

FOR YOUR PRACTICE

LAWYERS CONCERNED FOR LAWYERS

Psychiatric illness no excuse for bad behavior

Q. Originally licensed in Massachusetts, for many years, I have hitched my wagon, both professionally and personally, to Craig (not his real name), an entertainment/sports lawyer in another state, and sometimes a brilliant one, whom I came to love. After I finished law school myself, I became his associate, handling most of the nuts and bolts of running the practice while he dazzled clients and collaborated on various projects.

At times, it has seemed that the same drive, fast thinking, and persuasive talking that made Craig a standout in his field also caused him to behave inappropriately. He has had a number of brief encounters with the psychiatric system (including at emergency rooms), and has been given a range of diagnostic labels, but never fully accepted the idea of staying on medications. During some of his “episodes,” he has been unwise with money and relationships, but has always been apologetic afterwards. I guess in some ways I’ve liked feeling needed by him, and he has been willing to share me with my parents, for whom I also serve as caretaker.

At present, however, he is off again on a “business venture,” and it has become all too clear to me not only that I am on my own, but that there is no money left. Having taken on the role of his underling and organizer, I haven’t generated my own independent income in over a decade. Do I have to wait for him to come back to himself and to me, or is there something more that I can do?

A. There is something you can do, but not for Craig — for yourself. In your appreciation of his brilliance and the gratification that you derive from your helping role, as well as your sympathy for his apparent psychiatric illness (which sounds like it might be barely-treated bipolar disorder, but that is only speculation), you have been neglectful of yourself, and now find yourself with little

in the way of security, resources, or opportunity.

Fortunately, you have not only your legal training but all the practical knowledge developed in your years as an essential part of Craig’s practice. This seems like the moment to seize control of your career, reshape it your own image, and begin the process of building a reputation and a bank account. Now may be the time when you are in a position to extricate yourself from this one-sided relationship and to learn to find self-esteem in your own work and accomplishments rather than only by giving to others. Such a change probably won’t be easy, and you would be well advised to get ongoing support — from a therapist, professional groups (such as a bar association committee), perhaps LCL’s Unemployment or Solo Practitioner Groups, etc. Craig may have a slightly better chance of taking responsibility for his disorder without you to pick him up when he falls — but whether or not that happens, you have acquired ample evidence that to make his needs primary is to leave yourself in the lurch. If you come to meet with LCL staff individually, we would be happy to help you develop an initial sense of direction as you enter into this process.

Questions quoted are either actual letters/e-mails or paraphrased and disguised concerns expressed by individuals seeking assistance from Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers.

Questions for LCL may be mailed to LCL, 31 Milk St., Suite 810, Boston, MA 02109; e-mailed to email@lclma.org or called in to (617) 482-9600. LCL’s licensed clinicians will respond in confidence. Visit LCL online at www.lclma.org. ■