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Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry



Help for Impaired Lawyers

Paul Newman vividly portrayed an alcoholic attorney in “The Verdict.” With stubble beard and shaky hands, he pulled bottles out of the file cabinet and drank to pull himself together and make it to Court. The fact that the film did not address the character’s alcoholism is quite realistic.

The Problem Why? Because in the real world most alcohol or drug impaired lawyers die of their disease. They avoid rehabilitation and Alcoholics Anonymous (although the latter is free and anonymous). They say the reason is that they are afraid they might be recognized by former clients which could harm their practice, lead to being sued for malpractice or loss of their license to practice law.

When I see alcoholic attorneys in consultation, they feel greatly relieved when I tell them about “The Other Bar” and the Lawyer Assistance Program (LAP). The Other Bar, a California nonprofit corporation in existence since 1973, provides a confidential network of groups in which attorneys can discuss their drinking/drug problems with other attorneys who have experienced similar difficulties. There are about 35 such meetings every week in California, and additional meetings in Canada.

The Lawyer Assistance Program is in existence since January 2002. Lawyers may self-refer to get confidential help for problems with substance abuse, mental health or other personal problems that impact work performance negatively. The program offers individual and group counseling as well as consultation/referral for rehabilitation or other treatment. Participation is absolutely confidential as mandated by law.

Is there a problem? Here is a test that can help you figure out if an attorney has an alcohol/drug or other problem. As with other self-evaluation tests in which denial plays a significant role, a family member or colleague of the attorney can be of great help in answering the test questions. If you think that your attorney-spouse or your law partner may

be in trouble, you should take the test (privately) for your partner. Just answer the questions the way you think your partner should answer them – based on your observations of your partner’s behavior and performance. The difference between how you and your partner answered the same questions will show the amount of denial and the degree of impairment.

The test

Have you failed to show up at the office or Court because of a hangover?

Have you neglected to process mail promptly, failed to return telephone calls or keep appointments?

Are you drinking in the office?

Have you commingled, borrowed or otherwise misused a client’s trust funds or escrow funds?

Do you have “blackouts”? Are there drinking hours or days you can’t remember?

Do you regularly drink at lunch, and is your ability to perform diminished in the afternoon?

Do you frequently blame your secretary unjustly for the things that go wrong?

Is your relationship with your clients, staff and friends deteriorating?

Are you missing deadlines for performance, such as allowing the statute of limitations to run out on a case?

Do you wish people would mind their own business about your drinking and stop telling you what to do?

If you have answered even one of these questions affirmatively, The Other Bar and the Lawyer Assistance Program say you owe it to yourself to call them and anonymously find out the extent of your problem, if any.

The Other Bar 1-800-222-0767
Lawyer Assistance Program 1-866-436-6664
Dr. Pursch’s Office 949-499-5631