



LAWYERS CONCERNED FOR LAWYERS

Early career complicated by unstable relationship

Q: After completing law school in Oregon, I moved to a nonprofit sector job in the Boston area, where I met my current boyfriend, who also hopes to become an attorney. He is essentially a fine person, but we have some differences that are complicating our relationship.



Dr. Jeff Fortgang

Adam (not his real name) was formerly in the Army, including combat, in Afghanistan, and came out of the experience with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), diagnosed by the Department of Veterans Affairs. He can be very kind, but seems afraid to actually get close, and he has a lot of anger in him that sometimes erupts in ways that scare me. At times, he yells at me and accuses me of trying to control him. (Maybe I do, especially when he drinks too much, which he doesn't think is a problem.) So far, he hasn't gotten physical when angry, but I feel as if that could happen. My friends tell me I should get him out of my life, but I really respect his values and dedication, and I keep thinking I can help him heal. Helping people is part of what inspired me to become a lawyer.

A: Too many of our returning veterans from places like Afghanistan and Iraq, where they lived in an ongoing state of danger and saw their comrades injured and killed, have come home with PTSD. The "luckier" among them have managed to get treatment, at the VA or elsewhere, but it can be a long and uncertain road to recovery (as was well depicted by Bradley Cooper in the film *American Sniper*, and decades earlier by Bruce Dern in *Coming Home* and by Christopher Walken in *The Deer Hunter*).

Among the concerns that you describe in Adam are that he seems potentially violent and that he has some level of drinking problem about which he remains in denial. These features may very well represent PTSD, as well as other kinds of psychological residue of warfare; and it is not unusual for individuals develop addictions in the context of trauma symptoms. (Many veterans, of course, survive without developing PTSD, which itself is in a way amazing.) New understandings of and treatments (both psychological and pharmacological) for trauma are being developed all the time, some at the VA. But improvement is generally not fast, predictable or certain. It also helps if the individual recognizes his problems and takes personal responsibility to address them; Adam does not appear to be at that point.

So, although these decisions are yours to make, your friends' concerns about you are understandable — they would rather see you pursue your fledgling legal career without having much of your emotional energy diverted to the demands of this difficult relationship (which could get worse before it gets better, especially if the heavy drinking persists). Part of this picture is your own inclination to be a caretaker for someone who is hurting or damaged; taking a look at that tendency with a therapist might be a useful undertaking for you, as you attempt to balance your feelings and respect for Adam with your own needs. If desired, we at LCL can help line up an appropriately skilled professional. If Adam actually crosses the threshold of becoming physically aggressive toward you, then there is no question that it is time to reach out for help. ■

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Dr. Jeff Fortgang is a licensed psychologist and licensed alcohol and drug counselor on staff at Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers of Massachusetts, where he and his colleagues provide confidential consultation to lawyers and law students, and offer presentations on subjects related to the lives of lawyers. Q&A questions are either actual letters/emails or paraphrased and disguised concerns expressed by individuals seeking LCL's assistance. Questions may be emailed to DrJeff@LCLMA.org.