



IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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CONTROLLING MY STORM

Despite my best lifelong efforts, I am no longer able to blame others for my own anger and sometimes abusive and controlling conduct. Not that I haven't tried. In an apparent effort to play the victim, my favorite excuses for bad conduct have included being raised by a bipolar mother before the advent of lithium, being dumped by my first "true love," and serving in the army in Vietnam.

I must not have dealt with the pain and fear that these circumstances caused because I have had recurrent nightmares about them for much of my life. Outwardly, I tried to be tough and competitive, and even found some "success" in my educational and vocational life. Yet inside, I stayed stuck in anger mode to avoid dealing with the mess underneath.

In Vietnam in 1968, my fear and pain came crashing down. One night on guard duty in DaNang, I sat in a guard tower behind a 50-caliber machine gun, watching flares light up the midnight sky, unable to see another human being, and hearing only the distant rumbling of artillery and aircraft. I felt totally alone – rejected by my mother, my sweetheart, and my country. That was one of the first times I was able to break through the rage and feel the pain that was buried inside. I sat there crying like I wish I had been able to do as a young boy. My mother did not tolerate boys crying.

So tough guy that I was, I came back home to the States, finished law school, and started trying cases in court. The trial process terrified me. My first jury trial resulted in a mistrial because one of

my witnesses mentioned "insurance." The trial judge angrily lectured me in front of my client and the jury, declaring that I had wasted everyone's time and the taxpayers' money. I never lost my fear of being yelled at by a judge.

I gradually developed a mild but noticeable depression that adversely affected my focus at work. I kept running away from my childhood and other demons through compulsive and addictive behaviors, including smoking cigarettes and occasionally getting drunk. At home, I was controlling and abusive at times, feeling that many of the people around me were stupid and to blame for my actions. They needed me to set them straight.

Needless to say, many of my personal relationships were ruined by my negative conduct. Although I was pretty tame at work, I could be a tyrant at home – yelling, swearing, flinging small objects across the room, and being generally abusive. Two marriages later, I was extremely depressed. I became insecure in my new relationship, abrupt and discourteous with people, and generally "acted like a jerk."

The good part about all of this bad behavior is that I was aware of it. As my legal career progressed and I became a judge, I saw many cases that involved angry, abusive, and violent people (sometimes including the trial lawyers). One day after a particularly explosive outburst with my fiancée, I sat in my chambers and asked myself what I would do with someone like me who might come before me for sentencing on a domestic matter. Generally, I do not give credence to individuals who blame others for their misbehavior. I want them to look at their own issues,

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feelings, and behaviors and to stop playing the victim. For those men who were the most argumentative, defensive, and entrenched in their own self-righteousness, I would usually include six months of anger management or domestic violence counseling with the Men's Resource Center (MRC) as a condition of probation.

I picked up the phone, dialed MRC, and made an appointment for my own intake conference.

For the past several years, I have attended three or four different MRC groups – from groups focused on basic anger management techniques to more advanced groups focused on how to enhance trust and intimacy in a relationship. The tools I have learned help me to deal more calmly with stressful situations. I use time-outs, meditation, positive self-talk, slow starts, breathing, and many other techniques to stay grounded and calm in the eye of most storms. All this growth has been made possible with the commitment, patience, and love of my understanding wife. I must have done something right to deserve her. She is truly a good woman whom I now see as an ally instead of an adversary.

If you are struggling with emotional baggage or issues that might detract from your personal or professional life, the Oregon Attorney Assistance Program can help direct you to the Men's Resource Center or other similar community resources.

Positively More Calm