



A LIGHT HEART AND A FOCUSED MIND IN THE LAW

Part One: Mental Wellness and Self-Care

What mental health needs is more sunshine, more candor, more unashamed conversation. Glenn Close

I. INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the first in a three-part series on bringing a lighter heart and a more focused mind to work with you. The next two installments will cover how to get along with other folks in the workplace, and common-sense tips on how to stand up and speak to an audience without sprinting for the exit. Today, though, I want to talk about mental wellness and addiction, as well as simple strategies for taking care of and actually liking ourselves.

Mental illness can be a difficult, scary concept. Stigma still shoves it into the shadows of shame and denial. We talk about mental health (if at all) in hushed tones while glancing furtively around the room. Don't stress, Friends. Almost everyone has challenges to some degree. I certainly do:

In addition to working as a securities defense litigator and a mediator, I'm a recovering alcoholic and grateful survivor of a major depression in 2013. In this piece, I will briefly tell you my story of healing and hope¹, punch stigma in the face, and then describe the sustainable self-stewardship strategies that keep me feeling better in many ways than I ever have.

II. MY STORY

The twin specters of major depression and alcoholism haunt my father's side of the family. In 2008, dad, a beloved English professor at UC Berkeley, took his own life. In late 2012, that genetic predisposition, major life stressors, and alcohol abuse pushed me into the grey abyss of a severe depressive episode.

¹ For a more detailed account of my story of challenge, healing, and hope, see this [article](#) I wrote for the Princeton Alumni Weekly.

In February 2013, I took a medical leave from my law firm and voluntarily entered a hospital psychiatric ward in Berkeley, California. It was a dark season of my life. I endured a course of electro-convulsive therapy sessions, and struggled to find an effective combination of anti-depressants. Between treatments, I stared out the narrow windows of the psych ward at the Berkeley Hills where I grew up. It was like watching a black and white movie that I could barely recall.

In summer, 2013, however, medical and cognitive therapies began to work. Bright rays of hope shone through gaps in the storm clouds of despair. I got back on my bike, my sobriety endured, and a life of hope and promise slowly unfolded before me. Joy replaced sorrow, lethargy lost out to vitality, and gratitude pushed self-pity off the stage.

Although I am still a licensed attorney and mediator, I spend much of my time as a mental wellness advocate. I give talks on mental illness and substance abuse in which I share my story, and serve as an independent mental wellness mentor.²

III. SHARING DEFEATS STIGMA.

There is a growing community of folks who are helping to normalize mental illness and addiction, and to defeat the pernicious stigma that still surrounds them. Every time I tell my story of healing and hope, I become more convinced that sharing our mental health challenges is one of the keys to beating stigma, and giving the millions of people at risk the courage to get help.

It's not easy. When I started talking about my journey out of depression and addiction, I was terrified that people would brand me a "crazy drunk." My fears were groundless. Most people thank me for my candor, and say that hearing my lived experience has given them the courage to tell theirs. Be a storyteller. You may not know whom or in what ways you will help. But you will.

We also need to learn how better to recognize both the obvious and subtle signs of possible mental health and/or substance abuse issues. It can be tough to distinguish between temporary sadness and a more serious depressive episode. Answering the question, "Am I a party animal, an alcoholic, or both?" isn't easy

² I am not a qualified health care provider, therapist, or psychologist; and do not provide any such advice or diagnoses.

either. I am happy to report that more of the law firms, companies, and schools where I give talks are fighting the stigma and offering this type of training, and providing other resources to address these health conditions head on.

My advice: If you have concerns, or others have worries about you, seek a diagnosis from a qualified health-care provider. There is *zero* shame in that. After all, when you have a significant physical injury or illness, you go see a doctor. I'm grateful that I pushed back against stigma and got treatment; it very likely saved my life.

IV. THE FOUNDATIONS OF MY MENTAL WELLNESS

Take care of y'all's bodies...take care of y'all's mentals. Marshawn Lynch

A. My self-stewardship habits

I'm obviously not recommending medications; however, because of my significant depression, I was prescribed an anti-depressant. It works, I am grateful for it, and I make sure I take it every day. *Zero* shame in that either. But the meds are only part of my wellness. I think of them as a safety net or guardrails on either side of my mental health. However, I find the most joy and additional vitality from these simple, sustainable self-stewarding habits:

- *I exercise at least five days a week.* Regular, *moderate* exercise has been found to be more effective as some anti-depressant medications.³
- I have recruited what I call a **SEAL** Team. We give one another **S**upport, **E**nergy, **A**ccountability, and (sometimes tough) **L**ove. My team includes a mentor, my cycling coach, AA sponsor, and a few friends and family whom I trust with my life. We have each other's backs. No one on our team is *ever* left behind.
- I see a therapist, and I attend AA meetings. These are acts of bravery, inclusion, and service; not shame or an admission of weakness. It can be hard work. I don't always feel "safe," but the insights I gain have helped me to like myself

³ See, [Exercise more effective than Medicines to Manage Mental Health](#), and my blog post, [Exercise Shouldn't be the "E" Word](#).

more, and to treat others with the honor and respect that we all (usually) deserve.

- I meditate and practice mindfulness. There's no success or failure. My mind often slides around like a [big dog on ice](#). That's meditation for you. And as Yoda reminded us, "Try, you should not."
- I nurture my faith and spirituality. Part of that practice is to say a gratitude for the new day, followed by the Serenity Prayer.⁴ It seems to apply to everything that life brews up.
- I work in the service of others. What at first can sound like a chore usually turns out to be a joy and a privilege.
- I recharge. There are many ways to do this. I try to duck out of the smartphone/social media circus tent periodically⁵. I also take *every single minute* of vacation time to which I am entitled.
- Finally, getting at least seven to eight hours of sleep is the most rejuvenating slice of the 24-hour pie. When I have trouble falling asleep, I recite this soothing New Zealand prayer of acceptance and closure:

*It is night after a long day.
What's been done has been done.
What hasn't been done hasn't been done.
Let it be;
The night is for stillness and rest.*

B. Daily Resilience

Life can be hard to control. It will bring suffering. So, stop busting your and others' backsides trying to control things. The good news: Tough times and "failures" slowly build everyday resilience. As you patiently forge this important tool, you will be better able to cope with challenges when they come around life's corners (and

⁴ *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* Reinhold Niebuhr

⁵ I had fun writing this little [piece](#) on the risks of excessive phone and social media use.

they will). You are accumulating important experiences, and collecting effective life tools and perspectives such as these:

- Everyone, including colleagues, clients, parents, and your peers fail. [You don't have to love failure](#), but don't be terrified of it either. We are evaluated not by the fact that we have made a mistake, but by how we handle it. Promptly and fully admit the slip-up, work the problem, and learn a bit from your mistakes.
- This thought experiment helps me fight fear of failure: I make a list of the things that scared me over the last twelve months. My list is usually long. Then I put a check mark next to the ones that actually happened. If you're like me, you will find that there are very few check marks on your list. This will help you skirt the trap of painfully wasting time stressing about the future.
- Finally, do what you can to put the gremlin of impostor syndrome in its cage. More on that in Part Two.

C. CONCLUSION.

We often look for happiness in the future, predicting hopefully, "I will be happy when ____." Whatever dream or goal you put in the blank certainly could happen. But it might not. Even if it does, it *could* make you happy, but it might not. Sounds pretty uncertain to me. What is certain is that "when" is *right now*. One of my cinematic heroes, Ferris Bueller, said it better than I can:

Yep, I said it once, and I'll say it again. Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.

So, let's work on treating each day as the blessed gift that it is, and go forth with a lighter heart and a more focused mind.

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In addition to working as an attorney and a mediator, Cameron speaks around the country to lawyers, other professionals, and students on mental health, self-stewardship, civility, and ethics. He also serves as an independent mental wellness mentor and lawyer orientation instructor. Cam's mental wellness work is supported by [Stout Heart, Inc.](#), a non-profit 501c3 corporation.

Cam [blogs](#) and creates short [videos](#) on wellness, daily resilience, and self-stewardship.

A former member of Princeton's varsity tennis team, Cam is an avid cyclist, and the proud dad of two adult children and a sweet little grandchild. A native of the San Francisco Bay Area, Cam now lives in San Anselmo, CA with his spouse, Laura Docter, a health coach and educator.

