

# Practicing Law With Parkinson's Disease

By **Adam Siegler** (April 10, 2024)

I knew something was wrong when I was sitting in court waiting for a hearing to start and noticed that my right hand was tapping reflexively on the counsel table.

I had experienced these tremors after I had returned from deployment in Iraq, but dismissed them as the usual signs of stress and fatigue, just like the hypervigilance and nightmares. But the tremors got worse, and I started to feel disoriented and ill.

Eventually, I made some medical appointments, and learned that I had a common form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Two days later, another doctor said I also had Parkinson's disease.



Adam Siegler

And how was your week?

As a litigator at a large law firm, I was staggered by the news. I did not have time for this. I had cases to manage, and I needed to develop new business on top of that.

So, I went through all the stages of grief, starting with denial. And I panicked a bit, which is something that litigators and soldiers don't usually do. I sold my car, thinking I wouldn't be able to drive it soon, and started trying to sell off my books and possessions so my wife wouldn't have to deal with them.

Meanwhile, I told everybody I was fine, even though they knew that I wasn't fine, and I knew that they knew. But eventually, I had to face the diagnosis.

It's been more than five years since I was diagnosed, and since Thursday is Parkinson's Awareness Day, falling during Parkinson's Awareness Month, this is a good time to share my experience practicing law with this disability.

Parkinson's disease is a neurological disorder that results from the death of certain cells in the brain that produce dopamine, which is essential to movement. Little is known about its cause, although research suggests that, for military servicemembers, exposure to various pesticides and chemicals may play an important role.

In 2022, Congress passed the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act, which established certain presumptions in favor of veterans who had been exposed to toxic chemicals in combat theaters, camps with burn pits and similar locations.

The disease is characterized by involuntary resting tremors, stiffness, slowness and dizziness. Tremors usually start in one hand, then progress to the legs and the other hand. Some patients can experience a writhing movement over their whole body, while others have difficulty even standing or walking.

It is a progressive disease, which is a nice way of saying that it gets worse over time, and it eventually results in dementia and death, usually over a period of years.

There is no cure. The number of patients who have recovered from Parkinson's disease remains zero.

But there is hope. Thanks to the tremendous efforts of people like actor Michael J. Fox, whose eponymous foundation funds critical research efforts, the disease is becoming better known and better understood.[1] Research is ongoing at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, UCLA Medical Center and Cedars-Sinai. Groups like Ping Pong for Good in Los Angeles[2] help patients develop coordination and resilience through exercise and specifically ping pong, which requires constant attention and fast reflexes.

Many people with the disease are in their 70s and 80s — they are retired and have time for these programs. But Parkinson's is rapidly becoming more prevalent and affecting younger people still in the workforce. It is estimated that there are more than 1 million patients in the U.S., and even as I write this, there are more working people who have it but don't know it yet.

I know several other lawyers who have the disease and are still working, but working as an attorney with a condition like this presents some unique challenges. I share these thoughts with my colleagues who have the disease, and with those who do not, so that we can at least have an open conversation about it.

Let's face it — the tremors and other physical symptoms present a real problem. They can make other people feel uncomfortable. The tremors are awkward in meetings, depositions and court appearances, because they make some people wonder if you (1) are on drugs, (2) should be on drugs, (3) had too many drinks, or (4) will survive long enough to finish their legal case.

I remember sitting in a conference room with two prospective clients, presenting a detailed explanation about the legal issues they faced, but they weren't paying attention. One of them nudged the other with his elbow and whispered, "Look at his hand!"

In another case, I was interviewing a witness who described the rapid and fatal progression of Parkinson's in a family member, and all I could do was hide my hand under the table and say, "I'm so sorry, that must have been a very difficult time for you."

The tremors also interfere with operating a computer mouse or touch screen. The constant fatigue, both from the disease and the medication, is a burden that haunts me every day. On some days, when it is hard to walk, I am angry and frustrated with myself for being disabled. I have also had to learn to cope with the bouts of nausea that accompany the medications.

### **Picking up the Rucksack**

But, as the drill instructors in the U.S. Army like to say, "No sniveling!" You must pick up your rucksack every day, move out and do your best. In addition to a loving and supportive family, which I have been blessed to have, here are the things I have found that help.

### ***Help others who are worse off.***

Helping other people is the best way to take you away from your own worries. I am one of the coordinators for the pro bono legal work in our office and help run the firm's national pro bono program for veterans.

Whenever I meet someone who is seeking asylum because they were tortured in their home country, or someone who has been severely wounded in combat, I am reminded that my troubles are trivial in comparison.

If anything, having this disease has made me more compassionate and more understanding of people who are disabled or have suffered discrimination because of who they are or how they appear.

For lawyers with Parkinson's, pro bono work is a great way to regain your perspective in life.

### ***Use the technology.***

I admit I'm old-fashioned and still like to mark up exhibits with a pen, but the technology can really help.

At the suggestion of colleagues, I started using a dictation program. Instead of one computer mouse, I have two "mice" so I can switch hands readily and keep working.

And of course, with the surge in remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, I can appear remotely in meetings and hearings and avoid the awkwardness of some in-person meetings — although this defers, rather than solves, that issue.

### ***Eat a healthy diet, and exercise.***

Yes, these are essential.

### ***Avoid stress.***

My doctors all say it is especially important to avoid stress. As lawyers, we must laugh at that recommendation. But there is value there.

Most of the stress we experience in law comes from allowing minor things to bother us. Maybe opposing counsel was insulting or uncooperative, or an associate didn't do the work you requested, or the computer stopped working during a filing, or your latte didn't have the right topping.

These things are only stressful if you allow them to be.

### ***Rely on your colleagues.***

For lawyers, this is the most important recommendation. Even for healthy lawyers, colleagues can provide a tremendous boost in synergy, creativity and productivity.

Parkinson's can be a very lonely disease, as patients withdraw into themselves to avoid the discomfort of in-person meetings. Having colleagues can overcome that and help you to reengage after a Parkinson's diagnosis.

Getting your partners involved in your practice is also critical to maintaining professional standards and having backup if you have an episode or become increasingly ill.

I was unable to work for a period, and my colleagues — they know who they are — rallied around, picked up my caseload, and then helped me reengage when I got back to the office.

### ***Be upfront with clients and courts.***

I initially tried to hide my symptoms because I was embarrassed and afraid of jeopardizing my standing with clients and judges. But I have been amazed at how understanding most people can be.

Judges and court staff have been incredibly kind and accommodating — perhaps because they see so many other people facing overwhelming legal, financial and medical obstacles.

### ***Keep your sense of humor.***

A robust sense of humor is necessary. Aside from the usual jokes about having my martini "shaken and not stirred," you will find that Parkinson's patients are better off laughing at the disease than whining about it.

My Army buddies are brutal in their humor, and I am thankful for that.

### ***Be grateful.***

Parkinson's is a slow-moving disease. Patients still have time to practice law, take care of their families, and spend time with friends and colleagues.

You may not get the latte you wanted, but be grateful you have coffee to drink at your law office, and colleagues with whom you can share that moment.

### ***Managing and Communicating***

For colleagues, supervisors and managers in the law office, Parkinson's is like any other disability, where reasonable accommodations and adjustments can be made.

Beyond that, I would say that it is important to support lawyers with Parkinson's, but don't pity or coddle them. People who are living and working with Parkinson's just want the opportunity to be included in the team, from the initial pitch to jury verdict or deal closing.

Every disability has different challenges, but lawyers with this particular disease can still contribute, and it is better to have honest discussions rather than rely on outdated assumptions.

And the time is ripe to have these conversations, because more and more, clients expect their outside counsel to reflect the spectrum of diversity throughout our society.

And as we enter Parkinson's Awareness Month, I like to remember these encouraging words from Michael J. Fox on why we should be both grateful and optimistic: "Gratitude makes optimism sustainable. If you're grateful for the opportunities you have, for what you've been given to do work-wise, for the opportunities that exist, you're optimistic."

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[1] <https://www.michaeljfox.org/>.

[2] <https://www.pingpongforgood.org/>.