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OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

# *IN SIGHT* for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## HOW I BROKE THE CYCLE OF PAIN AND ADDICTION

I could start my story about my addiction to prescription drugs with the day I was fired from my job. Or I could begin with the day several months later when the clerk at the posh store where I was shopping called the police because she thought I was too impaired to drive. Or should I begin with the worst day – the day my husband told me if I didn't go to rehab, he would take my 12-year-old daughter and leave?

My addiction was fueled by physical pain and fear of pain. The event that sticks out in my mind as “the beginning” is struggling in pain through a client's daylong deposition. An MRI two days later showed I had a herniated cervical disk. Neurosurgeons recommended I get a fusion immediately due to spinal cord compression, but I waited for six months because of fear and uncertainty. The cloud of pain and anxiety that descended over me was ripe for addiction. I catastrophized – and started taking prescription Vicodin. At first I took it only occasionally, as needed, but soon it seemed like I needed it three times a day, every day, like clockwork.

The spinal fusion surgery I eventually underwent did not seem to stop the pain. The surgeon theorized that the injury had been there so long that a pain pathway had been established. Even though the offending disk was repaired, the tissues and nerves were still sending pain signals. The neurosurgeon referred me to a pain specialist.

My experience under the care of a “pain specialist” was the beginning of a

nightmare roller-coaster ride. I became trapped in a web of prescriptions, appointments, and tests. I felt chained to the doctor and the pharmacy. The doctor put me on a permanent narcotics maintenance program. Soon I graduated from Vicodin to Percocet, and then to Morphine, Oxycontin, and Fentanyl. When I became depressed, they added an antidepressant. When I couldn't sleep, they added Ambien. Every morning I had to take an antinausea drug to keep it all down. The doctor told me I should accept that I would be on medications for the rest of my life. I felt I had two terrible choices – addiction or constant pain.

I kept trying to work, but I constantly felt sick, tired, and depressed. I imagined I had a giant raptor perched on my back, its claws embedded in my shoulder blades. Sometimes I shut the door for a few moments and lay on the floor, praying for the physical and emotional pain to go away. I was frequently late to work and used all my sick time. I became increasingly fragile, and I could not handle any criticism. I was deeply ashamed, and at the same time I blamed everyone else for my problems.

I tried to care for my 12-year-old daughter, my husband, and my 80-year-old mother, but I had nothing left for them. After work I would come home and lay on the couch. Usually, I would fall asleep there. My daughter didn't invite friends over for a year. I felt like an embarrassment to my family. I thought I was a terrible mother, wife, daughter, friend, and employee. I wanted to disappear.

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At some point I started abusing the medications. I would take too much and run out before my prescription was due. Many months I made up excuses about why I needed to fill the prescriptions early. I would wait for the hour, the minute, my prescriptions could be filled, and would rush to the pharmacy to pick them up. The anxiety and shame created by dependence on narcotics were crippling.

One Saturday I woke up in the hospital. The doctor said I had overdosed and was down to three or four respirations per minute. That afternoon my husband called a treatment center and arranged for my 30-day in-patient admission. I did not want to go, but I had hit bottom. Of all the terrible choices I had, treatment seemed like the least horrible option.

Of course, the first few days of treatment were tough. The back pain initially increased, but not as much as I feared it would. I couldn't sleep for a few days, and the anxiety from withdrawal was very uncomfortable. But I was in the company of people going through the same thing, and that helped a lot. It also helped that I was free to collapse, cry, and sweat without fear of disappointing anyone. I no longer had to pretend everything was okay. It took a lot of energy to keep everything going when I was addicted to painkillers, but finally I could just stop and let all the balls in the air crash to the floor. There were a lot of things I disliked about treatment, but it saved my life, my family, and my career.

Within a couple of days, I was grateful that my husband had given me the ultimatum that forced me into treatment. At first, he held me at arm's length and did not promise that he would be there when I got out. My daughter also kept her distance. I was so sorry for all the pain I had caused them, but I tried to be hopeful they would trust me again.

I was placed in the chronic pain group, and we read a book that argued that pain and suffering are two separate things. Maybe you can't control the pain, but you can control your response to it. That concept was revolutionary to me. For the first time, I recognized that I was not actually trapped and that I did have choices. Instead of worrying that the pain was only going to get worse, I chose to think it would get better. This choice helped me break the cycle of pain – fear – pain – fear. When I assumed the pain was temporary, I was able to

ignore it and think about something else. My shoulders relaxed, and the pain decreased. Within a couple of weeks, I could go for hours without thinking about pain. I began to apply this newfound power to choose my thoughts to other areas of my life. If I woke in the middle of the night, instead of darkness, I chose a more positive option from the thought menu. It was liberating to learn that I could choose what I spent my time thinking about.

Also key were the daily lectures about addiction and neurochemistry from scientists and doctors. I learned that drugs and alcohol alter the brain's neurochemistry and inhibit the body's natural ability to respond to pain and stress. I learned that if I could hold on long enough to get the chemicals out of my system, my own endorphins, serotonin, and dopamine would kick in. Eventually I found out that my own body handled pain as well as or better than narcotics had.

I accepted, and eventually embraced, the idea that in order to be healthy and sane, I had to completely eliminate narcotics and other addictive substances from my life. Instead of wondering if I am having too much, I simply have none. I followed the recommendations of my support group, and I tried to apply the principles in all my affairs. I also started making healthier choices in other areas of my life – I started jogging again and changed my diet.

Today I have been clean and sober for more than seven years. My life is so much easier to manage. I am responsible, organized, and reliable. If I say I am going to be somewhere or do something, I do it! I don't have to worry that I may feel too sick or that I will forget. I have my old job back, and I have regained the trust of my husband, daughter, friends, and coworkers. I am nearly pain-free, except for normal temporary aches and pains. I practice choosing how I respond to situations and people, and I try to take responsibility for my own emotions. Fortunately, the legal profession and life in general provide many opportunities to practice. Sometimes I do not succeed at first, but I keep trying and eventually I can steer my thoughts in a positive direction.

I regularly attend community support meetings to maintain my sobriety. I welcome the authenticity that I find in these meetings. People talk about real things in

a genuine way. It is refreshing to connect with people in this way. It is comforting to know that anything I say or feel is acceptable and will be understood. And it is good to see newcomers, have the opportunity to share my experiences, and be grateful for how far I have come.

*Choosing Positive Thoughts*