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IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

RETURNING TO WORK AFTER A HEALTH LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Consider these scenarios.

1. A lawyer returns to work a month after a suicide attempt.
2. You, the managing partner, have orchestrated an intervention for a fellow partner and now, after two months, she's back from treatment.
3. A lawyer starts to receive help for severe anxiety and depression. During the course of treatment with a psychiatrist and counselor, he continues to work and confides to his colleagues about his experiences.
4. You start to attend a 12-step program to support your recovery, and you don't want your friends or anyone at your firm to know.
5. Your colleague takes a leave of absence to undergo chemotherapy and radiation treatment for cancer and asks you not to mention the reason to anyone else.

These are but a few examples of the challenges facing the Oregon lawyer who has sought help for a mental or physical health issue and now returns to the workplace and faces the friends who want to help and the co-workers who are simply curious. Recovery from major illnesses such as cancer, depression, anxiety, and substance dependence is a process, not an event. So what does it mean to the people involved? What are the tasks and challenges of a lawyer during the first year of recovery, and how can friends and colleagues help?

Education. The first days, months, and even the first year after returning to work from a health leave of absence present unique challenges to the individual lawyer. Whether in a firm, in solo practice, in government service, or unemployed, your tasks for staying healthy

are similar. Most likely you have received education about your illness or condition, how it manifests in you, the expected recovery path, and what you need to do to stay healthy. Keep getting educated; it can only help.

Professional Help. Continue with your treatment plan, aftercare program, and counseling. You didn't get to this place overnight, and getting better takes time, too. You will need the advice and guidance of health and/or mental health professionals. Think of it as securing and maintaining your personal team of experts. Follow the advice of your healthcare team.

Process vs. Event. The process of returning to health is just that – a process. You may bounce back quickly, or you may have a host of symptoms that manifest including memory issues, mood swings, fatigue, emotional sensitivity, sleep disturbances, physical issues, cognitive disturbances, and stress sensitivity. These may be part of the “normal” process, but pay attention to the expected route of recovery and the signs of relapse for your particular illness or condition. Contact your healthcare provider with changes or concerns. Get familiar with the principles of the acronym H.A.L.T., a tool that can help stave off any mini emotional or psychological crisis or even full-blown relapse. Once you know to check whether you are Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired, you can address each area accordingly. Once you are fed, calm, supported, and refreshed, things will seem better.

Support Networks. Establish and maintain a support network of similarly situated individuals. Support groups can be helpful as they emphasize group participation, after-meeting camaraderie, activities, and friend-

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ship. The OAAP offers many types of support groups. The OAAP also connects people with resources state-wide. Personal experience and scientific research both show that having a group of peers who intimately know similar challenges is beneficial and necessary for a successful return to health.

Exercise and Stress Management. Establish an exercise and stress management routine. Make sure you are healthy enough for physical activity, and if you are, don't hesitate to get started. Exercise is an extremely effective stress reliever and will help build your stress resiliency over time. Don't overdo it, but, at a minimum, plan to incorporate an exercise activity at least once a day for a half hour. Try different sports or activities, investigate old passions, or check out new ones. Whatever you choose, practicing a little bit every day will help you feel better faster. Stress management programs will suggest exercise as well as other activities to help with stress: prayer, meditation, biofeedback, and, of course, regular old-fashioned fun.

Nutrition. Pay attention to your nutritional needs. Some illnesses affect our bodies more harshly than others, and proper nutrition restores and nourishes the body. Eat in a healthy manner to fuel the body's processes and reap the benefits of practicing self-care.

Telling Others. Think about whom to tell and what to say about your re-entry, illness, or recovery. It's your life and your health. Push back from the stigma that encourages you to keep silent about your illness. If you work for a firm who has supported you during a medical leave, it will be important to talk to them about how and what is said to others. You have a voice in this discussion, so be assertive. Friends will be interested in your welfare and recovery, but you can also be selective about what you say to them. Not everyone needs to know everything. Loved ones and family should be kept in the loop – they are a critical part of your support system. Practice with group or individual support systems about how you will answer questions. Most people are rooting for your success and merely want to help.

Speak Up. Learn to ask for what you need – especially as it relates to your health. Most people can't

read your mind and aren't thinking about your situation. In fact, if you look like you're okay, most people will assume you're doing fine. But if you don't ask for help or express what you need, no one will ever know. If you need special help at work or time off to get to the doctor or your support group meetings, let the appropriate person know. If you're ready to take on a special project at work or handle that big case, let your firm or colleagues know that you're feeling up to it and are ready for the challenge.

Reputation. Work to repair your reputation at work or in the community if it has been impacted by your illness. It may take time to reestablish any trust that was breached. You can do it as you rebuild relationships through consistent, thoughtful, and healthy actions over time. If your employer or firm requires monitoring or practice supervision, accept this as gracefully as possible. Demonstrating accountability will go a long way in rebuilding trust.

Finding Work. Transitioning back to a solo practice, a job change, or unemployment can be stressful situations for the lawyer returning from a health leave of absence. The following is a list of suggestions to help with rebuilding your solo practice or finding employment while still following your recovery, treatment, or wellness plan:

- Consider a non-legal job if the return to a law practice is not immediately practical or feasible. Sometimes working a few months or longer at a job other than law can pay the bills, reduce stress, and provide some time for health to take hold. Get creative – brainstorm about job possibilities with yourself or friends. The OAAP attorney counselors are a great resource and can provide free, confidential assistance. Explore the possibilities.

- Get active in a support group for lawyers – it can reduce isolation and be an uplifting experience to be with others who have similar experiences. Call the OAAP to learn more and get connected to various groups. Network within your local bar associations, volunteer with a committee, or join a section of the Oregon State Bar. Getting involved will help keep you connected to the practice of law and will provide valuable interactions that may even lead to employment opportunities.

- Join the OSB Solo and Small Firm Practitioners section. This can be invaluable as both a networking tool and a source of useful practice information for a practitioner.

- Find a mentor within your area of law practice. There are lawyers out there who want to help, especially those who have received help themselves.

- Connect with helpful lawyers – bring coffee to them at their office or offer to take them to coffee, breakfast, or lunch. Talk to them about jobs, work, or clients that interest you. Learn to network and keep those bridges and doors open.

- Attend specialty bar association meetings, conferences, or seminars in your area of practice or other special interests. The smaller associations can be very welcoming, personable, and supportive.

This article was adapted with permission from the Wisconsin Lawyers Assistance Program (WisLAP) and the Texas Lawyers Assistance Program (TLAP).