

Wellbeing at the Bar

RACHEL SPEARING

Many of you may have read about the campaigns in public and private sector business to improve people's Wellbeing.



The business case for improving people's health and wellbeing in their work and lives has been well documented and shown to demonstrate great benefits to the quality of their work, retention rates, relationships both personal and professional, health and longevity.

The Bar has traditionally been a profession within which mental health and wellbeing has rarely been spoken of, yet so many of us know colleagues who have experienced varying levels of difficulties at some point in their working lives. The Bar by its very nature, is a challenging place to work, from the complexity of our working structures, to the demands of our specialist work; both of which have been compounded by digital developments and financial crisis. The terrain in many areas has drastically changed in the last 20 years which requires preparation and resilience to meet the demands of practice in the current legal market.

In late 2014 the Bar Council set up an initiative to investigate the issues impacting upon barristers' professional practices. This was in partnership with all four Inns of Court, and assisted by a charitable donation from the Charlie Waller Memorial Trust. There are many definitions with regards to wellbeing; but wellbeing for 'us' is about having the resilience and ability to carry out your professional duties in a healthy way. The confidential survey using a team of specialist experts to analyse the data, yielded almost 2,500 responses, demonstrating appetite for the initiative from practitioners employed and self-employed from all areas of specialism and circuit.

The research found that 1 in 3 found it difficult to control or stop worrying; 2 in 3 felt that showing signs of stress was perceived as weakness; 1 in 6 felt low in spirits most of the time and 59% demonstrated unhealthy levels of perfectionism (closely linked to causing symptoms of burn out), which placed us higher than research findings for medical trauma consultants. It also confirmed what many of us suspected, that psychological wellbeing within the profession is rarely spoken about. A full copy of the report and findings can be downloaded from the Bar Council's Wellbeing section of their website.

The entire Leadership of the Bar have united in responding to this report by committing to a programme

which is designed to provide members of the profession with the information and skills they need to stay well; to support members of the profession as they deal with difficulties that arise insofar as they affect a barrister's professional life; and to provide assistance to those with responsibility (or taking on a supporting role) for those in difficulty or crisis. The working group consists of a representative from every SBA, Inn, Circuit and also now includes the Institute of Barristers, Clerks, who have additionally committed to their own working group within the IBC to mirror the programme for their membership.

In the Autumn the programme will launch a Wellbeing Portal of online resources for individuals (pupils, new practitioners, practising barristers) and those with a management responsibility in Chambers. We plan to expand and support mentoring programmes and improve education and training for new and existing practitioners, so that they are provided with the same preparation as other highly skilled professionals undertaking demanding work.

This programme is not aimed at softening who we are or what we do, but about providing us with the additional skills and knowledge to optimise our performance, maintain and retain our excellence and the valuable service that we provide to our clients. We plan to visit each Circuit following the launch. Please support this project in whatever way you can. For more information, contact Sam Mercer at smercer@barcouncil.org.uk.



Rachel Spearing is the Co-Founder & Chair of the Wellbeing at the Bar Project. Called to the Bar in 1999, she is a Mediator and practises in Crime, Financial and Regulatory Law at Pump Court Chambers in London and the Western Circuit. She teaches within the Business School at the University of Portsmouth and Internationally in

Executive Education and was appointed a Bencher of Inner Temple in 2015.