



TEXAS LAWYERS' ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

# NOT YOUR TYPICAL ADDICT

*I never dreamed I could become dependent on medication, but I did. I lost everything—my practice, my wife, my family, and almost my life. And then I got help.*

BY DARREN C. BERTIN

There always seems to be a slight shock when one of our own unexpectedly dies from alcohol poisoning or a drug overdose or suicide brought about by a struggle with chemical dependency. "I never knew" . . . "That's a real shame, what a tragedy" . . . "She had such a bright future, I don't understand."

Of course you don't. But in your own way, you should. Addiction, whether to drugs or alcohol, is at epidemic levels, and our profession leads the way.

We alcoholics and addicts are everywhere. We're the assistant district attorney who feels compelled to sneak dope from the evidence locker to keep from getting sick because she has lost the power of choice; the named partner who day-after-day is up in the wee hours of the morning drinking just to make it out the door and into the office; the young associate who cannot stop at two glasses of chardonnay like the rest of her colleagues and night after night shamefully leaves the group to drink alone; the middle-aged solo practitioner choking down handfuls of pills with tears in his eyes because he doesn't know why he's doing it or how to stop.

## Who is me.

People tell me all the time that I'm "not your typical addict." Sure, I have a degree in philosophy, a master's degree in theology from a fairly prestigious university, and a law degree. For 12 years, I enjoyed a successful trial practice and a good reputation, in addition to having a beautiful family and a nice, quiet life before my disease manifested. Yet I still don't know what it means to be "not your typical addict." For me, skid row is a state of mind, not a place.

My addiction started with a headache. A migraine. For some reason unknown to me, this particular time the medication I took to quell the pain latched on to me and didn't let go. And in an instant, and slowly but surely, the death spiral began. My thriving practice slowly rotted on the vine alongside my life. I couldn't comprehend what was happening, which was an odd thing for me. I'm a smart guy, I had stood right next to many addicts in court, and I was the one wearing the suit, not the jumpsuit. So that couldn't be me. All my knowledge, intellect, and experience was telling me "I'm not that guy."



And I couldn't have been more wrong. But the roots of denial in the active addict run deep and strong, and the flashes of reason in my mind that were telling me something's wrong were drowned out by the screams of my brain telling me nothing's wrong. Where my mind would tell me, "You're going to die tomorrow if you keep doing this," my brain was telling me, "You're going to die today if you don't!" And being that addiction is a disease of the brain and not a mental disorder, my brain won the day.

I quit every night. And I mean that. I literally quit every single night. I swore a solemn oath each day that *this* would be the last day and that tie-me-to-the-mast and no matter what, *this was it*. Yet despite my best, most sincere, well-meaning intentions, I couldn't. And I didn't know why. And the ever-present guilt, shame, remorse, hopelessness, despair, and self-loathing that saturates the very life force of every active addict became that much stronger with each successive failure of willpower.

My once successful law practice flatlined, leaving a reputation in tatters, a family torn apart, and a life stolen. I was at my bottom. And it was then that some friends intervened and got me the help I so desperately needed.

As I began to heal, I learned that I'm not the incorrigible, morally bankrupt individual I once believed myself to be, but rather that I have a disease—an organic brain disease that manifested itself in anti-social, self-destructive behaviors. Along those same lines, I learned that recovery is not bad people learning how to be good people, but sick people learning how to be well and healthy. Addiction is a plaque on the arteries of the spirit and soul, and none of us want to have this disease. Trust me on that.

I was born with a super-dopamine-seeking brain that is susceptible to being hijacked by any and all mood-changing, mind-altering substances. I eventually learned that my choices can keep my disease at bay and in remission, but unfortunately I had to learn that lesson the hard way after having lost the power of choice for a number of years. Of course, I would have stopped "for the sake of my children and spouse" if only I could have. But my brain was broken, and I discovered this fact after the damage was already done.

### How to heal.

As I write this, by God's grace I am coming up on four years clean and sober. And I could not be more grateful for the gift of life I know and enjoy. I know happiness—true happiness—a concept that was entirely foreign to me before recovery. I know hope, I know freedom, I know love, I know compassion, I know self-care. I know that I matter to myself and a host of others who now surround me, something that humbles me deeply. And I also know that I'm a breath away from losing all of that if I don't continue to do the simple, daily maintenance that gives me the life I have today.

The joy and hope I feel when I see my fellow lawyers in recovery accomplishing amazing things—be it a complex merger, a productive settlement, a clean real estate closing, or a good verdict in

a trial—never cease to be great inspiration. And I know that their clients were represented with the utmost honesty, respect, and integrity, the very spiritual principles of any program of recovery made manifest in the legal arena. Outside our grand vocation, I see the same people contribute to the landscape of the world through volunteering, serving on boards, creating art, and myriad other contributions and invaluable services. We take life seriously and give all we have to our families, friends, and firms because we know from whence we came. We smelled the devil's breath and we survived.

We do not take a single second for granted. We love deeply, intrinsically. We have huge, compassionate hearts. We grieve genuinely for hurting people.

And we get sober. We even stay sober, with work and with the understanding that this disease will not be taken for granted.

Whether you know it or not, every one of you reading this personally knows someone who is in the throes of their addiction or in recovery. We are everyman, everywoman; we are your partner, your associate, your legal assistant, your boss, your judge, your receptionist, your clerk. And you can support us on a day-to-day basis.

Start by visiting the Web page for the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program ([texasbar.com/tlap](http://texasbar.com/tlap)) to educate yourself on the realities of drug addiction and alcoholism. In addition to educational materials, TLAP is the starting point for getting the help you or others in the legal field need. It is a wonderful resource, and with financial assistance through the Sheeran-Crowley Memorial Trust, it is possible to obtain the necessary knowledge, resources, and contacts statewide. I say this from my own personal experiences dealing with TLAP, for it was TLAP and the Sheeran-Crowley Trust that helped save not just my career—but my life.

If you are everyman or everywoman, know that you are not alone. We are here. We've been where you are, and we know the way out. We *want* to help.

If you are not one of us, you can stop being scared of us. We're not monsters. You can ask us to join you on outings, be it lunch or after work or wherever. Our bodies and minds need nourishing. And we value friendships more than you can possibly imagine. Don't give up on us.

But more than anything else, you can start having the conversation. You can ask questions. I promise you we don't mind answering them. By simply talking about it, you can help strip away the stigma. Because the only thing worse than battling a chronic disease is battling a chronic disease that many people believe does not exist. I can assure you that everyman and everywoman—and everyone—will thank you. **TBJ**

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