

Face Your Demons **HELP YOURSELF GET BACK ON TRACK**

By Frank Harrison Reynolds

Over the years, I have represented attorneys facing discipline problems ranging from various client grievances to drunk-driving arrests. All attorneys are human beings with needs, wants, and sometimes problems. But it is a privilege to be able practice law, and you have a professional obligation to make sure your clients are properly represented. Therefore, you must be able to recognize problems that may interfere with your ability to fulfill this obligation. The key is to identify and do something about those problems before they hurt you or your client. If the problem has already occurred, take immediate steps to face it squarely and honestly and to fix it.

Be honest with yourself. Take a step back and evaluate yourself: Are you missing deadlines? Are you feeling overwhelmed? Are you drinking more than before? If you have problems with alcohol or other substances, seek help immediately. Find programs in your area that can help you through your state bar or through the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs directory (www.abanet.org/legalservices/colap/lapdirectory.html). Do not wait until it is too late and you are required to post a bond.

One of my favorite sayings is: “Fix the problem, not the blame.” Do not get into a mindset that it is always the client, the judge, the opposing counsel, or the staff person who is the problem. Learn to look honestly at yourself in the mirror and find ways to become a better person and attorney.

Get organized. Unfortunately, law students are not taught the organizational skills they need in the real world. Problems can arise when you feel overwhelmed and do not know where to start on a project or how to prioritize tasks. Once you start to put off addressing a problem, or a potential problem, the slope becomes very slippery, quickly. Then things can go from bad to worse.

The file that started in the middle of your desk that suddenly is on the corner of your desk is a warning. If it then moves to the chair and finally to a place on the window sill or the floor in a corner, it is screaming that you are heading for trouble. The same is true for the fourth telephone message from the client that you have not returned. These are problems of organization that can lead to larger problems, such as grievances. Keep trying different methods to organize your workload until something works. For example, make a checklist every morning and do not go to the second task in the checklist until the first task is done. Pick up that file and do what you are supposed to do! Pick up your phone and dial that client’s number. Most often you will find that following through with these tasks is not as painful as you fear and will actually make you feel better.

Find a mentor. It is amazing what having a mentor can do when you have questions or are feeling the pressures of the practice. It is helpful to have a sounding board that you trust and respect to give you good, honest advice and opinions. A mentor can help you realize that you are not alone and that the problems you are facing today have been problems for many other attorneys.

All attorneys encounter personal and professional problems. If you can be honest with yourself, confront the problems head on, and seek help when you need it, you can prevent these problems from harming yourself and your clients.

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READY RESOURCES

- The 101 Practice Series: Ethics and Professional Responsibility
www.abanet.org/yld/101practiceseries/ethicsprofessionalresponsibility.shtml
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