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## Asking for Help: You Can't 'Lawyer' Your Way Out of Chemical Brain Diseases

Posted by: J. E. "Buddy" Stockwell on Jul 1, 2021

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I am always trying to envision new ways to encourage lawyers, judges, and law students to feel comfortable about contacting TLAP ([Tennessee Lawyers Assistance Program](#)) for confidential help with problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction, compulsive gambling, sex addiction, depression, anxiety issues, or any other type of mental health difficulties that they may be experiencing.



The truth is that most of us are not good at asking for help. For one thing, there is the myth that it makes a person appear weak. In fact, however, asking for help empowers the person because it allows them to face chronic problems head-on, instead of being stuck in a quagmire of secret misery.

Another misconception that discourages seeking help is the misbelief that highly successful people are “strong” and don’t need help. In fact, it is the opposite. Any great leader knows that he or she is not skilled at everything and that, to be successful, it is often necessary to rely upon the advice of others with advanced expertise in certain areas.

Asking for help is still not easy though, especially regarding personal problems, and lawyers and judges are particularly resistant to the concept of seeking help. We are not comfortable surrendering to anything.

This is not surprising. In law school we developed intellectual stamina and analytical skills that afford us legitimate academic confidence. Add in practicing law thereafter and we gained well-earned confidence in problem-solving on a grand scale. The end result: we are not accustomed to asking others for help or admitting any weakness or helplessness. We are trained to handle problems, not suffer problems.

Our admirable attributes of independence and tenacity serve us well right up until we suffer a personal problem that can’t be outsmarted. Alcoholism, drug addiction, depression, anxiety issues and other physiologically based chemical brain diseases simply

can't be defeated with willpower, analytical skills and confidence. You can't "lawyer" your way out of chemical brain diseases. As such, the self-reliance that previously served a lawyer or judge so well can be their total undoing, because it blocks the path to help.

In the end, and not just for lawyers and judges but for all people, fear and stigma are at the core of why most people are reticent to reach out for help with mental health issues: fear of being judged; fear that adversaries will obtain and use information against you; and, fear of losing control of the situation.

While an internal struggle over seeking help versus maintaining secrecy and hoping for the best rages within the individual who is suffering and in trouble, time is of the essence more than they imagine. Sadly, it is common that an individual will resist seeking help until the problem becomes a full-blown crisis. By procrastinating and not seeking help early on, more-serious consequences accumulate and the road to recovery becomes more arduous. In the worst scenarios, the inability to seek help costs the person his or her life. These deaths are not widely publicized, but they are happening nonetheless; right here, right now, and within our own legal profession.

As the new executive director of the Tennessee Lawyers Assistance Program (TLAP), I am extremely grateful and excited that the *Tennessee Bar Journal* has invited me to be a regular contributor. I look forward to keeping the Tennessee legal profession updated on the very latest news and trends in the comprehensive and highly specialized field of providing professional clinical support to lawyers, judges, and law students. It is my greatest hope that, in the fullness of time, members of our profession will learn much more about today's TLAP and feel much more comfortable about confidentially accessing TLAP's sophisticated and effective services.

## **'My Life Imploded' But TLAP Helped**

I also hope to share recovery stories from time to time by those who wish to contribute (anonymously and with permission), so that readers experience a first-hand account of what TLAP assistance looks like, and more importantly, what it feels like. To that end, here is what a lawyer recently experienced after reaching out to TLAP:

Last year, my life imploded. I lost my job, had no future prospects, and my home life was a mess. I knew I had two choices: give up or get some help.

I've never been one to ask for help, and it was one of the hardest things I've ever done. When I reached out to Buddy Stockwell at TLAP, I was terrified that it would negatively affect my professional licensure and that I would be quietly cordoned off from productive society and any hope of future success or stability. But something very different happened. Buddy and his team embraced me wholeheartedly, and over the course of the next few months, they spent countless hours communicating with me, helping educate me about my substance use disorder, and ultimately, helping me get treatment so that I could start a journey of recovery.

There were several times during those early days when I wanted to give up, tell TLAP that their recommendations seemed excessive or too time-consuming, and try to find my own way. Each time I started to get cold feet, Buddy called me up directly and talked me through the reason for the recommendations in great detail and told me exactly what I could expect from different types of treatment. On one occasion, I told TLAP I just couldn't afford the kind of help they expected me to get; Buddy told me to stand by and made calls to find financial aid options that made the best treatment in the world accessible to me. In other words, TLAP supported me, removed every barrier, and ultimately led me down a path of recovery in spite of myself.

Today, I'm sober, employed, and have the support of a loving family. I still work with Buddy and my TLAP support crew on a regular basis in order to maintain my sobriety. My one wish in writing these words is this: if you have any concern about reaching out to TLAP, please know that they care; they will bend over backwards to help you, and in doing so, they will maintain your anonymity and treat you with respect. They did it for me.

Above all, stories such as this reflect the most important ingredient in recovery: Hope. No matter how far we have fallen, with effective support there is a way back. Some of the happiest and most productive lawyers I know found their way to their lawyers' assistance program and received the level of professional clinical support that they needed. They are happy again and have escaped the darkness and isolation.

We are all familiar with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis' famous quote: "Sunlight is the best disinfectant" and that holds true for dispelling stigmas that impede one's ability to seek help for alcoholism, addiction, depression and other diseases.

If you think you have (or are concerned about someone else regarding) a problem with alcohol, drugs, depression or any other mental condition, contact TLAP. Your call or email is confidential. You do not even have to give your name. Whether you need immediate help or want general information TLAP is there! Call (615) 741-3238 or email to [Tlap@tncourts.gov](mailto:Tlap@tncourts.gov).



**BUDDY STOCKWELL** was appointed by the Tennessee Supreme Court in July 2020 as executive director of the Tennessee Lawyers Assistance Program (TLAP). He comes from south Louisiana where he has been a volunteer and program monitor for the state's Committee on Alcohol and Drug Abuse and the executive director of Louisiana's comprehensive Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program (JLAP) peer professionals' program. He is a certified clinical interventionist through "Love First" training at the Betty Ford Center and has personally been in recovery from alcoholism for over 38 years. Stockwell earned his law degree from LSU Law School in 1993. He practiced in both large and small firm settings, including a solo practice in Baton Rouge where he focused heavily on domestic litigation. Read more about him at [tba.org/Stockwell](http://tba.org/Stockwell).

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