



BY PATRICK R. KRILL

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A Lawyer-Friend 'Might Have' Alcohol Problems. What To Do?



(<http://images.law.com/contrib/content/uploads/sites/292/2017/01/Alcoholism-Article-201701251014.jpg>)

This week Patrick Krill advises a lawyer on how to approach a friend who may be struggling.

Dear Patrick,

I have a close friend who I think is slipping into depression and alcohol abuse. We used to practice together, but now no longer work together (or even live on the same continent). I try to communicate with her, but she avoids difficult topics and simply ignores me if I get too close to a topic she is uncomfortable with. I am concerned, but I also don't have enough "hard facts" to make a case. What I am noticing falls more into the category of changes in

behavioral patterns, which lawyers are quick to dismiss or recharacterize as simply a product of being “too busy” rather than evidence of a health issue. I also am geographically distant and (because she is shutting me out) personally distant from this person.

What, if anything, do you suggest I do in a situation like this? Thanks for your help and candor.

Bill in Shanghai

Hi Bill:

You don't need “hard facts” to be a concerned friend, and waiting until you have them can sometimes be dangerous. Clearly you have gleaned enough to raise your alert level and, assuming you're not prone to unreasonable or excessive worry, that's sufficient grounds for doing something. Kudos to you for not taking the well-worn path of least resistance, the one that leads to heads being fully submersed in sand-like substances.

In terms of your approach, this isn't the right time to be “making a case.” I'm aware that asking a lawyer to back away from that mindset is a little like asking water not to be wet, but give it a try. After all, this is a human matter, not a legal one. If you come at this like a lawyer, she'll respond in kind. You'll square off, get nowhere, and unfortunately have nobody to bill for the time. Not a winning scenario.



Since your friend has already demonstrated her reluctance to engage in sensitive topics that hew too close to the reality of her possible struggles, be persistent and just try to get her communicating more *in general*. Try to (re)establish a level of closeness that might make her more comfortable opening up and sharing a vulnerability with you. This will require that you talk about your own struggles, whatever they may be. Even if they are nothing more than the pedestrian frustrations of day-to-day life, law school gave you the skills to make them persuasive and compelling. Do it. Vent your troubles, and expose your weaknesses with an eye toward reciprocity. Doing this over email or Skype is fine but, ideally, you should spend some time together soon.

Assuming it's at all doable on your end, invite her to come visit. Based on what you've told me, she'll probably say she's too busy, but she might also surprise you and jump on the opportunity for a change of scenery. After all, it's Shanghai, a legitimately exciting place. Use that to your advantage and try to arrange some quality time that is more conducive to candid conversations about personal matters. Note, take this idea at face value. I am not suggesting that you lure your friend to a foreign country for some sort of half-baked intervention or emotional ambush.

Regardless of whether she takes you up on the invitation, what I want you to do next is the same: First, if you haven't already, read up about the signs and symptoms of problem drinking and depression, enough to give you the baseline understanding and knowledge you need to sound literate on the subjects.

Second, familiarize yourself with some available resources you could direct her to in the city and state where she lives. (Perhaps a lawyer assistance program?)

Third, articulate your concerns in an organized and thoughtful letter that is nonconfrontational, nonjudgmental and, above all, clearly supportive. Muster your empathy, and convey it. Talk about how entirely common problem drinking and depression are for lawyers. Reference this column—and this conversation—if it helps. Just get it all out on paper, or a screen.

If she comes to visit, you've got an unofficial script to guide you through the type of difficult conversation that sometimes makes people lose their train of thought or forget everything they wanted to say. If not, email the letter, with an unambiguous request to discuss its contents at some point in the near future. If she continues to shut you out, you've done what you can under the circumstances. Anything more is impractical, but anything less could one day fill you with regret.

Have a question? Send it to wellcounseled@gmail.com

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Patrick R. Krill is the founder of Krill Strategies, a behavioral health consulting firm focused exclusively on the legal industry. Go to www.prkrill.com

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