, and was connected to the Didi Hirsch Suicide Prevention Center in Culver City.

"I said, 'I've just been through an enormous ordeal, and I'd love to be able to help if I can,'" he recalled. Sixty hours of training later, he had a weekly shift at the call center.

For Rexford, the more challenging calls were the most gratifying. One that stands out involved an "acutely mentally ill man" who Rexford said was "squarely in a world of delusion." Explaining that, on the hotline, it's important to adopt the reality of the caller, Rexford said, "he told me that someone was putting rats under his door, that there were people in apartments across the way with TVs that were on a loop with him."

It occurred to Rexford that "there must be some doctor in his world," and ultimately, Rexford was able to convince the man to reach out.

"I have no psychology degree. I graduated from Berklee College of Music as a drummer. I couldn't be further from a mental health guy," Rexford said. "But we don't all need to be mental health professionals to be able to help each other. ... And I think by helping each other we also kind of heal ourselves."

When Rexford moved to San Francisco to attend UC Hastings College of the Law, he had to give up the hotline, and after law school, he moved back to Los Angeles to start his career as a lawyer.

Noting that in order to help on the suicide prevention hotline, one must commit to the same, four-hour shift each week, Rexford said, "[The] music business and legal profession, and kids and all that doesn't lend itself to that kind of regularity."

Still determined to help, Rexford decided to "start [his] own thing."

In 2016, the Manatt, Phelps & Phillips LLP partner launched LightHopeLife, a nonprofit suicide prevention and awareness foundation

that raises “funds for those organizations out there that are doing education and research and outreach and hotlines and places that are dependent on donations.”

Rexford said the foundation’s other goal is to educate people about how to talk to someone in a psychological crisis who may be experiencing suicidal despair.

Fellow Manatt partner, and LightHopeLife board member, Charles J. Biederman described Rexford as “a tireless crusader for a really, really important issue.”

“We do not have the world’s easiest job,” Biederman said. “And he devotes buckets of time to reaching out to people.”

Explaining that this is an issue Rexford “really takes personally,” Biederman said “a lot of people, it seems, window dress causes. He’s a really good example of giving back.”

While the bulk of Rexford’s practice is music industry-related, he also does “some film and TV stuff [and] some fashion stuff,” he said.

“All of these industries, and the legal profession, are hit hard by mental illness and substance abuse and alcoholism and all these things that drive people to kill themselves,” the attorney added.

Acknowledging there are a wide range of combinations, factors and variables that culminate in mental illness, Rexford posed an interesting question. How many people enter the legal profession for reasons other than a desire to practice law?

Some are pressured by family members, Rexford said, while others are approaching

college graduation and simply don’t yet feel ready to enter “the real world.”

Whatever the reason may be, many attorneys find themselves unhappy in a job they fell into “by happenstance,” Rexford explained. They grow accustomed to the salary and the lifestyle it affords, then realize they’re stuck.

“I spend more time with the people up and down this hall than I do with people in my family,” Rexford said. “I may be the one to notice that there’s a change in them; I may be the first line of defense. ... I may be the one to say, ‘Hey, is everything OK? You look down; what’s going on?’”

Unfortunately, the “majority of people in society have no idea how to talk to someone in crisis,” he added. “We are essentially trained to give people space and to not be intrusive, which for people stuck in the darkness of despair creates an isolation and alienation that compounds that despair.”

To combat this, Rexford put together a free, one-hour presentation called, “How to Talk to Someone in Crisis,” which has been given continuing legal education credit.

“Everyone who will give me an audience, I’m giving this presentation to,” said Rexford. So far, he has presented the material at Manatt, Southwestern Law School, Belmont University in Nashville, the Academy for Jewish Religion and at Concord Music Group.

David Wykoff, a sole practitioner based in Nashville, described Rexford as the gold standard for lawyers in the world of music and entertainment.

“Being in Tennessee, it’s not infrequent for lawyers from New York and Los Angeles to take the point of view that they know how to do things better than we do,” Wykoff said. “He’s never taken that point of view with me or anyone else I know around here.”

Over the last 10 years, Wykoff said he and Rexford have worked together on a number of deals.

“He’s one of the most thorough attorneys I’ve ever dealt with,” Wykoff added.

Discussing Rexford’s suicide prevention and awareness foundation, LightHopeLife, Wykoff said, “I think it’s fantastic.”

“I attended one of the presentations that he gave at Belmont,” Wykoff added. “And that was really moving.”

At the beginning of each presentation, Rexford brings up his own history of depression and anxiety, he said, “Because how can I expect other people to be comfortable talking if I’m not?”

The material also includes a transcript and role play, “so that people can get a feel for how a conversation with someone in a dark spot might go,” Rexford said.

“I’ve always thought, if you and I were going to lunch and we saw someone at the next table choking, and no one knows the Heimlich maneuver, it’s too late for that person for us to learn it.”

With that in mind, Rexford said, “If you see someone in crisis a month, a year, five years from now, and you come and dig up my packet,” it might save a life.

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