

Holland & Knight Attorney On Overcoming Crippling Anxiety

By **Sarah Martinson**

Law360 (June 11, 2021, 4:30 PM EDT) -- Holland & Knight LLP senior counsel Wendy Robbins knows firsthand the ups and downs of overcoming crippling anxiety while trying to be a successful attorney, and she released a book in May chronicling her journey to help other people take control of their anxiety.

Robbins started dealing with anxiety at an early age and had her first panic attack when she was 6. She told Law360 Pulse that her home life at times was volatile while she was growing up and her mother had untreated mental health issues that affected her.

Robbins said her anxiety grew worse as she got older even though she thrived in school and became a successful attorney. Her worsening anxiety led to more panic attacks, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression and suicidal thoughts. In her 20s she tried to manage her anxiety with therapy, medication, mediation and yoga, without success.

"I became an overachiever really to hide what was unraveling inside of me," she said.

Robbins hit bottom and a turning point in her life when she developed agoraphobia — a fear of leaving her home — and couldn't go to her law firm's office without having panic attacks.

Here, Robbins speaks with Law360 Pulse about struggling with anxiety, her book "The Box: An Invitation to Freedom from Anxiety" and the legal industry's response to attorney mental health.

Tell me about your journey with anxiety.

The story that I think best illustrates it is, and it's really where I got the title for the book, is that we, the summer before that first panic attack, got a new refrigerator. My parents put that cardboard box that it comes in in the living room, and I would play in that box. After a while I found out that I was really hiding more than playing. It was because my household, when I was young, was volatile at times. And I was ill-equipped to deal with it at that age and really understand what was going on. So the next summer, when we moved, that cardboard box didn't come with us, obviously, but it became a metaphor for what I started to do as a child. I was building a box around myself to protect myself from all of the triggers that were causing the anxiety.

As I grew, my anxiety grew as well, and those walls just got thicker and taller. Over the years, I adopted destructive perfectionism and became extremely controlling of my environment. I became an overachiever to hide what was unraveling inside of me. That box stayed with me until I ultimately realized that it was really a prison that I had created because I was just closing off every door that I thought was a place where my anxiety would be triggered. I was terrified to live because I was so afraid of the anxiety that was overwhelming me inside.

I realized that I was in prison in my early 30s, and that's really when I hit rock bottom. I was at my first law firm, [in] my first marriage, and I became agoraphobic at that point. So it was really difficult to have a fulfilling relationship and maintain my career. I found ways to manage and to hide it more, which is not the best solution. I did that for about another 10 years, and it wasn't really until my early 40s that I decided to uncover what was going on, because I couldn't really reconcile all of the achievements I had gotten at that point in my life and what was unraveling still inside of me with the

anxiety.

How were you able to get through law school and become a successful attorney with your anxiety?

I always thought that once I achieved passing the bar, having my first husband, having my first law firm job, all of those achievements would rid me of my anxiety. I was convinced that it was just because I wasn't a lawyer yet or because I wasn't in a safe marriage yet that my anxiety was so bad. But once I had all of those things, my anxiety was worse than ever.

How did you overcome your anxiety?

In my late 30s, I had discovered the Midwest Center for Anxiety and Depression and ordered tapes or CDs [of] group therapy sessions. It was the first time that I ever heard other people voicing the scary thoughts that they had that were similar to my own. That really saved me in a big way. Hearing other people tell their stories gave me this hope that I wasn't completely broken, and I wasn't completely crazy. That's a lot of why it's a huge motivation for me now to tell my own story, because I know how much of a huge affect they had on my own life.

I started asking my doctors, my life coaches, "Do you think it's possible for somebody who suffered with this disorder for decades to actually live a life totally free of it?" They all sort of said, "I don't know" or "probably not." So I decided to go out and find out on my own. That's the journey that I write about.

Do you still struggle with anxiety at all?

I identify myself as free of anxiety, but not because I don't have anxiety anymore, but because it doesn't control me anymore. I still have panic attacks occasionally, and I use it now, like as my superpower.

Can you explain a little more how you use your anxiety as a superpower?

If I'm thinking about something in the past and I'm feeling anxious about it, I recognize it now as a place that needs some healing, some forgiveness, maybe some healthy boundaries. It really shines a light on places that I need to focus on more.

In the present moment, when I feel anxious, I use it as an opportunity to identify my thoughts that are creating that anxiety and really observe them. Then, once I become the observer of that thought, then I can change that thought, because our thoughts are optional. That just gives me the opportunity to live a more intentional life versus just reacting to all of these emotional triggers.

Then when I look at my future, this was a big shift for me; I would look at opportunities or new relationships or new jobs and always feel a sense of resistance. I was always saying "no" because I would say to myself, "They don't get it. They don't understand that I have anxiety. I can't do something like that." So all of these doors were just closing around me. Now when I feel that way, if it's not an actual threat, which typically it never is, then I know that I need to lean in. That it's something that I'm afraid is going to cause me anxiety or panic, and that's the only threat that there is. So I'm seeing them as places to build resilience now versus building resistance.

Why did you decide to write your book?

I wrote it at the beginning as a cathartic way to move through this journey that I was on to discover whether or not I could really live a life beyond anxiety. At the beginning, it was really just to save myself, and then about halfway through I started discovering so many amazing treasures along the way that I just wanted to share. I wanted to share this process with as many people suffering with anxiety as I could, because I could see that there was a light at the end of the tunnel. I could see that there was a way out of this box that I was in and a way to live the life that's waiting for you on the other side. I really felt like if I could help someone else find his freedom earlier, it would just be such a gift for me.

Why do you think mental health issues and substance abuse are so prevalent in the legal industry?

I think first, a lot of people that get into it are already anxious overachievers. They may already have anxiety issues, and they're exacerbated because the traditional route is to either be in a big law firm or be a solo practitioner. The pressure is just so intense. Your life is really not your own, especially if you're in a law firm. You have partners who can give you work at any time and ask for it on a very short deadline. If you're a [solo practitioner], you're at the disposal of your clients all the time. You're also identifying problems all day long. Our job is to identify things that could potentially be problems. So we're in a way catastrophizing all day long, which is something that people with anxiety do anyway. We need to be hyperaware, super sharp and detail oriented. We need the ability to sit there for hours on end and be very focused. Then, to unwind all of that when we go home and just shut it all off is extremely difficult. So I think that it lends itself to, unfortunately, mental health issues and substance abuse.

Do you think the legal industry is doing enough to address attorney mental health?

I don't think that we have in the past. I think that if there's any silver lining from 2020 and the pandemic it's that words like wellness, well-being [and] mental health are now part of our vocabulary, which I think is something we need to root into the culture that is our profession and start to grow new practices out of that. So that we're taking care of each other in ways that really make sense so that productivity is so great and people are able to thrive in a very stressful profession. The more we as a collective understand these mental health issues, the quicker we can end the stigma surrounding them.

It's important, too, that we educate, because there's a lot of people who aren't suffering from mental health who are lawyers and they're like, "Well, maybe this profession is just not for you." I think telling our stories as sufferers also allowed the nonsufferers to have empathy and understand what the struggles really look like.

--Editing by Brian Baresch and Alyssa Miller.

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