

# LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

## THE HIGH-FUNCTIONING ALCOHOLIC

**A**s judges and lawyers, we often exhibit personality traits that help us succeed as law students and, later, as legal professionals.

Review these traits to see whether you recognize any of them in yourself or others in the legal profession: 1) outgoing and gregarious personality; 2) strong ability to function in “survival mode;” 3) exceptional “people skills;” 4) desire to make others happy; 5) need to prove themselves; 6) high level of physical energy; 7) meticulous work ethic; 8) very likable; 9) physically strong; 10) desire to succeed materially; 11) competitive nature; 12) high professional/academic standards; 13) ability to compartmentalize professional and or academic life from personal life; 14) attachment to external success; and 15) desire to exceed parental levels of success.

Believe it or not, this list does not delineate successful traits of legal professionals. Instead, it is a list of traits common among High-Functioning Alcoholics (HFAs). That’s not to say that these traits automatically make someone an alcoholic, but it is interesting to learn that some of the traits that propel legal professionals toward success also can disguise the disease of alcoholism.

In the United States, 18 million people meet the criteria for substance use disorders and up to 50 percent of diagnosable alcoholics are HFAs. A mere 9 percent of alcoholics are stereotypically drinking cheap booze from a bottle in a paper bag. In reality, a huge number of alcoholics are found on the job each day, appearing to successfully manage their professional and public lives despite their ongoing drinking problems that, in their minds, are compartmentalized and under control.

HFAs may not admit it but their drinking negatively impacts their work performance at times and they simply get away with it. Many HFAs are professionals who are not closely supervised and have loyal support

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staff members who cover up mistakes and clean up messes. The HFA’s alcoholism progresses undetected as a result. Also, hefty professional salaries often provide HFAs with ample resources to hide or “fix” damages caused by their continued problem drinking.

For the HFA’s personal view, excessive alcohol use is often considered an appropriate reward. The catchphrase “work hard, play hard” is often employed by HFAs to rationalize problem drinking. Further, to try and normalize problem drinking, HFAs often befriend other heavy drinkers who also “play hard.”

Unsuccessful at alcohol moderation, HFAs often engage in mind games by claiming the alcohol content of their drinks is not that high or by drinking expensive alcoholic beverages so as to aver they are connoisseurs rather than problem drinkers.

As HFAs expend great effort to appear normal, many secretly suffer painful personal distress: shame and remorse from drunken behavior; frustration over failed attempts to control drinking; and the pain of abstaining for months or years only to “fall off the wagon” and become a problem drinker again.

Early in the HFA conversation, someone always asks: “If the person is successful despite problem drinking, why not leave them alone?” In answering that question, it is paramount to first understand that despite an HFA’s best efforts to contain alcoholism within his or her personal life, if left untreated, alcoholism will eventually impact the person’s professional performance and public life. By that time, however, the

person’s private life is often in shambles.

As time marches on, family members, friends and coworkers often ignore and minimize the HFA’s problem drinking because they feel that they “have no proof” that the person is really an alcoholic. They also may feel that because the person is still functioning at the moment “it must not be that bad.” In truth, it is very bad because the disease worsens over time. HFAs may be successful in delaying consequences but they rarely escape them. Alcoholism is a chronic, progressive and, if left untreated, potentially fatal disease. The HFA’s ability to compartmentalize drinking, combined with others’ hesitation to address the HFA’s drinking, often makes matters worse for HFAs because the problem often grows until an overwhelming avalanche of consequences comes crashing down.

The results can range from severely damaging to deadly. Approximately one third of people who attempt and complete suicide meet diagnosable criteria for alcohol abuse or dependence. That statistic, combined with the legal profession’s already high rates of substance abuse and suicides, places those of us in the legal profession at very high risk. By reaching out to the Lawyers Assistance Program (LAP), you can tap into valuable resources that literally can save lives.

If you have a problem, call LAP! If you know someone with a problem, call LAP! Your call is confidential as a matter of law and you do not have to give your name. LAP can be reached at (866)354-9334, by email [lap@louisianalap.com](mailto:lap@louisianalap.com), or on the web at: [www.louisianalap.com](http://www.louisianalap.com).

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