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Five Steps to Overcome Stigma as an Individual in the Legal Profession

By Shawn Healy

In my line of work as a clinical psychologist, one of the biggest barriers to being able to help lawyers, law students, and judges is the stigma that many feel about needing and accepting help. The role of problem-solver or helper is very comfortable to them, but being the one who needs help? Not so much. The stigma associated with mental health treatment has diminished in recent decades, but it is still the number one reason why lawyers resist asking for help for an addiction or mental health concern. Many think that their reputations would be negatively affected if others realized that they needed help. Truth be told, we constantly risk our reputations being challenged whenever anyone finds out about our less than perfect qualities. This is the reason why most people try to get to know new people by finding out all they can about said person while revealing as little as possible about themselves.

Letting people know who you are, what your weaknesses are, and what mistakes you've made in life is a very vulnerable experience. That vulnerability makes us feel uncomfortable. When we feel uncomfortable, we try to reduce our discomfort as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, most of us choose to reduce our discomfort with a short-term solution, usually through avoidance. Avoidance helps you feel better quickly, followed by a more intense feeling of discomfort the next time you feel vulnerable. Avoidance often makes things worse.

Fighting stigma is very similar to confronting fear. Fear grows when you give it space to grow (when you avoid it), and fear shrinks when you approach it. The best way to reduce the uncomfortable feeling of being vulnerable is to practice being vulnerable more often. If a particular stigma makes you want to hide some fact about yourself, choose to tell others about that fact. The more you consciously choose to share your vulnerabilities, the less anxious you will become about someone learning about your vulnerabilities.

Obviously, real life is more complicated than a quick pep talk about embracing your vulnerabilities. While we all know that we are all human and that we are all imperfect in our personal lives, we still try to convince others that we are much closer to perfection in our professional lives. Or at the very least we try to present ourselves as less imperfect than others. So, on a practical level, how do you confront stigma in your life while also maintaining your professional reputation? Since each situation is different, here are a few places to start.

1. Start small.

Confide in those you already trust, those who have shown a propensity for understanding, compassion, and support toward you. Reveal more to them about your struggles. This will help to unburden you, it will improve your relationships with people close to you, and it will make it easier to seek help from others if needed.

2. Build a new community.

Start finding others who understand what you are going through to build community. No matter what your struggle is—substance addiction, stress, depression, anxiety, ADHD, etc.—there are people who have gone through what you are experiencing. Learn from others who understand and from those who accept without judgment.

3. Own your story.

Get more comfortable with your story—your whole story. The more that you can talk about your real self—your struggles and your triumphs, your weaknesses, and your strengths—the more resilient you will become.

4. Make it normal.

Because it is. There are countless stories of people—both famous and not—who have recognized a need, sought help, and became more resilient as a result. The more familiar you are with some of these stories, the more normal that shared experience will feel. This will not only give you more hope for your future, but it will also normalize your struggle—which is what makes us all human.

5. Reinterpret the responses of others.

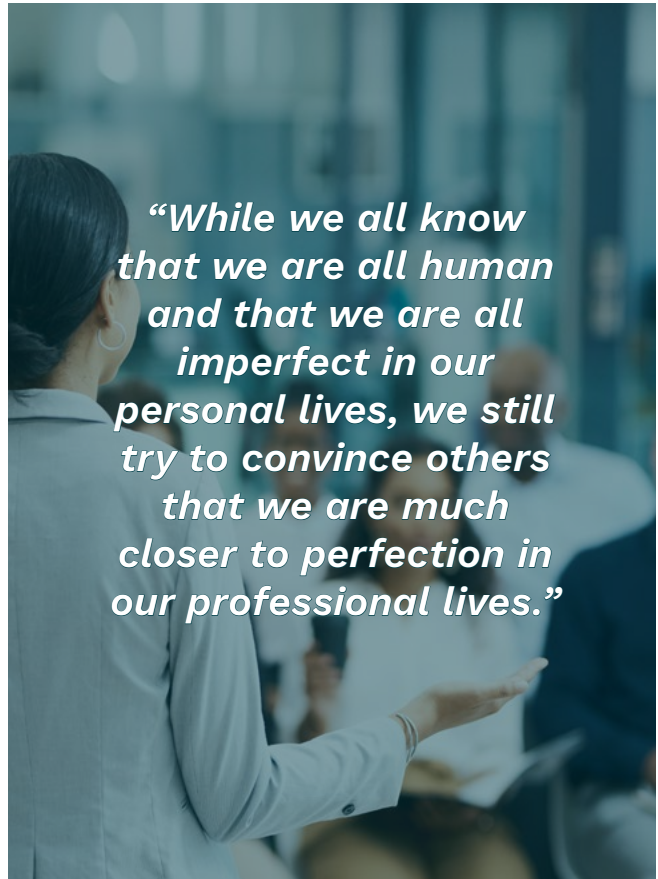
Despite all your efforts, you will not be able to control how others respond to you having struggles and flaws. It's surprising how some people react when they learn that we are all human. While you cannot control how people respond to you, you can control how you interpret their response. Most of the time when someone responds harshly to another's vulnerability, it is a defensive response made in fear of their own vulnerabilities—and hence how they personally might be able to handle someone else responding harshly to their own vulnerability. For example, it is often the case that the person who boasts the loudest feels the most insecure. So, try interpreting a person's judgmental response as a subtle reveal of their own vulnerabilities. Instead of responding harshly to their vulnerability, show them how a resilient person acknowledges their own while not backing away.

Stigma, like other fears, only holds power over us when we allow it to.

– SHAWN HEALY

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