

Wanna Party?

Growing up in the 60's, I started "partying" like a lot of other people did – underage drinking with friends in the park near my house. Laughing and carrying on – running from the cops – it was my favorite kind of fun. And since I didn't get into too much trouble, it all seemed pretty harmless. What I didn't realize at the time was that drinking did something for me that it didn't seem to do for most other people. When I drank alcohol, I somehow felt larger – more powerful – and all the negatives in the world around me seemed smaller and less threatening. All the fear, the prevailing feeling of inadequacy and the sense of not belonging diminished and often disappeared while drinking. I loved everything about drinking – the taste, the smell, the way the bottles looked, but mostly the effect it had on me – the way it made me feel.

When I was about 16, I smoked my first joint. That night, I met my second true love. I loved smoking dope – from the first time to the last – even though I hated what it eventually did to me. And even though I came to use cocaine five days out of seven; even though I like pain relievers and tranquilizers (often all at the same time) – above all I loved drinking and smoking marijuana and did both virtually every day for the last 15 years of my active using.

As the years went by, drinking and getting high gradually became more and more important in my life. In college and law school, I managed to get excellent grades and did most of what was expected of me. I often said to myself that I worked hard and played hard. And even though I worked as hard as most people, I "played" a lot harder. I started noticing that my drinking and using were different from my friends – I drank and got high more frequently, often alone. I didn't think it was a problem because I somehow managed to function. It's only now that I'm living a clean and sober life that I understand that "living" life was possible for me – that I didn't have to settle for just "functioning".

Alcohol and drugs were my reward when things went well and my solace when they didn't. Whether celebrating or drowning my sorrows – they were my constant companions and eventually became my top priority. I was more dedicated, more devoted and made more sacrifices for alcohol and drugs than for anything else in my life.

As things got worse, I became less and less able to hide the effects of my drinking and using from those around me. My wife and my partners knew "something" was wrong, but didn't know what to do. All lawyers have too much to do and too little time to do it, but everyone I knew managed better than I did. My practice was full of excuses and blaming and having others bail me out. The deadlines were unreasonable; the clients were impossible. I worked so hard why didn't they all cut me some slack?

I finally got to the point where I lived in constant state of terror. I knew I wanted to stop drinking and using but couldn't stop no matter how hard I tried. Continuing to drink and use was untenable and living without alcohol and drugs also seemed untenable.

Then, I did something I had a great deal of trouble doing all my life I asked for help. In tears, I told one of my partners that I thought I was an alcoholic and a drug addict and that I needed help.

I choked those words out the first time I said them. How could it be? I was a cum laude graduate of a good law school a partner in a major Buffalo law firm and an alcoholic and drug addict? Shouldn't I have known better?

I felt rotten, weak-willed, immoral and no good. I was a procrastinating, people-pleasing perfectionist an ego manic with an inferiority complex. I felt that I was a loner and a loser and that I just didn't belong in life. And I clearly had a mental obsession and a physical compulsion to drink alcohol and use drugs. Shouldn't I have known better?

I found out that knowledge has nothing to do with it. I have a disease a primary, chronic, progressive, incurable and fatal disease called alcoholism. The alcohol and drugs are just symptoms. My strength and willpower have nothing to do with it. I am powerless over alcohol and drugs.

I also found that, although incurable, this disease I have is very treatable. I'm not alone, far from it, and if you have the same disease I do you're not alone either.

For those of you who think you have a problem with drinking and/or drugs, there is a solution. For confidential assistance, call Pat Spataro, NYSBA LAP Director, at 1-800-255-0569.