

# A PERSONAL RECKONING SPARKS REFORM

**Michael Herman's** breakdown became a turning point for his career – and a catalyst for change at Canadian law firms

**AS GENERAL** counsel at Gowling WLG (Canada) LLP, Michael Herman spent decades navigating the legal and corporate world, dealing with complex negotiations and high-stakes pressure. But in 2016, after a lifetime of pushing through stress and anxiety, he found himself in a place he couldn't power through. What started as physical issues – atrial fibrillation, chronic fatigue, digestive problems – turned out to be symptoms of something deeper: severe depression.

"I just hit a wall," he says. "I just had no energy. I had no ability to concentrate, no ability to even think."

He initially took a short leave from work, assuming that rest and medical tests would fix what felt like burnout. "I'll get some rest ... and after a couple of months, I'll come back and everything will be fine," he thought. But when he returned, it quickly became clear he wasn't ready. "Within about a week, I knew."

One morning on his balcony, coffee in hand, looking out over Toronto's Don Valley, a thought struck him: "What's the point?" he says. "And somehow, in that moment, I recognized that what I really was dealing with was not physical. The physical was a consequence of the emotional and the mental."

It was a shattering realization – but one that set him on a new path. Recovery would be non-linear, slow, and deeply personal, but Herman started therapy, began taking medication, and

developed new self-care routines. He found an approach that worked and, more importantly, he was able to stick to it.

## Breaking the silence

Herman's relationship with mental health began long before 2016, but like many professionals, he didn't recognize the signs. "From a young age ... I suffered from mild to moderate depression from time to time, and

that, when it came to me, I bought into [the stigma] completely... I was weak. I was to blame. I was not worthy of getting help."

That belief turned into shame. "Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change," he says, quoting Brené Brown. "I had to begin with, how was I going to look at and work with that self-stigma and that shame... Not easy to do, but I had to do it."

**If I can influence, by talking about my experience, one person to not struggle in silence but to reach out for help, whatever that looks like for them, then that's a success**

did not really understand what was going on," he says. "The messages I got ... were that when you're having a difficult time, you just keep pushing through."

That internalized belief – what he now calls self-stigma – was the first thing he had to confront.

"I was one of these people who always said I don't stigmatize those who may have depression or anxiety or other mental health challenges," he says. "I don't hold it against them. I don't think any less of them. I don't think they're weak. I don't think they're incapable. What I didn't realize is

## The decision to speak out

As his health improved and he returned to work gradually, Herman made a promise to himself: if he made it back, he'd speak out. "I felt a certain responsibility to do it," he says.

His other motivation was, "If I can influence, by talking about my experience, one person to not struggle in silence but to reach out for help, whatever that looks like for them, then that's a success."

That opportunity came when his firm asked him to send out an email promoting a mental health initiative. The version they provided was polished – but not personal.



## PROFILE

**Name:** Michael Herman

**Current position:** Partner and general counsel at Gowling WLG (Canada) LLP

**Key Dates:**

- » **2002:** Joined partnership at Goodman and Carr LLP
- » **2007:** Joined partnership at Gowling WLG
- » **2014:** Became general counsel at Gowling WLG
- » **2024:** *The Right Not to Remain Silent* was published, including a chapter by Herman

# CROSS EXAMINED

“I said, I’m writing to you not as Michael Herman, partner and general counsel of the firm, but as Michael Herman [the] person,” he says. “And I, for the first time, disclosed in this email my experience and why, therefore, this initiative was so important.”

He hesitated before sending it. “I feel like I had my finger over the cursor send for about 15 minutes,” he says. “It was probably about three seconds, but [I thought to myself], ‘Do I know what I’m doing here?’ But I pressed send.”

When he checked his inbox later, it had exploded. “What was so moving to me and so affirming in the decision I had made was that I, for the first time, realized just how many people are either affected directly [by]

**“I was one of these people who always said I don’t stigmatize those who may have depression or anxiety or other mental health challenges... What I didn’t realize is that, when it came to me, I bought into [the stigma] completely... I was weak. I was to blame”**

challenges that they’re experiencing ... and/or have loved ones or close friends or other family members [who] are going through really difficult times.”

That personal message marked a shift. Herman would go on to speak publicly at legal conferences, including a memorable first talk at a CBA event in Regina. Later that same day, he received an email from an attendee: “I’ve really been struggling... I’ve been afraid to reach out for help. I listened to you ... and I went out [and] I call[ed]... and said, I need help.”

“That email was what made everything worthwhile,” he says.

Herman eventually shared his story in *The Right Not to Remain Silent: The Truth*

*About Mental Health in The Legal Profession*, recently published by LexisNexis.

## Building a culture of support

Herman didn’t stop at telling his own story. In early 2021, he reached out to other major law firms to create an informal mental health collaboration.

“The perspective that everyone has brought ... is that mental health is not a competitive issue,” he says. “We should be sharing with each other what we think is helpful and the ‘good, the bad, and the ugly’ about initiatives and programs firms have run.”

The goal is to go beyond awareness – to embed real systems that support employees. “Leaders need to model the behaviour as

best they can,” he says. “People within an organization are looking to leaders to show that it’s okay to talk about these things.”

At Gowling, more than 150 people across the firm have been trained in mental health first aid. “It’s people from across the spectrum ... partners, associates, business support people,” he says. “We also started with leaders, so that they understand what it takes for someone ... to come forward.”

## Advice for others

For anyone considering going public with their own struggles, Herman doesn’t sugarcoat the risks – but he stresses the need for connection.

## SHARING HIS JOURNEY

*The Right Not to Remain Silent: The Truth About Mental Health in The Legal Profession* contains a series of first-person accounts by lawyers living with mental health and addiction issues. Authors include:



Justice George R. Strathy



Justice Michele Hollins



Beth Beattie (also editor), Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General



Carole Dagher (also editor), former VP of legal at Loblaw’s



Thomas Telfer (also editor), law professor at Western University

“Yes, it’s scary,” he says. “Yes, you’re putting yourself into a vulnerable position ... but no one should have to struggle in silence.”

He encourages people to reach out, even if it’s not to someone at work. “If you can’t find support internally, go outside,” he says. “Come to people like me. Reach out to your member assistance program. Talk to someone. Because when we struggle in silence alone, invariably, it’s going to end badly.”

## A lifelong journey

Even now, Herman doesn’t consider himself “recovered.”

“As far as I’m concerned, the recovery will go on for the rest of my life,” he says. “I’m never ... ‘there.’ The journey continues.”

But by being open about that journey, Herman continues to push back against stigma and isolation – one conversation, one email, one honest moment at a time. **CL**