



The Addicted Lawyer

By Ann D. Foster

I'm always amazed at the power of denial.

It was 10 a.m. on a Friday. She was nervous. Her hands shook as she spoke. Her voice croaked a bit as she settled into the chair. "I'm really not sure why I'm here, but the managing partner told me point-blank that my job and the partnership were on the line if I didn't talk to you. So here I am."

Sally was a litigation attorney on the partnership track at her major law firm and looking every bit the successful lawyer. The problem, she said, was that the firm was concerned about her drinking and had requested that she talk to someone at the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program to help determine whether she needed help. Sally didn't think she had a problem with alcohol, but the firm was calling the shots. She called and said she would be in the area next week and agreed to come for a short meeting.

As we settled into the conversation and I told Sally that our conversation was confidential and that nothing we talk about would be divulged to anyone without her written permission, Sally visibly relaxed. "I was a bit nervous to come here today," she confessed, "but this might not be so bad at all."

"Tell me why the firm is concerned about you. What did they say they had observed about your behavior that caused them concern?"

For a minute she struggled to keep her composure. Then she spoke. "This is so difficult for me. I'm mortified that my colleagues at work are talking about me. I don't know what to do."

"Just tell me what's going on and we'll figure out what options and solutions are available to you. You're not alone in this anymore."

She spoke haltingly of events that had occurred during the past several months: missed appointments, late arrivals, early departures, frequent absences, arguments with staff and colleagues, happy hour every day followed by wine at dinner and Scotch at home. She then admitted hangovers, overlooked discovery deadlines, forgotten attendance at depositions, and increasing requests for a law clerk and associates to cover for her at meetings and in court. She sheepishly mentioned several late-night phone calls to clients when, the next day, she couldn't remember what she said. Her clients clearly did; they made cryptic remarks about those conversations. She paused and then softly said that her husband had started making comments about her drinking. Worse yet, her daughter wouldn't get in the car with her anymore.

Sally stopped short. "I'm a great lawyer. I graduated top of my class from a great law school. I'm being considered for partnership at a top law firm. I have a great husband and family. I own a nice home and a vacation home in Telluride. I'm active in my church and I volunteer in my community. I'm not an alcoholic!"

"No one is using labels here," I reassured her. "But people are concerned about your behavior and how it might be affect-

ing your work. Let me ask you this: Do you think your drinking is interfering with your job?"

"Absolutely not," she said firmly. "It's not the drinking that's making these things happen at work and at home. I'm a trial lawyer. I'm under incredible stress. My husband is also a lawyer and under a lot of stress and that affects me too. My daughter is a teenager. You know what that means. Also, the economy is tough these days and money is tight. To top it off, my sister has just been diagnosed with cancer. I'm just not handling it as well as I normally do. My life is really a mess right now. You know, if you had these problems, you'd drink too!"

Sally stopped. She took a deep breath. Her eyes narrowed. "It's really all too much to deal with. What should I do?"

As we sat and talked about options for Sally, both personally and professionally, we agreed that she should be evaluated by a reputable therapist or psychiatrist. In times of crisis, getting the best available advice and information is important. Just as lawyers find the best available expert witness to help at trial, lawyers must also find good therapists to provide expert assessment and an individualized course of treatment. If Sally was indeed struggling with substance abuse or dependency, treatment, peer assistance, fellowship, and recovery were available. If this was not a substance abuse issue, the therapist and TLAP could be helpful with other issues as well. It was a win/win situation for Sally. I gave her the names and contact information for reputable therapists whose services were covered by her medical insurance and who maintained offices near her home.

We talked a bit more. Sally was calmer but still concerned. She took a deep breath. "What if I do have a problem with alcohol? What happens then?"

We launched into a conversation about what treatment really was: education about the illness of dependency (terminal, chronic, progressive, multi-systemic, and incurable); how it manifests itself in the individual (signs, symptoms, denial, bad behavior); necessary skills and tools to arrest the progression of the illness; the need for abstinence from all mind-altering substances; how to maintain abstinence; the possibility, signs and symptoms of relapse, and the promise of a fully functioning, healthy life. In short, I explained, treatment is similar to an undergraduate education in recovery.

"And what about AA (Alcoholics Anonymous)? I don't think that's for me," Sally said.

"Have you ever been to AA before?" I asked.

"No, but a few years ago, a friend, actually a client, suggested that I might go to a meeting sometime to check it out. I blew off that idea," she shrugged. "Wow. I'd forgotten about that until now." Her voice trailed off and she stopped.

"Well, AA is a self-help support group made up of people who want to learn to stop drinking and stay stopped. It's often suggested that you go to a certain number of meetings before

determining whether AA is a good fit for you. TLAP has a number of volunteer lawyers who would be happy to introduce you to AA and to answer any questions you have. I can put you in touch with a woman lawyer volunteer in your city who would be happy to take you to a meeting. TLAP also has lawyer support groups all around the state. The group in your city would be an excellent place to go to be with other lawyers who are going through the same thing as you." I stopped. This just might be too much information to handle all at once.

"We really are way ahead of ourselves," I said. "Let's stick with getting you in to see someone who can help determine what's going on with you. Then we can talk again about options based on that information. Remember, you are not alone. I will help you in any way I can."

Sally smiled. That was a good sign.

I heard regularly from Sally in the next few weeks. What, if anything, should she tell her firm, her husband, and her clients? Which would be better for her, in-patient or outpatient treatment? What about insurance coverage for treatment? Where do the lawyers groups meet? Would I put her in touch with a woman lawyer volunteer, just to talk? What treatment centers were comfortable with professional clientele? Eventually she stopped calling. I checked in with her after a few weeks to see how she was doing. All seemed well.

About a year later, I got a phone call. It was Sally. She wanted to volunteer with TLAP. This was a good sign, too.

I'm always amazed at the power of denial. But I know that it's not always a permanent defense.

For more information about treatment, AA, and TLAP:

- "What to Expect in Treatment," *GPSolo*, October/November 2006
- "What to Expect at 12-Step Meetings," *GPSolo*, October/ November 2004
- "Demystifying 12-Step Programs," *GPSolo*, July/August 2001
- "How TLAP Works," www.texasbar.com/tlap