



## LAWYERS CONCERNED FOR LAWYERS

# Practice only makes perfect if you know how

**Q:** I took my law classes at night and graduated a few years ago. Because of a pressing family matter that took most of my time, I did not actually do anything with my degree (other than passing the bar) until recently, when some referrals began to come my way through a



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friend whose own line of work brought him in contact with potential clients. As soon as I got started, I realized that most of what I learned in law school was much more abstract than the nuts and bolts of real life practice, and I have had to more or less “fake it.” The one lawyer I knew who was experienced in this area of law has retired and moved away. Though actual cases have been quite few, I have already come perilously close to failing a client or two because there are such huge gaps in my knowledge about the how-to of this type of practice.

As a result, I have been feeling tied up in knots, losing sleep, and unable

to enjoy my family life or relax on days off. My wife tells me she knows I’ll figure it out — it’s nice to have a vote of confidence, but that doesn’t solve the problem. While my doctor has offered to prescribe a tranquilizer, it seems to me that although that may calm me down, I *ought* to feel stressed until I find a way out of this predicament.

**A:** Agreed that a tranquilizer is not the answer to the problem, unless you’re so frozen with anxiety that you can’t take any constructive action. Most kinds of graduate study provide more in the way of abstract knowledge and principles than concrete how-to experience. But law is perhaps unique in that (in most states) there is no requirement or routine mechanism for apprenticeship. Health care professionals have internships, and must put in years of clinically supervised work before practicing independently. Teachers start out as student teachers. Plumbers start out as apprentices to licensed plumbers. Lawyers, especially those who do not get jobs with firms or organizations, are often cast into the deep water to fend for themselves, while at the same

time attempting to appear fully in control. Many new attorneys figure things out along the way, but, as in your situation, there is the potential to botch up cases, and even for your unwitting errors to come back to haunt you via discipline or suit. Assuming you are unable to find a employment at a business/agency/law firm, there are other potentially helpful measures. Once you begin making constructive moves, your anxiety is likely to subside.

Continuing Education courses (like the CLEs offered at the MBA and elsewhere) tend to have a more hands-on utility than law school courses. (There is some controversy as to whether an LL.M. degree is helpful. You would certainly gain more specialized knowledge, but these programs can cost a lot without improving job prospects, depending on specific field.)

Bar Associations in some cases (like the MBA) offer mentoring programs. These may not offer ongoing, one-to-one guidance, but they can provide helpful input, and bar associations and committees can also be networking opportunities to meet colleagues willing to help even a potential competitor.

Volunteering may offer the best opportunity to gain experience, hobnobbing with more experienced attorneys, while also doing good. You can explore opportunities through both state/local and specialty bar associations, as well as MassProBono.org. This is not only a way to gain practical experience but also to meet and connect with lawyers to whom you can later turn for advice in a pinch.

And don’t forget that LCL is always here for you if your anxiety remains high, and that the LOMAP program is here to help with information on how to run your practice business-wise, another crucial subject that is not a focus of law school. ■

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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 Dr.Jeff@LCLMA.org.**