

# LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

## IDENTIFYING ALCOHOLISM

Experts now estimate that lawyers and judges suffer alcoholism and alcohol abuse problems at rates of up to 20 percent: twice that of the general population. In Louisiana, it is estimated we have about 4,000 lawyers and judges suffering from either alcohol abuse or alcoholism problems.

The ongoing and increasing damages and personal consequences that these individuals (and their family members) continue to suffer are not as personal as we might imagine. In truth, both the public and the profession can be severely damaged when an impaired lawyer or judge practices law. In fact, at least 50 percent of Bar complaints have some core component of alcoholism, drug addiction or other impairment issues.

Although alcohol abuse causes big problems in our profession, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that reaching out to help alcoholics and alcohol abusers is not about prohibition. If one out of five lawyers has a problem with alcohol then, conversely, four out of five lawyers do not have a problem with alcohol and they can enjoy alcohol responsibly. The focus here is on helping alcoholics and alcohol abusers — the people who misuse alcohol and need help.

Alcohol abusers have developed a maladaptive pattern of alcohol use that causes clinically significant impairment or distress. Alcohol abuse can lead to alcohol dependency disease (alcoholism): a chronic condition that is often fatal and never gets better without help. No matter how smart or capable the individuals, in the fullness of time and if left untreated, alcohol dependency will defeat them.

When does one's alcohol misuse reach the point of "enough is enough?" It has been said that alcoholics will probably not hit bottom and seek help until the painful consequences of their alcoholic behavior plummets them downward faster than they can lower their personal standards of

### Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (LAP)

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acceptable behavior. That is why a crisis is often reached before the person seeks help.

Early intervention and the mitigation of damages are often accomplished only when someone is concerned enough to get involved and help the person in trouble with alcohol abuse or dependency. The starting place in helping yourself or others is recognizing that there is a problem.

The issue becomes: how does one go about asking effective preliminary questions and answering those questions in an unflinching fashion to identify a potential alcohol problem?

Obtaining an initial read on the situation is less complicated than one might think. Objective screening tools are available to help everyday people determine whether they might have an alcohol problem. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) is a good resource.

At this NIAAA online link, three easy-to-use screening tools are available: <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arh28-2/78-79.htm>.

One tool, the "CAGE" test, poses only four simple questions for yourself to gauge others' behavior:

**C:** Have you ever felt you should **CUT** down on your drinking?

**A:** Have people **ANNOYED** you by criticizing your drinking?

**G:** Have you ever felt bad or **GUILTY** about your drinking?

**E:** Have you ever had an "EYE-opener" drink in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover?

Answering yes to two or more questions indicates a positive test and warrants further assessment.

While using any of these screening tools, the toughest challenge is obtaining brutally honest answers. Practicing alcoholics who do not yet want help will usually spare no effort in denying, distinguishing and rationalizing their alcoholic behavior to avoid truthfully answering even the simplest of questions.

Lawyers and judges are particularly adept at deflecting and defending against any and all questions. Our training makes us very wary of providing any answer, in any context, that might be deemed an admission against our interest. That makes alcohol abusing or alcoholic lawyers and judges especially disinclined to straightforwardly answer questions.

Despite the harsh statistics and increased obstacles we face as lawyers and judges when it comes to detecting and admitting alcohol problems, there is powerful and effective help available through the Lawyers Assistance Program to identify and treat alcohol problems.

If you think you might need help for an alcohol problem or want to learn more (without any obligation) about how you can help someone with an alcohol problem, contact the Lawyers Assistance Program. All calls are confidential as a matter of law and you do not have to give your name. Call (866)354-9334 or email [LAP@louisianalap.com](mailto:LAP@louisianalap.com).

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