



IN SIGHT

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

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OBSESSIONS AND COMPULSIONS

You made it through law school by being the best. You aced the bar exam. You landed a good job with a reputable firm. But the pressure didn't stop there. Despite your constant attempts to do your best, you find yourself obsessed with details, unable to get your work done on time, logging more hours than can reasonably be billed, and in trouble with friends and family for never being available. Your work is no longer satisfying, your personal life is a mess, and the future looks bleak.

This scenario is familiar to a surprising number of lawyers who may have developed behaviors and an approach to life *similar* to the symptoms of Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder. This approach to life generally includes a preoccupation with orderliness, perfectionism, and mental and interpersonal control at the expense of flexibility, openness, and efficiency.

DO THESE TRAITS SOUND FAMILIAR?

Post-it notes have become the best friend of people who are obsessive about details and list making. They spend so much energy trying to get organized that they don't get the work done. They may make lists, and then they make lists of their lists, and then they lose their lists. They purchase organizational tools – repeatedly – but never use them. Or they can't decide how to file something so they file five copies in several places, afraid that they'll lose it. They leave it in a stack to file when they figure out how to organize their files – and it stays in the stack until the stack of papers gets buried.

These individuals often spend an inordinate amount of time working on a project – more time than can be billed. Even after their billable hours are cut, they continue to work and obsess that they will miss something. Demanding perfection of themselves and office staff, they will draft and redraft documents.

Projects are often left to the last minute because they dread starting a task they feel can't be accomplished perfectly.

When perfection is the goal, delegation is difficult. It becomes "easier to do it myself." As a result, the person may be seen as overly critical, inflexible, and not a team player. This perfectionism can also be demonstrated as inflexibility in matters of morality, ethics, or values. An obsessive-compulsive person may see only one course of action as the "correct" course. This may cause him or her to constantly view the behavior of colleagues as unethical or inappropriate.

THE LEGAL PROFESSION AND OBSESSIVE- COMPULSIVE BEHAVIOR

An obsession with perfection is fostered early in the life experiences of the lawyer. Applicants who get into law school tend to be highly motivated and goal oriented. Those who survive the first year are then faced with ranking, pressure to be on law review, and competition for clerkships and other prime jobs. After law school they often choose a law firm culture that fuels their obsessive-compulsive tendencies and competitive nature: for example, firms that establish billing hour requirements but reward only those who exceed the stated criteria.

These choices may eventually lead to quality of life concerns. Lawyers with obsessive-compulsive tendencies are often so devoted to work that leisure activities and relationships suffer. It is difficult, if not impossible, for them to set limits that allow their health and relationships to thrive. Instead, they may engage in a competition with other associates to do more and be more. As time goes on, it all catches up with them and they completely lose perspective.

SO WHAT'S THE ANSWER?

The traits that got you through law school, helped you pass the bar, got you jobs, and launched your careers may work well for a long time. But when

they cause you to be miserable, it's time to change your behavior.

It is possible to do your job well but not perfectly, to learn how to delegate, and to regain your personal lives. In fact, when you avoid rigidity and get your life in balance, you may actually be more successful in your work. (A recent study of 1,200 top CEOs revealed an interesting insight into their success: they actually valued their family and friends *more* than their jobs.)

If you believe you have the traits described in this article, now is the time to make gradual changes. A call to the OAAP can be your first step to a life that is more satisfying and ultimately more productive. Call Mike Long or Shari Pearlman at 503-226-1057. All consultations are strictly confidential.

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