

Juggling Chainsaws

BY ANONYMOUS

I have been an attorney for 37 years. I like to think I have been a good attorney: I have fought many battles in the courtroom, have helped thousands of clients, and have hopefully made a difference for the better in many lives.

I have, however, been fighting a secret, personal battle with depression and anxiety for much longer than I have been practicing law.

My childhood was normal, even idyllic. I had great parents, good health, loving siblings, grandparents close by, and great friends. My parents owned a sporting goods store, and I grew up hunting, fishing, playing sports, water skiing on the local waters, and generally being the envy of my friends. I did well in school, had my share of girlfriends, and made the find of my life at 16, when I met my future wife.

Almost always, however, was the nagging fear that I was not good enough, that somehow I was not genuine, that I would be found out and then all would be lost. I don't know to this day the origin of that anxiety, but I created an elaborate secret life just to cope. An innate, gnawing fear became my constant companion — and my mortal and bitter enemy.

Over many years I created a complex house of cards to mask my own feelings of inferiority. To the outside world, family included, I was the happy, witty, and affable person and lawyer who went out of my way to solve others' problems and be a friend to all. It was so exhausting. I had a lot of friends, but I was killing myself and I did not know why.

My best tool to maintain the charade was lying. I lied about my true feelings and fears. I lied to my wife about my emotions and my work. Somewhere along the way, depression joined fear as my new companion and any chance to “come clean” was gone. The depression arrested me. I did only what was necessary to get by and that became harder and harder. Frozen in lethargy and bathed in fear, I continued to maintain the impression of a happy man — and continued dying inside.

Intellectually, I knew there was another way, a simpler way: Be honest, face my fears, and make it right. Nevertheless, each and every time, fear and depression trumped intellect, and I continued to lie to avoid detection.

On June 25, 2003, my partner confronted me about my practice and I was forced to own up to my issues. It was a chance to be honest with myself and to seek help. Looking back, I could not give myself any credit for grabbing the lifeline he threw me. At the time, I felt trapped and only admitted to problems because I was cornered. Now, I know in that very moment I chose to give up, give in, and seek help.

I don't know all of the reasons for my conduct, but I have sorted a lot of it out since that day. I realize now that I had a

fear of disappointing others and have concealed conduct that I thought might bring disapproval or make others unhappy or dislike me. With regard to clients, the paralyzing depression caused me to procrastinate and fear caused me to lie about the status of their cases and put the clients and myself at risk, personally and professionally. As a result of all of this, I had grievances before the State Bar. My law license was suspended for one year and I was put on probation for five years.

Since 2003, I have received medical help for my depression and counseling to help sort out my past. That professional help has been critical to my recovery. A vital key to my early and ongoing recovery has been the

Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program (TLAP) and Texas Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (TLCL). My wife found a TLAP advertisement in the *Texas Bar Journal* in 2003 and directed me to them. TLAP referred me to the local chapter of TLCL. This lawyer support group meets weekly in many Texas cities and continues to be a critical component of my recovery and life. My wife, daughter, and friends stuck by me — for that I am lucky and grateful! My greatest fear, that I would lose my family, my friends, and my reputation was never realized.

Dealing with my fear, anxiety, and depression is an ongoing job and one I undertake each and every day. It is easy, even for one who lived in their own special hell, to tell their story of success and say, “You can do it, too.” I know it takes courage or surrender at that moment of truth and that some never seize that moment. I now know that there are many moments of truth and that I just finally summoned the courage to surrender to mine and choose life. ✪

