



# IN SIGHT

for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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## THE FIXER

Ted was a lawyer in his mid-thirties who came into counseling with complaints of sleep problems and a general feeling of unhappiness with his life. Outwardly he had great success: a job in an up-and-coming law firm, a family, and a home. Yet inwardly, especially when he wasn't busy, he felt uneasy and even a bit sad. That others could count on him to get things done – once a source of pride for him – now felt like an endless burden.

I recommended that Ted come to a group for children of alcoholics and other dysfunctional families. He was shocked by this suggestion. Sure, there had been some problems growing up, but dysfunctional? Neither of his parents were alcoholics, nor did they abuse or mistreat him. Why would I suggest this? Ted was especially wary of a group. "It depresses me to listen to others' problems." As a clinician, I knew that Ted's statement confirmed I was on the right track. It told me that Ted had never learned to differentiate between others' problems and his own responsibility. He couldn't tolerate hearing about others' difficulties, because it triggered a feeling of obligation to fix their problems. Now in his thirties, he was confronted with what many people face in this stage of their lives – situations they cannot fix. He felt helpless. My hunch was that he had experienced a similar feeling of helplessness while growing up.

After several individual sessions, Ted decided to give the group a try. Over the next several months, he discovered that he felt like a failure when he wasn't able to fix a problem. He had experienced

this feeling growing up when he couldn't get his father's attention or his stepfather's approval. Even though he did well in school and with most anything he undertook, his father's absence and his stepfather's distance and lack of praise left him feeling as though something were wrong with him. He believed he wasn't good enough, focused on what he didn't do well or hadn't done, and derived little satisfaction from his obvious accomplishments. The message he longed to hear and never did was, "That's good enough," or "You've done enough."

The group continued, and Ted was able to uncover more of his negative beliefs. He used the group's feedback and his reactions to other members to unearth, label, and experience how he genuinely felt. The sadness he felt before coming to therapy eventually became grief for the approval he didn't receive growing up. Over time, Ted's grief metamorphosed into a healthy respect for his own limits. He realized that, at one time or another, we are all confronted with situations over which we are powerless. It is not always in our power to be the "fixer." With the group's help, he was able to face the realization that sometimes he cannot change situations. Once Ted was able to accept this, as well as to feel proud of all he had accomplished, he experienced ongoing peace and serenity.

Ted's situation is not unique or limited to men, who traditionally have been expected to "do" and "achieve" to earn self-worth. The female version of Ted has traditionally derived self-worth from her ability to establish and maintain relationships. To accomplish this, she acquires skills in the language of feelings. Rather than face her helplessness to change a

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situation or person, she may resort to self-criticism. While growing up, she probably learned that to sustain a connection with overburdened parents, she had to try harder, be more flexible, and understand better. In working to maintain the relationship, she had to give up a part of herself. This coping mechanism provides a fertile breeding medium for self-doubt and feelings of failure. She and Ted both have difficulty accepting powerlessness.

If any of your parents or grandparents were alcoholics or struggled with some other significant impairment or dysfunction, you may continue to be challenged by the coping mechanisms and survival skills you developed as a child. Rather than viewing this as bad news, you should recognize the unique opportunity to experience meaningful personal growth. You can stop repeating past patterns and move on to repair old wounds. You can become aware of how the patterns of your past are determining your reactions today. You can face and accept your own powerlessness. You do not have to wait until stress, depression, or burnout engulfs you, or until another significant relationship turns sour, before you address these issues. By changing your interactions and beliefs, you can move from lack of self-satisfaction to pride in your accomplishments.

If you are interested in taking the first step of this journey, call the OAAP and ask about the Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families group. (See page 3.)

Joe Alexander, LCSW