



LAWYERS CONCERNED FOR LAWYERS

You can drive yourself only so far without oil changes

Q: Growing up with one alcoholic parent and another who was often sidelined by depression, I was sort of pressed into service of necessity in helping to raise my two younger brothers. But I have to say that, for the most part, I gained a sense of value and satisfaction from doing so.



Dr. Jeff Fortgang

I did really well in school, and was the first in the family to go to college, where I developed into a strong advocate for the disadvantaged. After college, I became well known locally (in my Midwestern state of origin) as a community spokesperson. That led me to law school in Massachusetts and, afterward, to a solo practice in which I represented clients from various walks of life. I also began raising my son alongside a husband — who ultimately contributed little to the family either financially or emotionally, and who left for another woman.

When both my son and my father got sick at the same time and I was immersed in looking after them, I did not pay close enough attention to my practice bookkeeping and, although no client was harmed, I did get in trouble and have endured a BBO suspension. Now I'm greatly underemployed and, honestly, pretty depressed. It feels as if I've tried to do the right thing, but I must be missing something.

A: The part that you may be missing, quite understandably given your history, is the importance of self-care. Your way of operating falls within my own definition of so-called "codependency" (a vague term that people understand in varying ways) — namely, that you feel overly responsible to take care of the needs of others, and at the same time insufficiently responsible for yourself. As you note, you adopted (or, really, were drawn into by necessity) a role of premature responsibility as a child, and you learned to draw upon that caretaker role for your sense of identity, value, and efficacy. On the plus side, it contributed to your working hard in school and making a valuable contribution to your community. On the minus side, you were drawn to marry someone who did not carry his weight or sustain a commitment to you, and you have prioritized caretaking to the point of neglecting the financial management of your practice, which is the business equivalent to being a great driver who never changes your car's oil — at some point, the system will break down and jeopardize your ability to move forward.

If you need a tutorial on practice accounting, IOLTA reconciliation and the like, our sister LOMAP program is an excellent resource for that. But I'd suggest that psychotherapy is also a really good idea (and, of course, LCL can assist in finding a therapist). Maybe you've tried therapy at some point and it didn't lead to lasting improvement. It is important to realize that, when it comes to longstanding,



engrained patterns of personality/behavior, identifying the patterns (which may bring short-term change) is generally not enough. An equal challenge is "working through" — practicing new thinking and new behavior over and over in myriad instances, repeatedly making course corrections when you veer toward the unhelpful familiar, and dealing with the feelings that arise along the way. It's not fast or easy, and it can be challenging for both client/patient and therapist to keep the overriding goals in sight. But as you develop an increased sense of running your own life, rather than feeling as if you have no choice

but to focus mainly on others' needs, you may come to feel more empowered and less depressed. ■

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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.