



IN SIGHT

Helping you improve the quality of your personal & professional life.

Issue No. 38

APRIL 2000

FEELING BETTER

January 1, 2000. Here we are on the first day of the new millennium – the furnace is working, the lights are on, and water is flowing from the tap. I read *The Oregonian* “Time Capsule 2000” article in the paper this morning. The reporters interviewed 100 people and almost all of them identified themselves by their occupations: garbage man, E.R. nurse, transplant specialist, governor. Then there were those few who identified themselves by their interests or perspectives: extraterrestrial voyeur, vegetarian, world peace seeker, prozac believer. Those descriptions got my attention. So I say to my spouse, “That’s a good thing to think about on this first day of the new year – how do you identify yourself? Who or what are you?” He says “captain of industry,” “corporate titan,” and we chuckle and laugh out loud.

Then he asks me the same question. My first, too easy answer is “I am a lawyer.” That’s an odd answer, because I have given up the practice of law. That answer just lets me avoid really addressing the question. I say, tongue in cheek, “I am an evolving human being, a work in progress.” I can also say “parent,” “spouse,” “daughter,” “sister.” So maybe I am not exactly sure what or who I am, but I am sure what I’m not: I’m not depressed. That’s unusual for me. Especially in the dead of winter, holidays behind me, the most depressing time of the year. How did I get here from there? Where was “there?”

It was the bleakest, most hopeless, most anxious place and time of my life. I wished to die and realized that things would go on without me. I knew my kids would be devastated and would always wonder how I could leave them that way, and it didn’t seem to matter. I don’t want to sound melodramatic, but thinking about my history of depression is bleak and makes me feel a little bit like I am back there, in that

worst of times. The problem is, depression is dramatic. It can be so devastating that it’s hard to talk about without some drama. It is also hard to talk about because people don’t understand it, and I still feel faintly embarrassed for having had it.

Why would I feel embarrassed? Because, like many people, I thought it was a personal failing, a weakness. I had “poor coping skills.” I should be able to pull myself out of it. Well-meaning people told me to “cheer up.” I tried. I read books with titles like *Control Your Depression and Unstress Yourself*. But I could not think, or read, or exercise myself out of it. I cried too much, I didn’t sleep much or eat well. I remained anxious and tense sometimes, apathetic and lethargic at others. I thought about driving my car into a bridge abutment or off a cliff. I thought about harming myself and sometimes did hurt myself deliberately. I couldn’t be trusted with sharp objects.

I left my law office in midday and did not go back. I often went to the movies to get away, sit alone in the dark, and get involved in someone else’s story for a brief respite from my own. I took work home but never looked at it. I fell behind in everything and felt helpless and hopeless. I was close to abandoning everything. I was overwhelmed – my coping skills were gone.

I knew I was in terrible trouble. I have a history of depression, but no previous episodes had been so debilitating. I couldn’t just pull myself out of it. But somehow I managed to get help.

I read *Darkness Visible* by William Styron and wept with recognition. I read *Listening to Prozac* and discovered that there may be biochemical reasons for depression. It really isn’t something you are; it is something you have. And it’s treatable.

I finally got the name of a therapist from my doctor. As I worried over my inability to stay

focused on my work, my counselor said she knew of a program to help lawyers: the OAAP. Of course I knew about it, but I thought it was for lawyers with drug or alcohol problems. I found out that the program can help any lawyer who is having trouble functioning. The OAAP staff attorney met with me and helped me get help for myself and my clients. He put me in touch with other lawyers who had depression. I was able to pass my active cases on to others with no detrimental effect on my clients. I incurred no bar complaints or malpractice claims. I was fortunate to have a good support group: spouse, colleagues who have experienced depression, a counselor, OAAP staff. If you need support, call the OAAP. The program attorneys helped me save my own life.

In therapy, I recognized possible reasons for my depression: parental alcoholism, sexual abuse, and other life circumstances, including my profession. It was really hard to admit that the private practice of law was not a good profession for me. All that tuition money, all that time and effort, wasted. I loved the intellectual challenge of the study of law. How could I have missed the obvious poor fit of my temperament and the practice of law? Once I stopped punishing myself, I realized that I had not known how to ask the right questions and get the right information about what practicing law is like. If I was going to live happily again I would have to learn how to ask the right questions. And so I found out that the OAAP has programs to help lawyers find out what career choices might fit a person with a law degree who doesn't enjoy the practice of law.

None of this is easy to think about or deal with when you are depressed. But the alternative was so much worse. It was desperately difficult to admit that I had a condition that I saw as a personal failing or weakness. Now I know depression truly is a treatable condition. Medication can help; counseling can help. You can have a good life.

You'll notice that this is an anonymous article. That's because I still believe depression is misunderstood and those who have it may be unfairly judged. But the OAAP can put you in touch with me or another attorney who has been through depression – to talk, confidentially. If you recognize

yourself in this story, call the OAAP.

I am off anti-depressants now and I am not depressed. I am still in therapy and so thankful for a great therapist. Getting here was not easy or simple. It has taken years. I regret that I did not get good treatment sooner. Don't wait. Get your life back. Call the OAAP or a counselor, a crisis line or a doctor. Don't stop working on it – ever. Depression is a treatable condition.

Enjoying the Sunshine