

CLIENTS FIERCELY PROTECTED SECRETS SURROUNDING ALCOHOLISM

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I have been practicing as an attorney primarily in the Family Law area for 33 years. During the first half of my career I was often frustrated by my inability, using legal solutions alone, to bring about the changes necessary for my clients who were dealing with alcoholic loved ones, to feel sane, whole, and hopeful.

It was puzzling to watch otherwise intelligent clients repeatedly deny the depth and breadth of the alcoholism- and addiction-related issues in their lives, which were so obviously devastating their families and relationships. They were fiercely protective of the alcoholism “secrets.” Their minds raced and eyes darted at warp speed regarding past and future issues, while they mouthed phrases containing, “What if” and “Not me,” or “Yeah, but.”

These same clients demonstrated or articulated the belief that somehow they were at fault for their alcoholic loved one’s behavior. How eagerly they tried to do more or be more, so the alcoholic in their lives would behave better. The number of times these very clients repeated their own past behaviors toward the alcoholic, expecting to enjoy different results *this time* only to be devastated yet again by the failure of their efforts, seemed overwhelming.

I was appalled at my clients’ low level of self-esteem. These people were often the victims of the alcoholic’s verbal, if not physical, abuse. Their shame and guilt were

palpable and their hopelessness was paralyzing. No amount of education, income, social, or professional status seemed to make a difference.

These clients were often incredibly resilient, resourceful, hardworking men and women who enjoyed success in other aspects of their lives. I felt helpless to offer them anything other than a recitation of how the laws in our jurisdiction could assist them to get spousal or child support, custody, property division, a divorce, or at least a separation agreement.

My feelings of helplessness and frustration were a direct result of my ignorance about the disease of alcoholism and addictions. In my Connecticut childhood and my many years of college in upstate New York and Ontario, I occasionally saw someone I would identify as an alcoholic, but I had no appreciation that alcoholism is a disease that profoundly affects not only the drinker, but the lives and health of everyone who lives with or deals with the alcoholic. Nothing in my many years of postsecondary education had informed me on this subject.

About 16 years ago, all of this changed for me. My personal frustration and curiosity led me to read history and recovery literature from Al-Anon and Alcoholics Anonymous. I also attended open meetings of both groups, where the candid speakers allowed me to



identify the characteristics of this disease from the perspective and perceptions of both the alcoholic and the Al-Anon member.

Ever since then, I feel bombarded by the evidence and the effects of this disease all around me. I am stunned by my own prior ignorance of these issues.

My efforts to achieve an understanding about alcoholism and the principles of the A.A. and Al-Anon programs have made me a better lawyer. I am much more empathetic when I observe what I now recognize as features of this disease—dishonesty, denial, fear, enabling, resentment, anger, self-centeredness, confusion and hopelessness—in my clients or their loved ones. By gently asking probing questions, I am able to help focus a client's attention or offer my perspective on alcoholism's effects to encourage more meaningful choices. By keeping Al-Anon and A.A. literature in my office and in the general waiting room area, I am able to suggest to hurting clients that an Al-Anon or A.A. meeting may be as important as a legal solution to help them and their family members restore hope, sanity, and some positive momentum in their lives.

Repeatedly observing the positive results that these programs offer my clients and their families, encourages me to give Al-Anon and Alcoholics Anonymous my enthusiastic endorsement at every opportunity.
