



# IN SIGHT *for Oregon Lawyers*

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

September 2005  
Issue No. 59

## THE BALANCING ACT

Several personality traits seen with some frequency in lawyers and other successful professionals can take a negative toll on their personal health, well-being, and relationships. This article discusses some of those traits, offers a new perspective, and directs you to resources.

**Perfectionism.** Perfectionistic individuals are chronically dissatisfied with their own best efforts and the best efforts of others. Holding high expectations for themselves and others is a significant factor in why lawyers and other professionals are so hard on themselves and others. If you were to ask a group of lawyers if any of them are infallible, they will quickly answer, “of course not.” However, many lawyers hold themselves to a minimum standard of never making a mistake. To make a mistake rising to the level of malpractice is the source of tremendous guilt and shame for many lawyers. The fear of making such a mistake is often a source of unrelenting anxiety.

**Workaholism.** Working long hours and workaholism are not the same. Workaholism refers to engaging in excessive work in a maladaptive attempt to fulfill a variety of unmet psychological needs. In the profession today, some lawyers feel compelled to work excessively to meet the billable hour expectations set by their firms. Others work excessively to try to earn praise, approval, and recognition from employers and colleagues or love and respect from loved ones, family, and friends. Many perfectionistic individuals also tend to be workaholics.

**Guilt-prone.** Perfectionistic, workaholic individuals often are markedly

guilt-prone. They constantly evoke the “not enough” litany.

- I haven’t done enough soon enough.
- I haven’t read enough.
- I haven’t spent enough time on this case.
- I don’t spend enough time talking to my clients.
- I haven’t done enough investigation.
- I haven’t billed enough hours this month/year.
- I don’t do enough for the firm.

If you continue to add to the top of the “not enough” list, other important parts of your life fall lower and lower on the list of priorities. As the “not enough” list grows, important relationships, social outlets, recreational outlets, and caring for physical needs are pushed farther down on the list. Ultimately, the professional pays a very high price for neglecting the social, emotional, and physical components of life.

**Relationship difficulties.** Perfectionistic, workaholic, guilt-prone people often have difficulty in intimate relationships. They tend to feel more comfortable in work settings where the rules and limits are clearer. Personal relationships are more difficult because they lack the clear roles present in our professional lives. Sharing our innermost private thoughts, particularly the ones we are not so proud of (like our fears), is made harder by perfectionism and a chronic sense of guilt. Individuals who have difficulty sharing or talking about their innermost feelings tend to have trouble devel-

**OREGON  
ATTORNEY  
ASSISTANCE  
PROGRAM**

503-226-1057  
1-800-321-OAAP  
www.oaap.org

*Lawyers  
Helping Lawyers*

- Alcohol & Chemical Dependency
- Career Change & Transition
- Gambling Addiction
- Mental Health
- Procrastination & Time Management

*A free, nonprofit,  
confidential program  
for you.*

oping and sustaining intimate relationships.

The paradox facing lawyers and other professionals is that having perfectionistic, workaholic traits or an exaggerated sense of responsibility is frequently valued and rewarded by clients, partners, and employers. However, most individuals are not able to compartmentalize these traits to only their professional lives. These qualities spill over to the rest of their lives. Consequently, perfectionistic, workaholic, guilt-prone people, who have difficulty in intimate relationships, don't always have much fun in their lives. Their significant others and children also bear the brunt of these traits, and they are the ones most likely to complain.

It can be a difficult task to balance your personality traits, your responsibilities, and your relationships. The OAAP can help you achieve the balance you desire. The OAAP's attorney counselors can also refer you to counselors in your community. For help with these issues, call the OAAP at 503-226-1057 or 1-800-321-6227.

Donald Rosen, MD

*Dr. Rosen is the former director of the Professionals in Crisis Program at The Menninger Clinic and is currently the director of the Psychiatry Residency Training Program at OHSU.*