

# Mental Health & Wellbeing at the Bar

---

Stress



Wellbeing  
at the Bar

# Stress

The stress response is a natural human phenomenon that has been honed over thousands of years to protect us.

We are designed to experience short periods of stress. However, when stress becomes normality without recovery time or respite, we become unwell or experience negative health effects.

## Recognising the symptoms

Often we won't notice subtle changes in the way we feel, think or behave or we try to ignore them, hoping they will go away of their own accord. However, these signs and symptoms provide us with valuable data. If we can identify stress at an early stage, we can put tried and tested strategies in place to help manage feelings of stress and counteract ill effects before they get worse.

Although stress is not a psychiatric diagnosis, it is very closely linked to our psychological wellbeing. There is a significant body of research to demonstrate that stress also causes and exacerbates a range of physical conditions.

## What is the difference between stress and pressure?

Stress and pressure are two different things. We need pressure to enable us to function and perform well. When demands are high and possibly unreasonable we may not feel we can adequately respond to these expectations. We may feel out of control and overwhelmed. This is when we tend to experience stress responses. This may happen over a long period of time or in short bursts. Excessive levels of stress have been shown to lead to burnout, a state of complete mental and physical exhaustion.

## What are the causes of stress?

People cope with stress and stressful situations in many different ways. Some withdraw into themselves, some will talk excessively, and some will become angry very quickly whilst others can be prone to tears. Remember, there is no set pattern of behaviour when it comes to stress.

- Managing high expectations from solicitors, clients and judges
- Inconsistency of workload
- Volume of workload
- Long-hours culture – regular weekends preparing for cases
- Unpredictable work patterns
- Financial insecurity
- Reduction in boundaries between work and home due to technology
- Short deadlines
- Intolerance of mistakes at the Bar – leading to perfectionism
- Fear of being sued if mistakes are made

## Steps to reduce stress

The quickest way to reduce stress quickly and effectively in the moment is to engage one or more of your senses. This could involve movement – standing up, stretching or taking a short walk. It could involve raising your gaze and taking in every sight around you in a systematic and detailed manner. The simplest solution is to take in more oxygen, reduce adrenalin and calm yourself through deep breathing.

- [Breathing techniques](#)
- Write to do lists of personal and work things – all of them
- Prioritise what must be done and in what order
- Plan each week ahead
- Don't have more than two work evening events if possible each week
- Make a hot or cold drink
- Being aware of your [nutrition and hydration](#)
- Take a walk
- Sleep
- Look at things very early if possible as opposed to late at night
- Talk to friends and colleagues about what is stressful
- Play with a pet or take the dog for a walk
- Do something to help someone (not work)
- Focus on one of your five senses for a few minutes
- Remind yourself what is important in your life

“For the last four months I have been sat at home reviewing rape and child abuse videos without any real support or information as to when this task would end. ...today my doctor signed me off sick for a fortnight.... Her view is such work is unbearable over such a long period of time. My absence will compound problems for others but I am burnt out and cannot face dealing with another such case for the foreseeable future.”

**Philip Beardwell, CPS** – This barrister was signed off for four weeks and was then given assistance through a fitness for work assessment. The CPS has now introduced routine counselling for staff dealing with such cases and have now much improved their policies on stress-related illness.

## Where can I find out more?

- NHS general information about stress, anxiety and depression;  
<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/low-mood-stress-anxiety.aspx>
- Mind (the mental health charity) provide some tips for everyday living;  
[http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/stress/#.VrjIC\\_mLTIU](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/stress/#.VrjIC_mLTIU)
- Guidelines on stress from The Mental Health Foundation;  
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/stress>
- NHS self-assessment to check your mood;  
<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/pages/mood-self-assessment.aspx>