

Mental Health & Wellbeing at the Bar

Stress



Wellbeing
at the Bar

Stress

How you define your personal wellbeing will be unique to you. Things you may come across in your life that cause you no pressure may well cause a stress reaction in others. This is also true in reverse. These pressures come from many areas, it could be from life in chambers, or they may be from your personal life. But one can affect the other. Issues arising from wellbeing are quite normal. Your own definition of feeling psychologically well or unwell may be very similar or completely different to another person's. There is no right or wrong.

Recognising the symptoms

Stress and pressure are two different things. You need pressure to enable us to function and perform well. However, when demands are high, and possibly unreasonable, you may not feel that you can adequately respond to these expectations; for example, the barrister who, through no fault of yours, is having a tough time and unreasonably is blaming you. When this comes on top of all your other responsibilities you may feel out of control and overwhelmed. This is when you might experience a stress response. It may happen over a long period of time or in short bursts.

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.

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. Primarily this happens because the body is experiencing large doses of adrenalin, noradrenalin and cortisol. These hormones kick-start the body into protective mode – fight, flight or freeze.

The causes of stress

- Managing high expectations from barristers, solicitors and clients
- Managing difficult personalities or bullying behaviour
- A high volume of workload; or intense periods of high workload
- Long-hours culture: being available out of hours or at weekends
- The reduction in boundaries between work and home due to technology
- The speed with which you have to make difficult decisions
- The Bar's intolerance of mistakes leading to perfectionist behaviour in others
- Fear of reprisals if mistakes are made

Often you don't notice subtle changes in the way you feel, think or behave or you might try to ignore them, hoping they will go away of their own accord. However, these signs and symptoms provide valuable data; if you can identify stress at an early stage, there are tried and tested strategies available to you to help manage feelings of stress and counteract ill effects before they get worse.

Dealing with stress

The good news is that there are tools and resources available to you to keep you well, or to help you if you are currently unwell or may be in the future. We know that being a clerk is a great job. It is often rewarding and exhilarating and brings great satisfaction. But is it also demanding and pressured.

- Know the early warning signs to stop your stress levels developing into a chronic and intolerable state
- Confide in others and ask for help when you need it
- Be realistic with your performance level
- Set achievable goals
- Try some of our [breathing techniques](#)

You will be able to provide the best service to your barristers, clients and colleagues when you are at your healthiest and when life and work are in balance. If you feel the balance slipping and stress becoming a normal part of your life, you can take action to bring things back on course.

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
- 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>