

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.

The period after you are called, and before acquiring tenancy, will be stressful. You are constantly under pressure to prove yourself to other members of Chambers or your employer. You may also be balancing this with external stressors such as your family's expectations or financial worries.

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. It is much better to try to identify stressors 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. So, it is important to pinpoint your stressors during the early years in practice, so that it can be managed without exacerbating any physical conditions.

What are the causes of stress?

Stress can be caused by a range of factors, both in your pupillage and in your personal life. Some obvious stressors to be aware of from the outset are:

- Managing high expectations from your supervisor, colleagues and other members of chambers (including leaders when doing led work), clients and judges
- Inconsistency of workload
- Volume of workload
- Unpredictable work patterns – an expectation that as a pupil you may have to work very long and irregular hours; having to frequently work on weekends as a pupil; your cases routinely appearing on warned lists in Magistrates' or Youth Court
- Financial insecurity (you may not be paid for some of this work)
- Impact of technology – blurred line between your work and home life as you may be expected to respond to emails out of hours
- Short deadlines
- Intolerance of mistakes at the Bar – leading to perfectionism
- Professional obligations and the constant fear of your client making a complaint or suing you for any mistakes made

What is the difference between stress and pressure?

There is a thin line between the two, but it is important to understand that stress and pressure are two different things.

The HSE's formal definition of work related stress is: "The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work." Stress is not an illness – it is a state. However, if stress becomes too excessive and prolonged, mental and physical illness may develop

Pressure often enables us to function and perform to our optimum capacity. You need to recognise what this point is, and make others aware of it so you do not routinely exceed it. 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, especially if these pressures accumulate over a long period of time. This is when we tend to experience stress responses.

Excessive levels of stress have been shown to lead to burnout; a state of complete mental and physical exhaustion.

Steps to reduce 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.

The quickest way to reduce stress quickly and effectively 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. Some other means of managing your stress include:

- [Breathing techniques](#)
- To-do lists – it may also be useful to prioritise what must be done and in what order
- Plan ahead
- Don't take on more than you can manage e.g. try to limit the number of work related after-work events you attend
- 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 (arrange/don't cancel plans to see friends)
- Play with a pet or take the dog for a walk
- Take up a hobby
- Research apps and classes that might help around your area
- Put things in perspective

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>
- Understanding stress <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/furtheradvice/whatisstress.htm>