

The MYTH of the High-Functioning Lawyer Addict

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF A
SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER AND
RESOURCES FOR COMBATING ONE.

WRITTEN BY PAUL JACOBS

It is a myth that an individual seemingly functioning well at work could not also be suffering from addiction and severe emotional trauma. My own experience painted a picture of an individual who continued to maintain the facade of functionality at work despite the extent of my alcohol and drug use. I looked like a functional lawyer, but I was living a double life while hiding my pain.

I was a medical malpractice attorney trying lawsuits while hiding my use and abuse of alcohol and drugs. I also saw the same or a similar situation with many of my peers. They appeared to be functioning but, like me, were also suffering from severe health issues, addictions, and even suicidal ideation. Sadly, some of my peers died because of their mental health or substance use disorders. A better understanding of these issues and the resources available is critical for lawyers' health and the health of their practices.

Studies indicate that 21% of all lawyers and over 32% of lawyers under 30 have a substance use disorder (SUD).¹ The National Institutes of Health (NIH) defines five subtypes of alcohol dependence, and the functional alcoholic is one of these subtypes.² The functional alcoholic makes up about one-fifth of the total population of addicts. Certain characteristics are used to describe high-functioning alcoholics including:

1. High level of education;
2. Stable job;
3. Supportive family;
4. Most commonly of middle age; and
5. Family history of addiction.³

The American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) defines addiction as a "treatable, chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among the brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and an individual's life experiences."⁴

Maintaining a life of active addiction while working in a high-pressure field, such as law, frequently translates to leading a double life. The functional addict may spend extensive amounts of time double-checking their work following a hangover, having to stay up long hours into the night sending out emails and documents, or going to great lengths to conceal their unhealthy behaviors. They may be using their intelligence, legal rationalization, and self-reliance skills to minimize and hide the consequences of addiction and deny their problem both to themselves and others. People with addictions use substances or engage in behaviors that become compulsive and they continue injurious behavior despite harmful consequences. The absence of legal problems is not a gauge for the severity of the addiction.

A functioning addict or alcoholic may keep up appearances for a long time, but the disease progresses. By maintaining the myth of a functional addict, we can perpetuate the myth that addiction is a choice or character flaw. If one user can function and another cannot, then it must be a flaw specific to that one user who isn't functional. But this is wholly inaccurate. Remember, drug addiction is a progressive disease. The longer a substance is used, the more severe the symptoms and side effects will become.

Whether you feel you may have a substance use problem

or think someone else in your life may be struggling with a substance, it can be important to spot the signs of addiction before it progresses.

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), some signs and symptoms of an SUD include:

1. Drinking or using more than you originally intended;
2. Being unable to cut down your substance intake;
3. Spending a lot of time trying to obtain, use, and recover from the effects of a substance;
4. Cravings, or feeling strong urges to use;
5. Being unable to meet obligations at home, school, or work due to substance use;
6. Continuing to use a substance despite ongoing social or interpersonal problems caused by substance use;
7. Giving up activities you once enjoyed because of substance use;
8. Using substance(s) in situations where it is hazardous to do so (e.g., driving or operating machinery);
9. Continuing to use despite having physical or mental health issues related to your use;
10. Experiencing symptoms of withdrawal; and
11. Developing a tolerance.

A person may have an SUD if they meet at least two of the above criteria within a 12-month period.⁵

Addiction doesn't go away on its own. A highly functioning addict may feel they have everything under control but are living a false and potentially dangerous life. A key indicator of addiction is continuing to use drugs and alcohol even though it's causing negative consequences in your life and/or to your mental and physical health. There's no way to escape the dangerous and deadly long-term effects of drug and alcohol abuse. Health consequences of excessive alcohol use include high blood pressure, liver disease, stroke, heart disease, digestive disorders, and mental health problems.⁶

Addiction to drugs and alcohol can turn an individual into a person their loved ones hardly recognize. They may sacrifice their morals, health, safety, and the safety of others in the pursuit of their addiction. When I was in active addiction, I used substances even though it was wrong and I knew they were injurious. My health consequences included GI disorders, high blood pressure, and mental health problems.

Prevention efforts and treatment approaches for addictions are generally as successful as those for other chronic diseases. The good news is that by following these recommendations, lawyers with addiction do achieve better outcomes than the general population.⁷

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Recovery from alcohol or drugs helps restore healthy functioning without the need to change the way one feels with a substance. It is always better to start treatment early, before the disease of addiction causes major consequences in a lawyer's personal and professional life. My personal experience has shown that lawyers with an SUD who ask for and accept help are more productive, more profitable, and overall happier lawyers.

Legal professionals in recovery for an SUD can learn tools and cultivate a program designed to cope with the inherent stresses of the practice of law and better handle life on life's terms. Stopping alone is extremely difficult. However, there is hope with help from peer support, behavioral health and/or medical professionals, and evidence-based therapies. If you're ready to seek treatment for an addiction, would like to know more about your treatment options, or if you know someone that has the signs or symptoms of a functional addict, call or text the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program (TLAP). TLAP is a confidential program dedicated to providing hope, resources, and recovery for Texas lawyers, law students, and judges. TLAP is available 24/7. All calls are 100% confidential. Call or text 1-800-343 (TLAP). **TBJ**

NOTES

1. Michelle Fontenot, *Depression, Anxiety, and Substance Use Disorders: What Every Lawyer and Judge Should Know*, Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program, <https://www.texasjcmh.gov/media/qeehzvr2/friday-1015am-fortenot-depression-anxiety-and-substance-use-disorders.pdf>.

2. *Researchers Identify Alcoholism Subtypes*, National Institutes of Health (June 28, 2007), <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/researchers-identify-alcoholism-subtypes>.
3. *Id.*
4. *Definition of Addiction*, American Society of Addiction Medicine, <https://www.asam.org/quality-care/definition-of-addiction>.
5. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic And Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 490-492 (5th ed. 2013).
6. *Alcohol Use and Your Health*, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (May 15, 2024), <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/about-alcohol-use/index.html>.
7. Matthew Goldenberg, *High-Functioning Addicts: Who They Are, Who is at Risk and How to Get Help*, <https://docgoldenberg.com/high-functioning-addicts-who-they-are-who-is-at-risk-and-how-to-get-help/>.



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