



IN SIGHT

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Issue No. 37

JANUARY 2000

WOMEN ATTORNEYS SUPPORT GROUP

The practice of law can be stressful for many people, but women attorneys experience additional dimensions of stress, including balancing work and family demands. Frequently, high-functioning women lawyers fail to recognize the symptoms of stress.

Since 1997 the OAAP has sponsored a 10-week support group for women attorneys. When discussing their experiences, former members of the group have been strongly enthusiastic, noting that the group provided invaluable lessons in self-care that enabled them to be more effective in their practice and at home. Two members of the group, both partners in Portland-area law firms, characterized the group as a “life-changing” experience. In fact, many of the participants in the group, originally facilitated by Virginia Terhaar, L.P.C., were motivated to initiate significant decisions in their lives. One member moved from a large firm to a small firm practice, another left the active practice of law to transition to another career.

Group members commented on the “real bonding” that took place among the women, noting that “it was therapeutic to know that you’re not the only one dealing with these issues.” Another acknowledged that “it was a complete shock to find that what I was experiencing were symptoms of stress,” noting that she learned the importance of basic elements of self-care: regular exercise, a sensible diet,

and meditation as a relaxation technique. While initially feeling they were “too busy,” group members discovered that the time taken for those practices (and for the group itself) proved worthwhile, resulting in greater productivity in other areas. Group members learned that “stress isn’t something that comes at you from outside sources, but is how our bodies and minds deal with those outside events.”

The group also addressed issues involving work, home, and family – such as dealing with aging parents, wanting balance between work and family, and improving communication with male partners and clients. “The group gave support that you just don’t get at work...for issues that were just too personal, or work-related. We learned how to avoid the stress of being everything to everybody and how to respond, rather than react to communication that was confrontational or competitive.” While men today interact more with their families than did men in previous generations, the women acknowledged that “we still feel more responsible for home and family...we’re not on the same playing field if we compare ourselves to our parents.” One woman, a female attorney in a predominately male firm, valued the opportunity to discuss issues with female peers.

The OAAP will be starting a new support group for women lawyers this winter. The group will be facilitated by Shari R. Pearlman, M.S.W., J.D., and Virginia Terhaar, L.P.C. The group is confidential. For more information, contact Shari at 503-226-1057.