

PROFESSIONAL WELLNESS FOR LAWYERS AND LAW FIRMS 2018  
PAPER 6.1

# A Wellness Journey: What It Was Like, What Happened, and What It Is Like Now

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## **A WELLNESS JOURNEY: WHAT IT WAS LIKE, WHAT HAPPENED, AND WHAT IT IS LIKE NOW**

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### **I. Introduction**

I was called to the Bar in 1982. At the time, I was both a practicing alcoholic, and prone to depression. I am not clear in my own mind whether these matters were indeed unknown to me, or whether my well-honed skills of denial were already in full swing. Regardless, in hindsight, I had my first episode of depression in my teens, and drank alcoholically from pretty much the beginning of my drinking, which was also in my teens.

I have now been sober for over 15 years. I have not a depressive episode for over 7 years. Both of these things have occurred because I sought help, accepted the help that was offered, and then tried to help others, like others had helped me. In essence, I embraced the concept of "wellness", long before the term was in common usage.

### **II. Lawyers, Alcoholism, and Depression**

Others have referred to the comprehensive 2015 ABA report of the National Task Force on Lawyers Well-Being, titled "The Path to Well-Being: Practical Recommendation for Positive Change". The findings merit repeating. The study underlying the report found that 21% of all US lawyers engage in "problematic drinking", versus 6.4% in the general population. The number rises to 32% if only lawyers under 30 are considered. "Problematic drinking" was defined as being hazardous, or with possible dependence. I was without doubt such a drinker.

The report also stated that 28% of lawyers had experienced depression during their career, 19% had experienced severe anxiety, and 11.5% had experienced suicidal thoughts. I too, experienced all three.

These numbers, on their own, are bad enough. Compounding them is a reluctance of lawyers to seek help. Again according to the report, only 7% of lawyers seek help for problems with alcohol, and 30% for problems with mood disorders. The principal reason lawyers do not seek help is because they do not want to be stigmatised. Until things became unbearable, this was the case with me.

My alcoholism and depression were intertwined. One fed the other. Ultimately, I discovered that my efforts to deal with my depression while I was an active alcoholic were destined to be futile. Who knew alcohol was a depressant?

### **III. What It Was Like**

I was raised in a Vancouver suburb, in a loving and caring home. I wanted for nothing in a material sense. I did well in school, and in fact was awarded a scholarship by the BC government to study abroad for my high school years. I first drank regularly and to excess when I was 16. I had my first depressive episode when I was 17, although I did not recognise at that time what it was.

I completed a BA at UBC, where I also attended law school. I like to say that it was during law school that I really learned to drink. Alcohol flowed freely at various events. I was the President of the Law Students' Association in my third year, had keys to the beer room, and kept a bottle of scotch in my desk.

I articulated at a downtown firm. I wasn't kept on, which devastated me; alcoholics do not deal well with rejection. After a summer of looking for work, I joined what was then a small downtown firm in September 1982, where I commenced practice and stayed until 1996. I routinely drank to excess in that period. I had too many alcohol related incidents to chronicle.

I had been hospitalised for depression in about 1990. I was admitted to the psychiatric ward at UBC suicidal, and spent the better part of two months in the hospital. On some level, I knew alcohol had something to do with what ailed me, although I would never admit that. I recall a doctor at UBC asking me whether I drank. I replied "yes". He asked me if I drank when I was sad. I replied "yes". He asked me if I drank when I was happy. I replied "yes". He then asked me when I didn't drink. My response was that I thought he had missed his calling, and that he should have been a lawyer, as that was a very nice piece of cross examination.

One of the exercises I did in the treatment center I went to (more about that later) was to chronicle the history of my drinking, as best as I could. That exercise revealed that my drinking would increase over a number of years, plateau for a number of years, and then increase again. One such plateau was reached when I was asked to leave my first firm. I have no doubt that my drinking was one of the factors contributing to my departure, although many said not. Regardless, I joined another downtown firm where my alcoholism remained in check for a couple of years. However, in 2000, it was like a switch had been thrown, and my drinking escalated dramatically. Drinking during the day was suddenly routine. Afternoons were increasingly spent in bars and restaurants.

### **IV. What Happened**

It all came crashing down on November 13, 2002, when after close to a year of being in and out of depression, a series of panic attacks, and ever diminishing efforts at the office, I once again found myself sitting in the psychiatric ward at UBC, once again suicidal. The very same psychiatric ward I had been in 12 years earlier. This time was, however, different. I knew on some level that I had to change everything about the way I was living, or I would die. I knew alcohol had something to do with my troubles, although I was unaware of the precise extent of that.

I was visited in the hospital by two senior members of my firm. You know both of them. One had taken the bull by the horns. He basically told me that the gig was up. He said that although I had some mood disorder issues, my real problem was that I drank too much. I was advised that there was a place in Nanaimo that would sort me out, and that if I wanted to go, I would have the full support of the firm. I threw my hands in the air and asked how soon I could leave.

I was in treatment from November 17, 2002 to January 3, 2003. I was deconstructed, put back together, and baptised into a 12 step program. By the time I left, I was convinced that I never had to drink again, so long as I did what was suggested. I committed myself to doing what was necessary

to avoid returning to the place I had found myself. This commitment has been constant, although my desire to do what is necessary has ebbed and flowed.

## **V. What It Is Like Now**

My life sober has been far from smooth sailing: a 22 year marriage ended in 2004, and I parted ways with my second law firm in 2005. I first started acting as a mediator in 2004, and started practicing exclusively as a mediator, arbitrator, and adjudicator in 2014. I have had any number of challenges, professional and personal. I have dealt with all them by asking for help, and accepting the help that was offered.

I first met Derek Lacroix, and became acquainted with the LAP, shortly after returning to work in February 2003. I initially resisted getting involved, as I did not wish to differentiate myself as an alcoholic lawyer from any other alcoholic. Over time, my view changed. I now know that my experiences can benefit other lawyers who are having difficulties, and that sharing them assists both them, and me.

Others have spoken about wellness being a continuous process, encompassing all of life's dimensions: emotional, occupational, intellectual, spiritual, social, and physical. I have my ups and downs, as we all do, but I actively work at all these things. I do that through a combination of regular attendance at 12 step meetings; regular service work in my 12 step program, the LAP, and the community; regular although now infrequent therapy sessions; regular visits with a business coach; and, a modicum of exercise, which basically consists of walking pretty much everywhere.

I lead a rich and full life. I have a career that I could not have imagined. I have strong professional, family, and personal relationships. I played with my band at the Battle of the Bar Bands last week. I am certain that none of these things would have come to pass had I still been drinking.

I share my story with the hope that it will help others. It is really all I have to offer. It may resonate with you, or not. It may give you some insight into other people that you deal with, and that you may be able to better understand or help. Regardless, I do believe that my sharing assists in removing the remaining stigmas related to alcoholism and depression. It also assists me, in that I am reminded to be grateful for my recovery, and to all those that have assisted me along the way.