



ADHD or spread too thin?

Q: Within the past year, I got an admonition from the Board of Bar Overseers because of a foolish oversight that I need not review here. But it served as a wake-up call that there is something amiss with how I run both my practice and my life. I have always been active in my



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community and church, and when I became a lawyer as a second career, I continued to seek to “give back” because I think it’s the right thing to do. I have taken many kinds of cases — family law, immigration, civil suits, bankruptcies, etc. — many of them coming from friends, fellow church congregants, and their family members. A number of these individuals had no viable way to make more than a token payment, but I felt fine about donating my services, just as I do other kinds of volunteer work and help with local political campaigns and community projects.

In the course of these activities, as well as making errors that generated

the BBO complaint, I also seem to have neglected my marriage, and now realize that my wife has come to run her life almost independently of me, so that we are more housemates than partners. Given how poorly I have organized and prioritized various elements of my life and having done some reading, and think perhaps I have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Can Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL) help me evaluate that, and my options for getting it treated?

A: This is a very good point in time for you to have realized that something is awry and to reach out to LCL, but not only to consider whether you have ADHD. Making that diagnosis entails a careful history and review of symptoms; if ADHD is present, some combination of medication and coaching can be helpful in many cases.

But there may be a less clinical/medical explanation for finding yourself and your practice in a state of disarray. You seem to be highly motivated to do more, and to help more people and causes, than is manageable for one

human being. “Giving back” is a wonderful goal, but it does not mean “giving everything until there is nothing left and I have lost sight of myself.” From the sound of things, you have been dividing your energies in too many directions, both within your practice (one can specialize in everything) and in your church and community. As you say, there has been too little prioritizing. Even after you eliminate some of the many endeavors that have been competing for your attention, it will still be important to rank-order their importance on dimensions like: how rewarding, financially and spiritually; to what extent you are making a difference and well-equipped for the task; how irreplaceable you are; etc. Typically, people (unless independently wealthy) devote most of their time and energy to activities that will sustain their financial survival — as a lawyer, this includes attending to proper and timely professional behavior. Ironically, as you have attempted to help so many others around you, you have given too little consideration to your primary relationship, and your wife has adapted by growing more detached.

Staying organized and maintaining healthy priorities is especially challenging in solo practice. The solo practitioner makes decisions and develops habitual behaviors in an atmosphere of that could be characterized as “too much freedom,” without external guidance and constraints. These are among the concerns that arise in the online group I’ve been running at LCL for highly stressed solo practitioners. (You could consider joining this group, which opens up periodically to new participants.)

Please do come to LCL for consultation. Let’s discuss what kinds of approaches would help you focus on the most important elements of your life both at home and in your profession. ■

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Dr. Jeff Fortgang is a licensed psychologist and licensed alcohol and drug counselor on staff at Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers of Massachusetts, where he and his colleagues provide confidential consultation to lawyers and law students, and offer presentations on subjects related to the lives of lawyers. Q&A questions are either actual letters/emails or paraphrased and disguised concerns expressed by individuals seeking LCL’s assistance. Questions may be emailed to DrJeff@LCLMA.org.