

Driving Past the Bar Center

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Don't you really enjoy pleasing a client by winning his or her case. Isn't it great when you get everything JUST RIGHT! Being the perfect lawyer is exhilarating.

On the other hand, have you ever picked up your mail and seen a letter which might be some bad news, or a notice of an unpleasant task in a case you have been anxious about? Have you ever put that letter aside and told yourself that you would deal with it later and then did not? Have you ever not taken a call from another attorney you owed a response to - because you just couldn't deal with the fact that you were not on top of things.

If any of this sounds familiar, you could be in big trouble. I was, and it was just the beginning. It didn't take too long to go from ignoring a few letters and calls to imprisoning myself in my office, not taking any calls, and not opening my mail for months. I knew that I was spiraling downward toward professional oblivion, but I couldn't do anything to stop it. I was in lawyer's hell, but I deserved it because I now hated myself. I became professionally immobile - like a deer in headlights waiting to be run down - and if the truth be known, hoping for the end to come quickly. The guilt and pain were simply overwhelming, but I still went to the office every day. It was the best place to hide, and I was good at hiding. My wife, friends, and the other lawyers in my building had no idea what was going on with me. I guess I knew it

then, but I would later find out that I was in the midst of major clinical depression.

As you might have guessed, more than a few matters went un-attended, and the bar complaints came pouring in; but I couldn't deal with them either. The complaints counsel could, and I was justly disciplined.

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Throughout this entire period, every time I drove up State Street past that imposing structure which is our Bar Center, the pain, the fear, and the guilt would make me cringe. That building represented all of the seemingly insurmountable problems in my life.

I knew that I needed help, but I didn't know where to get it. With no insurance, and by this time certainly no money, I felt completely helpless. Then one day, I was sitting in my office, sobbing, not wanting to live with the mess I had created, and I remembered the lit-

tle ad that always appeared somewhere near the end of *The Mississippi Lawyer*. The Bar has this program that mainly helps drunks and druggies. I wasn't one of those, but I was desperate. I looked all day for a copy of *The Mississippi Lawyer*, but I couldn't find one. I guess I thought I had to have that little ad. I finally found a copy, and I made the call.

The voice answered, "Can I help you?" I told this person that I didn't know if anybody could help, but I started talking about what was going on. I've never been able to talk to anyone about the demons in my head, but I found it easy to talk to fellow sufferers. Before I knew it, I had an appointment with a psychiatrist and I soon began taking medication which helped the way I felt.

Through the program, I also discovered that I was not the only depressed lawyer in Mississippi. I was contacted by others who were trying to recover from this disease. Just finding out that there were other lawyers who shared my demons was therapeutic in and of itself.

My meltdown might have happened at just the right time for me, because not long after I started working with the program, the Bar started a group therapy program for depression, and asked if I would be interested in being part of it. Without hesitation, I said that I would. At that time, my only experience with group therapy was watching the old Bob Newhart Show. I didn't know what to expect, but I was willing to give it a go.

That was over two years ago, and since then the Bar's depression group, Code Name: The WB Group, has been meeting two Thursdays a month in the office of a prominent clinical psychologist, and the results have been wonderful.

Group therapy is a powerful tool. One can learn to give up irrational thoughts and beliefs through cognitive behavioral therapy; learn to manage anger and aggression and be more assertive without alienating others; learn to stop procrastinating; learn that it is OK not to get perfect results in every case; and finally, you can learn that you have a right to be happy and enjoy life and practicing law.

None of this happens overnight. It's almost like osmosis. You just have to stick with it – keep coming back until it works. It has worked for me. I knew this when recently, on a trip up State Street past the Bar Center, I looked over and realized that it no longer represented anything painful. Quite the opposite. The Bar saved my life, and every time I drive past that building, I thank God for the LJAP, the Bar and that little ad in the back of *The Mississippi Lawyer*. ■

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