

FOR YOUR PRACTICE

Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers

Despite practice success, feeling like a parenting failure



Q. I am a 51-year-old woman who has, over the years with my law partner, built a rather successful and well regarded general legal practice in Central Massachusetts. I've had some tendency toward depression for many years, but past therapy and an ongoing prescription for Prozac have been fairly effective. This week, however, I have been unable to get anything done, even to prepare for an important case. I can't get my mind off the fact that my college-age daughter is barely talking to me, and chose to stay at school rather than come home for winter vacation. Something seems to have happened at school to trigger this, but I don't know what it is. When she came home for Thanksgiving, she seemed to want to do nothing but sleep and use social media, and I pushed her to do something more constructive, so in part she may be avoiding a replay of that tug of war. My daughter and I were always very close — she has lived with me since her father and I divorced a decade ago — and I always prioritized her, through various crises and adolescent turmoil, over my work. But I can't seem to get through to her this time, and now I'm just feeling like a total failure, like my past efforts have not amounted to anything. It's hard to even ask my partner to fill in for what I can't seem to do — his kids are doing fine as far as I know, and he's the kind of person who has no comprehension of depression.

A. To begin with your last point, it's certainly seems to be true (since we hear it so often) that people who have been fortunate enough not to experience significant depression often think that one has only to "pull oneself up by the bootstraps." While a certain amount of self-pushing, such as involvement in activity and exercise even when motivation is hard to come by, is helpful in improving mood, people need to understand that when one is drowning in depression, an extended hand will probably be more helpful than advice to swim harder. Our website (LCLMA.org) has a number of links to resources and articles that are informative on depression in general and specifically in lawyers. And it does seem likely that you'll need to ask your partner for help on the work that currently faces you — just as he would do if symptomatic from a condition that he does understand, like cancer or arthritis.

If you are not currently in therapy, this is a good time to return, and not because your reaction is unique — most parents as devoted as you have been would have a hard time coping with what sounds like a fairly sudden alienation from their child — but because it's so stressful. Your daughter is certainly dealing with something (could be so many things), and expressing it partly by turning her anger toward you. For what it's worth, it may be because you have been such a stable, solid figure that she feels safe enough to do so, but of course it's still painful to withstand. For you to go from feeling hurt and disappointed to a sense of total failure, however, is a "cognitive distortion" in the direction of inappropriate self-blame, not to mention the implicit belief that her current perspective will last indefinitely, which is unlikely. With your parental support, she's been able to get through past personal challenges and into college. As you examine and reshape the kinds of thoughts that contribute to your sinking mood, you can remind yourself that your daughter's life, moods and choices are going to unfold largely in ways that are not within your control. It's time to take care of yourself, as well; and when she's ready to talk, you'll be ready to listen.

Questions quoted are either actual letters/emails 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; emailed 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.