

CHAPTER 40: PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS

AFTER I LEFT CHRYSALIS, I reentered the workforce. Not ready for a full-time career position, I accepted a part-time temporary job as a low-level administrative assistant. I answered phones, opened mail, typed correspondence, and boxed samples. When I interviewed, I felt self-conscious as I had to explain away my employment history, but they didn't scrutinize my resume due to the limited commitment. While I appreciated the opportunity to transition back into the workforce, I had twinges of embarrassment that this was the best I could do despite my age and education.

Nonetheless, I showered, blew out my hair, showed up on schedule, only called in sick if seriously ill, and strove to impress with quality output. Work changed from a mandatory activity that I couldn't pull off to an avenue to enhance my finances and confidence. This half-time job also enabled me to focus significant energy on my recovery. They retained me for nine months, and, for the first time since college, I left with a good reference.

At this point, I could handle forty hours per week and more responsibility. I landed a mid-level administrative position at a small software company. The not stellar salary was similar to my pre-Chrysalis compensation. I promised myself I would never earn less. As a reward for my excellent performance, my boss promoted me to office manager within the year. I continued to absorb new duties, like the accounting. Adding in my second raise, my income had increased by one-third. I applauded my success at climbing these rungs up the corporate ladder.

And yet I struggled with starting from ground zero and fell into the comparison trap. I obsessed over the lost years and the squandered opportunities. I could crumble, awash in anguish, when I interacted with people who enjoyed the achievements or material trappings I'd let slip through my fingers. I tried to counter the feelings logically, remembering I had a good life and had made huge strides. With time, I could recoup some losses and buy pretty things. But

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I already had enough. I recited a phrase I'd heard at WFS: "Never compare your insides to someone else's outsides." Maybe that person wasn't happier, even with the nicer car or bigger house. Plus, regardless, I only could move forward from where I was, a thirty-two-year-old newly sober woman.

Sometimes I convinced myself. Still, in particular, I agonized over law school. I'd had a stimulating and lucrative career within my grasp, but my substance use disorder had forced me to abandon this opportunity. Reminders caused deep twinges of pain, such as when law school friends complained about complicated research or difficult judges, which to me sounded like heaven. I smiled and nodded when they mentioned favorite professors although I drew a blank because I'd been so drugged and missed so many classes. I considered a return to law school, but Berkeley had warned that my credits would expire and I couldn't imagine they'd readmit me. If I applied to other law schools, I'd have to justify the multiple withdrawals and mediocre grades, the thought of which nauseated me.

I revisited the beneficial aspects of my tarnished work history. While I couldn't control my erratic behavior, this had resulted from my addiction rather than inherent limitations. With each position, I'd grasped the tasks quickly and had offered ideas for efficiency or better results. True, these jobs had been below my inherent abilities, but, regardless, I had demonstrated I could absorb new tasks and adapt to new environments. And I'd continued to perform well intermittently despite my excessive absenteeism. When counseled on my deficiencies, I hadn't been defensive. "You're right, of course. I understand, I'll straighten up." I'd known I couldn't do better, but all this bought time and goodwill. I'd always been laid off, never fired. This could've been due to legal concerns or, more likely, they'd thought I had mental health issues rather than I wasn't capable.

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Near my three-year recovery anniversary, I secured a job as an administrative supervisor at a much larger company, which presented fresh challenges. One of the women I oversaw said I was aggressive and harsh—familiar words, yet disturbing since I’d improved from my meth-fueled attack mode. I once walked into a common area to find a temporary employee, whom I’d hired, loudly complaining that I made her feel she couldn’t do anything right. Because I felt betrayed, I ordered her to pack up and leave. Apprehensive about another professional catastrophe, I wanted to improve but wasn’t sure I could. Even when I acknowledged my rough edges, I believed some intensity was a positive attribute, so I rejected some of the criticism. Still, I tried to observe how people reacted in discussions and to modulate my approach. With time and attention, I augmented my interpersonal skills although perfection eludes me even now. Then, with the company downsizing on the horizon, I realized my position, not so much me, might be at risk, so I looked around for another spot. As Doc will tell you in one of his “she’s amazing” examples, I maneuvered a promotion during these layoffs, which reassured me as to my overall work reputation.

At five years sober, because this job didn’t stimulate me intellectually, I reconsidered law school. To repair this loss would be wonderful. But I’d be devastated if I was rejected or failed again since I hadn’t studied or taken an exam in fifteen years. I almost persuaded myself to let it go and not dream the impossible. That Christmas, my mother laid out her plan to spend her impending, in her mind, huge lottery win. Then she asked what I would do with a million dollars. “I’d go to law school.” I paused, then looked at Doc. “You know, I don’t need a million dollars to do that.” He smiled and squeezed my hand.

We discussed this over several months and, with Doc’s encouragement, I wrestled my fears into submission and decided to take the risk. If Berkeley wouldn’t take me back, I might be

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accepted elsewhere. To prepare, I reduced my spending, cashed out my stock options, and built my savings. I enrolled in a class to prepare for the standardized admissions test, then scored in the top 1 percent. Even with this, I doubted Berkeley would accept me but hoped nearby Hastings might. When I had to address my law school withdrawals, in the applications, I didn't trust the process enough to admit to my addiction. Instead, I referenced the related, but more vague, personal and financial problems.

Berkeley did reject me. But as I watched television one day, Doc walked into the room, gave me an "I told you so" look, and tossed the fat envelope from Hastings. As I walked up the steps for orientation, I felt invigorated and terrified. I was six years sober but still struggled with anxiety, so the gamble loomed large. Although I enjoyed my courses, stress overwhelmed me during finals and while I waited for grades, even though I'd attended every class, read every case, and prepared for every test. After one exam, I suffered for weeks when I realized that, though I ultimately provided the correct answer, I'd flubbed a tangential point. As the "stupid, stupid" tape replayed in my brain, I rehashed every exam because, if I had made this mistake, there must have been others. I damned myself for fantasizing that I could succeed. When grades came out, I'd earned an A. The professor said I received full credit for my excellent analysis but had lost a point for this minor blunder.

Despite getting in my own way, my grades put me in the top of my class, so Berkeley accepted me back as a transfer student. I was beyond thrilled. Doc and I reviewed all my recovery accomplishments, which reinforced my pride in my evolution. My return to Berkeley's law school was exceedingly delicious icing on that lovely cake.