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IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

FATAL MYTH: THE HIGH-FUNCTIONING ALCOHOLIC

Alcoholics drink every day.

Alcoholics are unable to maintain their careers.

Alcoholics are unable to provide for their families.

Alcoholics always drink alone.

Alcoholics are usually homeless and uneducated.

These are just a few of the prevailing myths and stereotypes about alcoholics that allow high-functioning alcoholics (HFAs) to minimize and justify their drinking to themselves, loved ones, and colleagues. HFAs defy these stereotypes and often go undetected because they do not fit the image of the “typical” alcoholic.

An HFA is an alcoholic who is able to maintain his or her professional and personal life – career, home, family, and friendships – all while drinking alcoholically. He or she has the same disease as the stereotypical alcoholic, but it manifests or progresses differently.

A 2007 study by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) concluded that about 20% of alcoholics are “functional” and that only 9% fit the stereotype of the low-bottom alcoholic.¹ Other addiction experts estimate that between 75% and 90% of alcoholics are high-functioning.

Many Attorneys Are HFAs

Certain personality traits and tendencies allow HFAs, including lawyers, to succeed professionally while drinking alcoholically. These include having perfectionist and overachiever tendencies, a strong work ethic, high standards of

personal achievement, a competitive and workaholic nature, and a strong physical constitution.

Unfortunately, alcohol-use disorders that go both unnoticed and untreated are rampant within the legal profession. In one study in the *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, problem drinking developed in 18% of lawyers who practiced for 2 to 20 years and in 25% of lawyers who practiced for 20 years or longer.² Additionally, 30% of lawyers have been found to abuse alcohol.³ In fact, the number of lawyers with alcohol-use disorders is above the national average of about 9%.⁴

Recognize the HFA’s Profile

HFAs have certain characteristics in common. The lists below are comprehensive but not exhaustive.

In terms of their denial mechanisms, HFAs:

- Have difficulty viewing themselves as alcoholics because they don’t fit the stereotypical image.
- Believe that they are not alcoholics because they are successful.
- Use alcohol as a reward and/or justify drinking to relieve stress.

In terms of their professional and personal lives, HFAs:

- Are well respected for professional/academic performance and accomplishments.
- Maintain a social life.
- Often drink with colleagues and not always alone.

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In terms of their drinking habits, HFAs:

- Experience a craving to drink more after one alcoholic drink.
- Obsess about the next drinking opportunity.
- Display personality changes and/or compromise morals when intoxicated.
- Repeat unwanted drinking patterns and behaviors.

HFAs seem to live a “double life” in that they:

- Appear to the outside world to be managing life well.
- Are skilled at living a compartmentalized life (separating work and drinking life).

When HFAs hit bottom, they experience:

- Few tangible losses and consequences from their drinking, often by sheer luck.
- Recurrent thoughts that because they have not “lost everything,” they have not hit bottom.⁵

If you identify with the characteristics listed above, be honest with yourself. Alcoholism is a chronic, progressive, and lifelong disease that requires treatment. Impaired lawyers put their lives at risk. They sacrifice the quality of the work they provide to their clients. And last, but not at all least, they subject their family and friends to significant emotional strain and may even be placing them in dangerous or life-threatening situations.

If you or someone you love suffers with these issues, call the OAAP and ask to speak to one of the attorney counselors. Assistance is free, confidential, and readily available to you. Call 503-226-1057 or 1-800-321-6227.

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Endnotes:

1. H.B. Moss, C.M. Chen, and H. Yi, “Subtypes of Alcohol Dependence in a Nationally Representative Sample,” *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 91, no. 203 (2007): 149-158.

2. G.A.H. Benjamin, E.J. Darling, and B. Sales, “The Prevalence of Depression, Alcohol Abuse, and Cocaine Abuse among United States Lawyers,” *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 13, no. 3 (1990): 233-246.

3. R.G. Frances, V. Alexopoulos, and V. Yandow, “Lawyers’ Alcoholism,” *Advances in Alcohol and Substance Abuse* 4, no. 2 (1984): 59-66, quoted in Jeffrey Lynn Speller, *Executives in Crisis: Recognizing and Managing the Alcoholic, Drug-Addicted or Mentally Ill Executive* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989): 23.

4. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, “National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions,” *Alcohol Alert* 70 (October 2006).

5. Benton, Sarah Allen, *Understanding the High-Functioning Alcoholic: Professional Views and Personal Insights* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2009): 12-13.

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