



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Do You Know a “Normal Neurotic” or “Functioning Alcoholic?”

“Just because you don’t understand it doesn’t mean it isn’t so.” ~ Daniel Handler (Lemony Snicket)

When we hear terms like depression, anxiety, personality disorder, mental health disorder, or substance use disorder, many of us stop listening. Why is that? Historically, mental health and substance use issues carried stigma with them because society was, in general, ignorant about them, and that ignorance created irrational fear and judgement. Stigma was a major barrier to people getting treatment for those issues. Now, however, the biggest barrier to people seeking resources is financial. Since stigma is not as extreme as it used to be (because the general public hears about the issues more often, and we know that prevention and treatment save society billions per year), why do we still tune out the conversation? Most likely it’s because we do not believe these are issues that affect us. Since most requirements for diagnoses include something like “these symptoms impair functioning,” we might be correct in our own assessment because we technically do not meet the diagnostic criteria. But what if we experience symptoms such as anxiety or depression, which cause personal distress, but that don’t impair our ability to function?

Terms like a “functioning alcoholic” or “normal neurotic” might be used to describe someone who has a mental health or substance use issue but who can keep a job and maintain relationships without severe consequences. But what about the internal suffering that person goes through? What if we find ourselves continuously stressed and we are restless, hypervigilant, irritable, obsessing about the negative or the past, and/or worrying or obsessively trying to plan for the future (ie. anxiety)? Or if we are often exhausted, have difficulty concentrating, experience sleep disturbances, and are persistently sad/pessimistic/numb (ie. depression)? Or what if we start self-medicating with alcohol or other drugs to help deal with stress, anxiety and depression, and now we’re consistently using more than we used to?

Just because we aren’t “diagnosable” doesn’t mean we can’t benefit from getting help. Maybe that help takes the form of educating ourselves about issues relating to mental health or substance use issues. Maybe it’s starting a conversation with someone we trust about how life has been going for us. Maybe it’s finally taking some time off work to rest and recuperate. Research shows that attorneys experience issues like anxiety, depression, and substance abuse at much higher rates than the general public, yet we are less likely than the general public to seek assistance. This suggests that we think “we can handle it”

ourselves, we believe in stigma (ie. we're afraid to get help because of what other people will think), or we are in denial about our own suffering. We aren't superheroes, and we aren't invincible to suffering. Maybe you can't identify exactly what is wrong, but you know that something isn't going well and you could use some direction on how to process it. We spend so much time taking care of other people's problems that it is crucial we spend time taking care of ourselves, which might mean recognizing we aren't doing well and would benefit from some support. If that is the case, there is no need to tough it out alone. Call your Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program to see what resources are available to you for *confidential* assistance.

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